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FOUR WAYS TO PROMOTE DIGITAL INCLUSION FOR CALIFORNIA'S WORKERS

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Summary: Digital inclusion is key to a better and fairer economic future where every Californian can thrive. The social and physical distancing requirements of the pandemic crisis put a spotlight on the dramatic digital divide facing California's workers, and the inequities of that divide. To support workers and industries now and in a Future of Work transformed by technological changes, policymakers should invest in digital skill building for quality jobs, as well as access to broadband and digital devices.

THREE ELEMENTS OF DIGITAL INCLUSION



**Dependable and affordable
residential broadband
internet access**



**Up-to-date
personal digital
devices**



**Essential
digital skills**

DIGITAL INCLUSION IS KEY TO A BETTER, MORE EQUITABLE ECONOMIC FUTURE THAT IS INCLUSIVE OF ALL CALIFORNIANS

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, California's workers, industry leaders, and policymakers were grappling with the impact of rapid technological advances on the Future of Work.¹ COVID-19 has further laid bare the stark consequences of California's digital divide. In a matter of weeks, social distancing requirements moved much of the state's economic, social, and civic lives online for the near future. This rapid shift to a virtual world has created new challenges and compounded existing ones for Californians who lack broadband access, digital devices, or essential digital skills.

Roughly 15 percent of all California households – approximately six million people – lack broadband internet subscriptions.² Regardless of where they live, many Californians with low incomes are unable to access widely-advertised affordable broadband due to hidden costs.³ Many low-income families may also face challenges participating in online classes or videoconferences because they can only access the internet through smart phones, share a single device, and/or have plans with low data caps.⁴ Rural Californians additionally face a lack of broadband *availability*.

At a time when millions of Californians lost their jobs seemingly overnight, this digital divide makes it harder for workers to apply for unemployment insurance, train for new jobs, and look for work. Even as essential workers in fields from health care to janitorial services have kept California up and running throughout this crisis, the digital divide has posed challenges for some essential workers looking to access critical online training on new COVID-19 safety and work protocols. Meanwhile, Californians who were structurally excluded

from work or faced barriers to accessing online services prior to the pandemic may face an even tougher time finding a job in the heavily virtual, pandemic economy.

The impact of structural racism is reflected in the digital divide. In the U.S., people of color are more likely to lack broadband internet access at home, more likely to lack a desktop or laptop computer at home, and otherwise face greater barriers accessing the technology often used to build digital skills.⁵ As a consequence of these factors and other long-standing structural inequities, workers of color are over-represented among workers with limited digital skills.⁶ The

Policymakers should take action to expand broadband access.

Coalitions across the state are calling on policymakers to expand broadband access so that all Californians, especially the most underserved communities, have high-quality, affordable access to the internet. In August 2020, Governor Newsom issued an Executive Order intended to expand broadband.

The CA Public Utilities Commission also provides grants to increase publicly available broadband and digital inclusion through the \$20 million fund for California Adoption. Programs and projects in communities with demonstrated low broadband access are given priority.

Policymakers can build on these existing actions to take bold and immediate steps that further to accelerate broadband access. In doing so, they should build in robust consumer protections so that Californians are not subject to hidden fees or predatory financing practices as they purchase broadband subscriptions and devices.

racially disparate impact of the digital divide is especially egregious in a pandemic economy in which workers of color have disproportionately lost jobs.

California's policy leaders have committed to rebuilding a more inclusive and resilient economy in the wake of COVID-19 and to a Future of Work that expands economic equity. Policies that promote digital inclusion must be part of these efforts. The digital divide is not a failure of individual workers or families. It is in large part the result of policy decisions that failed to keep pace with technological advances, even as broadband internet access, digital devices, and digital skills have become baseline necessities for navigating everyday life. It's time for policies to change so that every Californian can equitably participate in the economy and society.

DIGITAL SKILL BUILDING CAN EMPOWER WORKERS AND PROMOTE INDUSTRY RESILIENCY IN THE FUTURE OF WORK

Digital skills – the capacity to use technology and the cognitive skills necessary to navigate it successfully – are essential to work now and in the future. Prior to COVID-19, jobs were already undergoing massive technological transformation, with even entry-level workers using all manner of digital devices and equipment. Since the pandemic, the importance of digital skills has only accelerated.

California's policy leaders are looking to “future proof” the state's economy – this includes supporting workers who make career transitions amidst labor market disruption and

supporting workers in building skills for jobs of the future.⁷ Digital skills are fundamental to achieving these goals.

Yet across all industries, data show that nearly one-third of all U.S. workers need enhanced digital skills.⁸ Many have “fragmented knowledge” – they are confident in completing certain digital tasks, like using a mobile phone to send a text, but need training to carry out others, such as uploading documents on a computer. Fragmented knowledge is more likely among those who do not own a desktop or laptop computer and among those who have smartphone-only internet access.⁹

Existing digital skill-building programs reach only a small fraction of potentially eligible workers, leaving a substantial gap in public support for these essential skills. However, that can change. By expanding access to digital skill building, particularly in the context of occupational training, California can empower workers to use technology in a changing and uncertain labor market. While some digital skill needs vary by industry, it is clear that industries will also be more resilient in the face of economic disruption if the workforce has essential digital skills. In fact, investments in digital skill building can help industries quickly adapt to the pandemic economy by increasing opportunities for online training on occupational health and safety protocols, remote work, and other practices. Investments in workers' digital skills will be key to creating a Future of Work built on quality jobs and industry innovation.



ROUGHLY 15 PERCENT OF ALL CALIFORNIA HOUSEHOLDS LACK BROADBAND INTERNET SUBSCRIPTIONS.



CALIFORNIA'S POLICY LEADERS HAVE COMMITTED TO REBUILDING A MORE INCLUSIVE AND RESILIENT ECONOMY. POLICIES THAT PROMOTE DIGITAL INCLUSION MUST BE PART OF THIS EFFORT.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROMOTING DIGITAL INCLUSION FOR CALIFORNIA'S WORKERS

1 Create a new digital equity grant program for those most impacted by the pandemic economy. The grant program should use new funds to target workers who are currently out of work, as well as those who are in frontline, low-wage jobs. Jobless workers should include those who have been laid off due to pandemic shutdowns and those who were structurally disconnected from economic opportunity prior to the pandemic (such as justice-involved Californians and young people who are out of school and out of work) and now face compounded challenges in the COVID-19 economy. Funding should be allocated to education and workforce providers and other qualified organizations to conduct activities such as those below:

- Develop and implement high-quality digital skill-building programs that are culturally and linguistically competent and responsive to worker and industry needs. In particular, funds should be used to contextualize digital skills instruction for specific industries, increase instructor professional development, and support training costs for workers.
- Provide participants with access to a home computer and home internet service through the duration of the program and for a set number of months following program completion
- Support digital navigators who are trained to help learner-workers utilize devices, access online services and search for jobs.¹⁰

The grant program should also include funds for the state to provide technical assistance to program providers, conduct a third-party evaluation of emerging digital literacy program models, and embed digital skill gain metrics as part of state education and workforce goals.

2 Expand the use of existing adult education funds to support digital skill building. California invests over \$500 million into its own Adult Education Program each year and receives an additional \$85 million in federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title II funding to support adult basic education, high school equivalency, and adult English language classes. The state should continue its use of these funds to help adult education providers incorporate meaningful digital skill building into adult education programs, and explore how this work might be deepened to include occupational digital literacy in the following ways:

- Requests for Applications could further incentivize providers to incorporate robust digital skill-building activities into programs, particularly via Integrated Education and Training models.
- State agencies could expand the technical assistance currently offered for adult education providers on program design, instructor professional development, and learner assessments as these issues relate to occupational digital skill building.
- State agencies could support partnerships between WIOA Title I and Title II service providers to create new models for digital skill building in the context of occupational training



CASE STUDY

A TRENDSETTING WORKER TRAINING PROGRAM BLAZES A PATH TO DIGITAL SKILL BUILDING

Being on the cutting edge of workforce development is nothing new to the nonprofit Building Skills Partnership (BSP). The California-based organization, which has eight locations across the state, has received national recognition for its [Green Janitor Education Program](#) and other initiatives to build the skills of its largely immigrant workforce. A labor-management partnership, BSP collaborates with more than 140 employers to serve janitorial and building service workers represented by Service Employees International Union–United Service Workers West.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, BSP capitalized on its strengths to help workers adapt to a new digital world. “We were already doing hybrid learning in some of our programs before the pandemic, but in March 2020, we shifted all of our training to virtual,” explains BSP Interim Executive Director Luis Sandoval. (In addition to the Green Janitor program, the organization’s offerings include a Vocational English program and a new Infectious Disease Certification.) “We don’t want to leave any worker behind when it comes to digital skills, but we’re still building out exactly what that looks like.”

Despite the fast-changing landscape, he says, one thing is quite familiar: BSP’s task is to identify emerging industry standards and prepare workers to meet them. Of course, the jury is still out on exactly what kind of new workplace technologies will be adopted in response to the pandemic and what kind of digital skills will be needed to use them. “For example,” Sandoval says, “if a company were to introduce a robot, our workforce has to know how to maintain it, how to read its outputs.” Similarly, workers increasingly need to be able to respond to building service requests submitted via mobile apps or other technology.

Even as BSP develops its programmatic response to workplace digitalization, Sandoval is keeping his eye on the bigger picture. “What keeps me up at night is: How do we do this through the lens of being more worker-centered?” he says. To that end, BSP views its digital skill-building work as part of its broader efforts to advance equity for workers, and is hiring a new E-Learning and Digital Equity Coordinator. “We challenge the narrative that being a janitor is a stagnant profession,” says Sandoval. “Now a janitor is an environmental steward, a public health worker, a first line in emergency preparedness...we have to add a human element to the technology conversation and recognize the totality of the person.”



NOW A JANITOR IS AN ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARD, A PUBLIC HEALTH WORKER, A FIRST LINE IN EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS...WE HAVE TO ADD A HUMAN ELEMENT TO THE TECHNOLOGY CONVERSATION AND RECOGNIZE THE TOTALITY OF THE PERSON.



INVESTMENTS IN WORKERS' DIGITAL SKILLS ARE KEY TO "FUTURE PROOFING" CALIFORNIA'S ECONOMY.



3 Ensure that digital skill building is an explicitly permitted use of existing workforce development grant programs. The CA Workforce Development Board issues a number of grant opportunities related to strategic workforce development initiatives. Where possible, Requests for Applications and other guidance documents should explicitly permit and incentivize applicants to incorporate digital skill building into their program design. This can include ensuring that providers document digital skill requirements for occupations; supporting the development of curricula and program models that allow workers to build digital skills in the context of technical training for specific occupations or industries; allowing funds to be used for professional development of instructional staff to equip them to teach digital skills; and more.

4 Utilize federal funds to provide digital skill building, device access, and digital support for workers in workforce development programs. Many local workforce development boards are rethinking ways to support workers' digital needs. The CA Workforce Development Board can provide guidance to local workforce development boards on how federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funds can be used to make technology and devices more accessible to workers and to help workforce providers upgrade their own technology to better deliver accessible online services.

California can also use current and future COVID-19 relief funds to promote digital inclusion. California has already used CARES Act funding to support instructional technology for educational agencies and institutions. With existing CARES funds or potential new federal COVID relief funds, California could expand broadband and purchase of hardware and software. For example, the U.S. Department of Education's Governors' Emergency Education Relief (GEER) Fund allows funds to support a range of digital inclusion activities, including the purchase of hardware and software, for people enrolled in skill-building programs.¹¹

In fact, the [City of Long Beach](#) is using \$1 million from CARES Act funding to supplement the city's Digital Inclusion Initiative. Funding will ensure that Long Beach residents have equitable access to and use of digital literacy training, the Internet, technology devices and other resources. In addition, CARES Act funding will be used to contract with community-based organizations and partners to: staff a Digital Inclusion Resources Hotline, provide free Chromebooks and hotspots, host pop-up outreach and technical assistance, develop multilingual digital inclusion resources and procure portable public Wi-Fi infrastructure. Similarly, [Riverside County](#) is using \$1 million in CARES Act funds to provide digital devices for adult education students.



ENDNOTES

- 1 See the California Future of Work Commission at www.labor.ca.gov/labor-and-workforce-development-agency/fowc/
- 2 Source: US Census, American Community Survey data. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/CA/INT100218>
- 3 See State of CA Public Utilities Commission letter on Affordable Broadband Plans to Support Customers Affected by the COVID-19 State of Emergency at https://tellusventure.com/downloads/cpuc/coronavirus/batjer_letter_isps_affordable_plans_24apr2020.pdf
- 4 See Pew Research Center, Mobile Technology and Home Broadband 2019 at www.pewresearch.org/internet/2019/06/13/mobile-technology-and-home-broadband-2019/ and Benton Institute for Broadband and Society, Data Caps and Vulnerable Populations at www.benton.org/blog/data-caps-and-vulnerable-populations
- 5 See National Skills Coalition, The New Landscape of Digital Literacy at www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/New-Digital-Landscape-web.pdf
- 6 See National Skills Coalition, Applying a Racial Equity Lens to Digital Literacy at www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/Digital-Skills-Racial-Equity-Final.pdf
- 7 See the California Future of Work Commission's Update on Progress, April 2020 at www.labor.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CA-Future-of-Work-Update-on-Progress-April-2020.pdf
- 8 See The New Landscape of Digital Literacy.
- 9 See The New Landscape of Digital Literacy.
- 10 See EdTech Center at World Education, Digital Navigators: Lynchpin in Equitable Reskilling and Recovery Efforts at <https://edtech.worlded.org/digital-navigators/>
- 11 See FAQ from Department of Education at <https://oese.ed.gov/files/2020/05/FAQs-GEER-Fund.pdf>

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