



# Digital Equity

## Background

In a recent report released in conjunction with the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey, 76 US cities included 100,000 or more households. One-sixth of all those urban households lacked any kind of home Internet subscription, including a cell data plan. And for poorer households—those with annual incomes below \$35,000—the unconnected percentages were much higher across the board. The median percentage of lower-income households without home internet, for all US cities above 100,000 households, was 30%.

In Baltimore, approximately 40% or 96,000 households in Baltimore City are denied the power of broadband to apply for jobs, pursue educational opportunities, participate in civic life and organize for social change.

Solving the digital divide requires an ecosystem approach, recognizing Digital Equity itself is a complex and dynamic system with many moving parts. A piecemeal approach will not work, instead, we must look for solutions that seek to maintain the integrity and functioning of the ecosystem as a whole, while also working to address discrete aspects.

## Digital Equity Ecosystem

The [\*Community Informatics Lab\*](#) of Simmons University defines a Digital Equity Ecosystem, as the "interactions between individuals, populations, communities and their larger sociotechnical environments that all play a role in shaping the digital inclusion work in local communities to promote more equitable access to technology and social and racial justice".

We agree.

## Justice Based Framework

As an ecosystem builder focused on making Baltimore the first Equitech city in the US, UpSurge must make digital equity a crosscutting value in its work, serving as both a North Star, and a catalyst for systems change, threaded through every aspect of the initiative. **Digital equity in our framework requires more than appeals to diversity and inclusion, recruitment and retention strategies, and access to capital. Rather, we seek a transformed ecosystem born of deep (and even disruptive) shifts in practices, norms, culture, and composition aimed at identifying and strengthening the role tech should play in advancing social and racial justice in Baltimore.**

At a minimum, this includes:

- **Engaging in systems analysis** by working to understand the ways in which history, power, resources, policies and practices have conspired to create and reinforce inequity.
- **Working to transform the policies, systems and practices** that produce unfair and unjust outcomes by race.
- **Shifting power** through prioritizing the leadership of communities most impacted, and grounding the work in solutions that ensure material changes in neighborhoods.
- **Collecting data across lines of race, ethnicity, gender, ability, immigration status and more**, recognizing we cannot solve inequities without understanding who is most negatively impacted and why.
- **Supporting long-term investments** in time, money, resources, and people that aspire to make equity real at the individual, organizational, neighborhood and city level.

The following individuals served on the Digital Equity Team:

- [amalia deloney](#), Vice President/Director of Digital Equity, Robert W. Deutsch Foundation (Team Lead)
- [Zinna Moore](#), Student, St. Mary's College of Maryland (Project Manager)
- [Kelly Hodge-Williams](#), Director of Development/Partnerships, PCs for People – Maryland
- [LaRon Martin](#), Co-Founder, The Virtual Village
- [Kendra Parlock](#), Executive Director, NPower Maryland
- [Jason Hardebeck](#), Director of Broadband and Digital Equity, City of Baltimore
- [Jonathan Moore](#), Founder/CEO, RowdyOrbit
- [John Brown](#), Entrepreneur/Business Development Executive

## Strategic Priorities/Recommendations

### Quick Wins

- **Quick Win #1: Develop an open wireless network.**
  - **Background:** Across the country low-income, especially Black and Latinx, households lack internet access at disproportionately higher rates. Income inequality, biased credit scoring and other forms of systemic racial discrimination are just some of the barriers they face. These households, approximately 40% or 96,000 (data from 2020), in Baltimore City are denied the power of broadband to apply for jobs, pursue educational opportunities, participate in civic life and organize for social change. Further, the pandemic has served to exacerbate the extreme economic, racial, and social disparities that have long characterized Baltimore neighborhoods. Given the compounding effect of the digital divide and its racialized local impact, it's critical to support the City in developing a feasible short-term solution that provides a step on the path to a permanent solution.
  - **Recommendation:** Led by the Director of Broadband and Digital Equity, the City of Baltimore should immediately begin developing a public access wireless network and deploy it by 2026, leveraging existing infrastructure (conduit, fiber optic cable, public buildings, etc.) to create free Wi-Fi hotspots in hundreds of locations throughout the City. This project will focus on providing access for the most underserved neighborhoods and communities, especially those with school-age children.

- **UpSurge focus areas to engage:** Government/Policy; Corporate Partnerships; Investor/Capital Attraction; Marketing/Narratives; Digital Health; Real Estate; Inclusive Entrepreneurship

## Systems Changes

- **System Change #1: Design and build a public option for internet in Baltimore.**

- **Background:** High-speed internet has become essential to full participation in today's economy and is increasingly considered the *"fourth utility,"* joining the more commonly recognized vital goods: water, electricity, and heat. As such, a superfast fiber network has the potential to transform cities. When city residents are able to connect to the internet at high speed through greater choice, better pricing and faster access, everyone benefits. Today's digital economy depends on high-speed connections to the internet, and *recent studies indicate*, communities with fast, affordable, and reliable networks will both attract and cultivate jobs. To truly achieve systems change in the areas of technology and telecommunications will require dismantling a history of segregation and disinvestment in communities of color that continues in the present as digital redlining, with the same racialized impacts.
- **Recommendation:** Broadband is necessary to participate in today's economy, yet today's broadband markets are increasingly monopolized leading to digital redlining. To address this systemic inequity will require a **public sector solution** designed to bridge the growing divide between digital haves and have nots. The City of Baltimore, working in partnership with philanthropy, business, and civil society is uniquely positioned to design and lead this "fiber to the home" initiative, ensuring universal access regardless of zip code.
- **UpSurge focus areas to engage:** Government/Policy; Investor/Capital Attraction; Marketing/Narratives; Talent Development + Pathways; Digital Health; Real Estate; Inclusive Entrepreneurship (we can later explain how we think these Teams should engage or would be impacted).

## Moonshots:

- **Moonshot #1: Close the digital divide through a comprehensive community initiative, ensuring all residents—regardless of social, economic or immigration status—have the technologies, tools, and skills needed to harness the power of universal affordable high-speed internet.**

- **Background:** In April, the Deputy Secretary-General of the UN stated that *"without decisive action... the digital divide will become the new face of inequality."* Her statement illustrates the compound impacts of the digital divide for communities who are locked out of life changing forces such as healthcare, education and economic opportunity. Moreover, it follows a 2000 acknowledgement by the Clinton administration that internet access and the skills to use the technology were necessary for full participation in US economic, political and social life. Across Baltimore City, 73.3% of white households have home broadband, compared with 50.2% of African American households and 46.4% of Latinx households. It is clear that in this city, the digital divide is also a racial divide.
- **Recommendation:** To ensure that current and future generations of Baltimoreans are not locked out of full participation in society, Baltimore must implement a Comprehensive Community Initiative to definitively close the digital divide. CCIs are locally organized, multi-sector collaborations that build local capacity and coordinate resources towards a common goal of improving population-level outcomes. Utilizing this approach will ensure that Baltimore's most vulnerable families and neighborhoods are able to participate meaningfully and fully in our city's economic, civic and social life.
- **UpSurge focus areas to engage:** All