Thank You

Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC is immensely grateful for the community organizations and advocacy groups that joined this convening to lend their expertise and share important insight. We appreciate the work that you do everyday to serve and empower our communities. Thank you for being trusted partners in the work to defend the human and civil rights of Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) and other marginalized communities. Advancing Justice | AAJC would also like to thank Comcast NBCUniversal for their ongoing support for AANHPI digital divide issues and their generous financial contribution that made this event possible.

Design and layout were provided by GRAPHEK.
Introduction

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, communities across the nation experienced the digital divide. In March 2021, Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC, along with Comcast, co-hosted a Digital Convening that brought together eighteen AANHPI serving organizations to discuss what the digital divide looks like in their respective communities.

They discussed how the digital divide includes insufficient broadband access, a lack of equipment, and a need for greater education. The community partners also shared their expertise on the ability of their communities to access digital services before, during, and after the pandemic.

The participating organizations represented 12 states. They included states with large Asian American populations like New York and Hawaii, but also states where some may not expect to find Asian Americans, such as Arkansas and Nebraska. Together, these organizations represented populations from varying Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander ethnicities and backgrounds from across the United States.

Recurring themes during the conversation included accessibility, education, workforce development, and safety. Every organization explained how programmatic success depended on first getting their communities access to devices, then getting them online, and finally teaching their communities how to navigate both their devices and the internet.

Learnings from the Convening indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the digital divide. More than ever, AANHPI individuals need broadband access to stay connected to communities, access healthcare and educational opportunities, and participate in government programs that are designed to bring them relief. Broadband access will remain an important service for AANHPI communities to access new opportunities, care, government programs and benefits, and connections to their loved ones even beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Communities will continue to rely on internet connections and digital literacy training to maintain their well-being and livelihoods.
The Problem and Need

As the COVID-19 pandemic forced 42 states and territories to issue mandatory stay-at-home orders—forcing millions of people to live, work, and learn from home—our need for quality broadband service grew. While the pandemic heightened our awareness of the digital divide and the staggering number of households unable to benefit from digital services and opportunities, AANHPI communities around the nation have been fighting to gain access for years. Although studies have suggested that 95% of English-speaking Asian Americans use the Internet, these studies are often limited in scope and obscure key inequities within our communities. Traditional digital divide indicators—including educational attainment, income level, and English proficiency—suggest that a gap in access exists among different ethnic groups in AANHPI communities.

AANHPI enrollment in welfare programs that can qualify a household for Lifeline, such as SNAP and Medicaid, represents another digital divide indicator illustrating the potential gap in broadband access. In 2015, 2.6% of SNAP recipients were categorized as Asian American. However, the divide between certain ethnic groups was stark: 2.38% of Thai Americans were enrolled in the program, compared with 67.3% of Bhutanese Americans. Furthermore, in 2016, 26% of Asian Americans and 37% of Pacific Islanders were enrolled in Medicaid or some other public insurance program.

These statistics not only illustrate striking disparities within AANHPI communities, but also allow us to project a potential lack of broadband access for a substantial proportion of it. Therefore, advocacy organizations and direct service providers that work on the community’s behalf should recognize that the Lifeline program is a critical tool for expanding broadband access and advancing racial and socioeconomic equity.

Parts of rural Hawaii that have long experienced a digital divide and a lack of broadband access saw the direct impact of distance learning on the education of students. With schools closed, administrators had to act quickly to ensure students were able to continue to participate in class. Sadly, not every district or state was successful. As students left their schools and attempted to get online from home, their need for quality broadband access grew exponentially, but the infrastructure and the services provided remained insufficient.

Even when families have access to devices at home there are barriers to broadband infrastructure which can impact a student’s ability to get online. One school administrator in Wailuku reported that while the school distributed Chromebooks to students, 29% of students were unable to get online due to limited broadband bandwidth at home. Unreliable internet prevented students from actively participating in class, leading to lower engagement and attendance. In some cases students were forced to seek digital access outside of their home, further putting their families at risk during a public health crisis.

In San Jose, California, where nearly 36% of the city’s more than a million residents are Asian American, it’s estimated that 100,000 residents lack internet access at home. This means that once the stay-at-home order was implemented and people were no longer permitted to attend school or go to work, people without broadband access at home faced increased difficulties in accessing work, school, and healthcare services. While conversations around the digital divide are largely centered around rural communities, it is inappropriate to assume that living in an urban environment automatically means that access to quality and affordable broadband service exists. The reality is that communities across the nation still experience the negative consequences of historical digital redlining.
Background

Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders and the Digital Divide

Although studies have shown that 95% of English-speaking Asian Americans use the Internet, suggesting high levels of digital access and literacy, these studies are often limited in scope and obscure key inequities within our communities. These surveys are conducted in English and online and aggregate data of over twenty different ethnicities. Ultimately, these studies are problematic because they likely over-sample people who are already connected and provide a skewed perspective on broadband access in our communities.

Despite the lack of disaggregated and inclusive data, digital divide indicators—educational attainment, income level, and English proficiency—suggest that a gap in access exists among different ethnic groups in AANHPI communities:

- For example, 4.6% of Japanese Americans have less than a high school diploma, compared with 53.6% of Burmese Americans.
- The median household income of Indian Americans is $114,261, that of Samoan Americans and Burmese Americans is $44,193 and $39,730, respectively.
- In 2016, 26% of Asian Americans and 37% of Pacific Islanders were enrolled in Medicaid or some other public insurance program. 1
- In 2019, 7% of the AANHPI community was enrolled in SNAP benefits. However, the divide between certain ethnic groups was stark: 1.4% of Taiwanese Americans were enrolled in SNAP, compared with 29.9% of Native Hawaiians, and 29.0% of Burmese Americans. 4

While several digital divide surveys show that 95% of English-speaking Asian Americans use the Internet, these surveys are limited in scope because they are conducted in English and online and aggregate data over twenty different ethnicities.

Digital Literacy and Skills Among Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders

Another dimension to the challenge of getting Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders connected is cultivating digital literacy and skills in a population where approximately 34% of individuals are Limited English proficient (LEP). Disaggregated data shows that LEP rates among Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders also vary significantly:

- Among Asian Americans, nearly 80% of Bhutanese Americans are LEP while 27% of Indian Americans are LEP. 2
- The average LEP rate among Pacific Islanders is 8.5%, but these numbers also vary among different ethnic groups, from 41% of Marshallese Americans to 2% of Native Hawaiians. 5

Language access and accessibility is critical to ensuring that Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders can get the most out of their experience online once they are connected to broadband. This is especially critical for accessing government services and relief programs. For example, none of the financial relief services offered by the Small Business Association provide translations into Asian or Pacific Islander languages on their websites.
Infrastructure and Other Barriers to Access

Affordability and historical discrimination, such as lack of investment in infrastructure, have led to insufficient or non-existent access to broadband for communities of color. This is especially true for historic Chinatowns and other ethnic enclaves all over the United States, which were born out of housing and labor discrimination alongside racially motivated exclusionary policies like redlining. This history of neglect, disinvestment, and displacement made its mark on the very physical landscape and infrastructure in areas like Chinatowns, impacting residents to this day.

For example, in San Francisco’s Chinatown, racial, economic, and environmental inequalities contribute to digital inequality and redlining for the largely working class and immigrant population. Data from 2015 found that only 56% of San Francisco Chinatown residents had Internet access at home, compared to the city-wide average of 88%.

40% of housing in San Francisco’s Chinatown is single-room occupancy, meaning that many only have a general address, opposed to one that points to their specific room, disqualifying them from getting Wi-Fi access if someone else already has an account using that same general address. The decades-old concrete flooring and walls in many buildings in the area also make the penetration and transmission of Wi-Fi signals through the building almost physically impossible. Moreover, these residences lack the infrastructure to install hard-wired internet or other connections. This leaves lower quality and speed hotspot devices as the residents’ only option for connection. Community Partners working with residents of San Francisco have reiterated that these barriers have persisted and have been exacerbated through the pandemic.

Even in neighborhoods where low-income communities have internet access, the quality and consistency of the connections vary, making them unreliable and disruptive for essential uses like logging in to school, working, or applying for government assistance programs. For example, in Boston, immigrant neighborhoods (including Chinatown) and areas with public housing have spotty digital connections where users are kicked off several times a day, making the internet unusable. Without adequate access to broadband, communities are unable to apply for or benefit from important government services and programs. For example, in San Francisco’s Chinatown, “the pandemic has shown the digital divide in people who have access and have the skill set to apply for PPP (Paycheck Protection Program), which is not an easy thing to do, and those that maybe got left out.” Businesses and communities members alike are repeatedly excluded from programs that are designed to assist them because they are unable to access them online.

Challenges to Connecting the Pacific Islands

Broadband access and affordability in the Pacific Islands has long been a challenge. In 2012, American Samoa had the dubious distinction of having America’s most expensive Internet. Since then, broadband connectivity has improved in the Pacific Islands but costs remain among the highest in the nation. Thousands of miles away from the continental U.S., internet connections are especially slow and prices are often unaffordable in American Samoa and the Northern Mariana Islands. An undersea cable linking American Samoa to Hawaii was laid in 2009, but BlueSky, the telecommunications company that bore costs along with the American Samoa government, charges $115 a month for speeds of 383 kilobytes per second. As more and more of our lives, work, and essential services move online, investing in greater infrastructure in the Pacific Islands is necessary to ensure that everyone can access the internet and fully participate in our society. In 2015, the only undersea fiber-optic cable servicing the Northern Mariana Islands was damaged in a storm, disconnecting nearly 60,000 residents from telephone, internet, banking, and other services for days. This prompted the construction of a second fiber-optic cable, but such vulnerabilities reveal the challenges to getting Pacific Islanders connected to the rest of the world.
The Convening

On March 18th, 2021, Advancing Justice | AAJC and Comcast invited 16 community organization leaders with expertise and hands-on experience addressing digital divide and literacy issues to participate in a digital literacy convening. Leaders met for a large group discussion about how issues related to digital technology and the media more generally affect the communities they serve.

Topics of discussion included the ability to use digital devices and access the internet, how digital spaces have been used for community-building, the roles that language access and media play, and how the pandemic has affected their digital and tech work. Participants then joined smaller break-out sessions to discuss broadband access issues in greater detail, as well as how technology and the internet have affected jobs and workforce development training, education and distance learning, and online media and communications. In each discussion, community leaders were asked to describe the status quo, identify barriers and challenges, and suggest what kind of solutions, resources, and support would be necessary to bridge the digital divide. Discussions were observed by Comcast staff and facilitated by Advancing Justice | AAJC staff: Tiffany Chang (former Director of Community Engagement), Joyce De Guzman (Manager of Community Engagement), and Emily Chi (Director of Telecommunications, Technology, and Media).

List of Participants:

- Alex Olins, Director of Employment and Citizenship Services, Asian Counseling and Referral Services (ACRS)
- Andrew Trumbull, Co-Founder and Director, Burmese Rohingya Community of Wisconsin
- Anna Lei, Movement Technology Support Lead, Chinese Progressive Association San Francisco
- Jannette Diep, Executive Director, Boat People SOS — Houston
- Joon Bang, Executive Director, National Asian Pacific Center on Aging
- Juo-Hsi (Sylvia) Peng, Immigrant Community Navigator, Asian American Federation of New York
- Justin Swartzwelder, Program Director, Center for Pan Asian Community Services, Inc.
- Kim Birnie, Communications Coordinator, Papa Ola Lōkahi
- Lee Kreimer, Programs Manager, Lincoln Asian Community Center
- Mary Heittex, Adult Education Program Coordinator, Arab American Association of NY
- Michelle Pedro, Policy Director, Arkansas Coalition of Marshallese
- Rebeka Islam, Executive Director, AAPIVote Michigan
- Shobhana Verma, Executive Director, South Asian American Policy and Research Institute (SAAPRI)
- Stephanie Lau, Assistance Executive Director, Chinatown Manpower Project
- Suki Terada Ports, Board Member, Japanese American Association of NY (JAAANY)
- Wei Chen, Civic Engagement Coordinator, Asian Americans United (AAU)
Key Findings

1. Many AANHPI communities and families are negatively impacted by the digital divide.

2. One of the greatest challenges is that families and individuals lack adequate access to devices and other tools that they need.

3. Digital literacy training is necessary to ensure individuals can access internet services and programs. Providing access to devices and broadband alone is insufficient, as many are unfamiliar with how to use the technology in an effective and safe way.

4. Language and cultural barriers make it more difficult for immigrant, refugee, and other LEP individuals from participating in programs designed to bridge the digital divide.

5. Historical redlining and infrastructure must be considered in order to address the digital divide.

6. Access to broadband is critical for students to maximize educational opportunities, but AANHPI students face difficulties participating in virtual programs.

7. Economic development and job training programs rely on broadband access. Community members use technology tools and the internet to learn new skills, improve English proficiency, and apply for economic assistance and benefits. These services became even more important during the pandemic.

8. Existing programs are not enough to bridge the gap. Community members and even leaders are often unaware of what kind of internet/telecommunication programming and assistance is available to constituents. For example, most participants at the convening were unaware that their communities could qualify for the Lifeline, Emergency Broadband Benefit, and E-rate programs.
1. Many AANHPI communities and families are negatively impacted by the Digital Divide.

Organization leaders reported on the profound negative impact that the digital divide has on AANHPI communities. Many community members do not have access to the internet or the technology that is necessary to use internet services. Lack of access is a persistent problem that has harmed communities long before the COVID-19 pandemic, and has only gotten worse since.

Some families do not have access to computers and other devices, some are unable to afford broadband services, others do not have adequate infrastructure or coverage options in their area, and others may be forced to sit in parking lots of libraries or fast food restaurants because even though schools have lent devices, their internet coverage at home remains spotty. The inability to get online limits access to job opportunities and training, education, health care services, community programs, and family connections.

2. One of the greatest challenges is that families and individuals lack adequate access to devices, software, and other tools that they need.

The digital divide in AANHPI communities is the result of compounding factors. The most common barriers include lack of language access, limited resources and equipment, mistrust and fear of getting online, suspicion of engaging in programs designed to get people online, lack of technical expertise, and a hesitancy to ask for help.

Every organization at the digital convening agreed that the lack of resources and equipment within their respective communities was one of the greatest challenges. Boat People SOS and Chinatown Manpower Project (CMP) explained that many families share a single device between all members of the household, increasing their difficulty of getting online and having reliable digital access. Similarly, the Arkansas Coalition of Marshallese explained that some of their community members only have a singular cell phone shared by the entire family. Often, families do not have adequate data or calling plans, and must rely on Wi-Fi calling when it is available. This forces families to take turns on one device, which is stressful, unreliable, and disruptive to school and working lives.

Prior to the pandemic, some users could use devices, internet, and computer programs at schools, community centers, and libraries. However, this became impossible...
during the lockdown. The Burmese Rohingya Community of Wisconsin reported that community members were able to obtain computers and other devices through private donations made to the organization. However, volunteers needed to collect and repair the devices because they were often in unusable shape. In addition to hardware, individuals often need costly software programs in order to complete homework, work tasks, and to fully utilize the internet, which can be difficult to obtain. Unfortunately, organizations often do not have the funding to purchase devices or other resources for individuals and families that need them.

What is the best type of support and what could governments, corporations, and national organizations provide?

- Immigrant communities need culture and lifestyle skills to navigate online, not just access. Digital literacy skills and need to give organizations and local groups the resources because each community is different, and strategies need to be localized.
- Seniors need additional funding with long-term strategy; senior centers receive federal funding, but they are not necessarily taking action to actually help the seniors, so their use of this funding needs to have better accountability and makes sure they are actually teaching skills like how to use phones and computers.
- Reframing “digital literacy” to be “digital empowerment” going beyond minimal skills and making sure that it improves someone’s life.
- Utilizing local organizations especially when it comes to language; trusted messengers to increase uptake and engagement of digital resources (ex. Local radio can promote some programs, but how else can we spread information towards local communities through trusted messengers).
- Wired internet service providers can be more difficult to access so funding/programs/benefits should be more flexible to meet the needs and capacity of individuals’ housing and current devices (mobile support, not just hard-wired for apartments that don’t have the infrastructure).
- Having more AANHPI at the tables where decisions are made.
- Community based research to better understand the needs of real people; updating needs assessment as populations and situations change.
- The past year has connected a lot of people digitally, so how do we provide more resources for these new connections? Especially in multiple languages, investing in more tools and platforms? Especially in multiple languages, investing in more tools and platforms.
- Community based research to better understand the needs of real people; updating needs assessment as populations and situations change.
- Creating infrastructure among and between organizations to continue this conversation and share best practices; ways to regularly convene or exchange information.
- Digital literacy and English classes can go together—digital literacy should always be top of mind; but it usually isn’t and is treated as something that can be taught on the side or just as needed instead of a focal point; organizations should move it up to a top priority.
- Having more AANHPI at the tables where decisions are made.
- Community based research to better understand the needs of real people; updating needs assessment as populations and situations change.
- The past year has connected a lot of people digitally, so how do we provide more resources for these new connections? Especially in multiple languages, investing in more tools and platforms.
- Community based research to better understand the needs of real people; updating needs assessment as populations and situations change.
- Creating infrastructure among and between organizations to continue this conversation and share best practices; ways to regularly convene or exchange information.
- Digital literacy and English classes can go together—digital literacy should always be top of mind; but it usually isn’t and is treated as something that can be taught on the side or just as needed instead of a focal point; organizations should move it up to a top priority.

3. Digital literacy training is necessary to ensure individuals are able to access internet services and programs. Granting access to devices and broadband alone is insufficient, as many are unfamiliar with how to use the technology in an effective and safe way.

According to Chinatown Manpower Project (CMP), low-income immigrants, refugees, and underprivileged individuals face the risk of receiving incorrect information or being intentionally scammed online.
devices and programs for the first time. Intergenerational programming has become an important tool to facilitate digital literacy skills training.

Training is also necessary to protect users from online risks such as scams, security threats, and privacy issues. Online safety is a growing concern of community leaders. The Arkansas Coalition of Marshallese’s youth digital literacy program focuses largely on online safety measures to ensure that youth clients are protected from threats such as age-inappropriate content, sexual exploitation, scams and cyberbullying on social media. Asian Counseling and Referral Services is also wary of vulnerable populations who may be more susceptible to online scams, and need to be better informed about how to obtain the most accurate information online. Organizations like Chinese Progressive Association San Francisco are also concerned about clients sending sensitive information such as identification photos and Social Security Numbers through platforms like WeChat. The organization believes digital security and literacy training is crucial for this moment where many communities are online for the first time.

Community organization leaders reported that they are aware of, worried about, and would like to learn more about the mis- and disinformation that affects their communities. As of now, serious reports of harmful mis- and disinformation have been sporadic and there is very little formal programming around this issue. More research and tracking must be done to better understand the impact of mis- and disinformation on communities. The Arkansas Coalition of Marshallese noticed that many of their clients rely on Facebook for news, which can contain substantial mis- and disinformation. Part of the effort to increase digital literacy is to address this concern and teach community members how to distinguish between accurate and inaccurate information.

4. Language, cultural barriers, and personal circumstances make it more difficult for immigrant, refugee, and other non-English proficient communities to participate in programs designed to bridge the digital divide.

Language accessibility is a key barrier to remediating the digital divide in AANHPI communities. Representatives of the Asian American Federation and the South Asian Policy & Research Institute expressed concerns on how many programs designed to bridge the digital divide fail to provide accessible translations, making it challenging for non-English proficient communities to participate. Even in rare instances where translated materials are provided, they may not include the appropriate cultural context and have quality issues making them difficult to decipher. Additionally, live support lines may not support AANHPI language interpreters. Together, this can make it difficult to sign up and pay for broadband, but it also makes it nearly impossible for individuals to troubleshoot technical issues as technical assistance is rarely provided in AANHPI languages. The Arkansas Coalition of Marshallese explained that this is particularly challenging for languages that are difficult to understand like Marshallese, leading to many individuals being left without services. The Burmese Rohingya Community of Wisconsin added that interpretation and translation services are dire for the Rohingya community because their alphabet is not written, meaning that they rely on audio and video interpretations.

Fear and lack of trust can also discourage individuals from getting online. South Asian American Policy and Research Institute noted that some of their elderly clients were unwilling to learn how to use the internet because they were fearful of new technology or intimidated by the learning process. Asian Community and Cultural Center in Nebraska shared a similar concern, explaining that many elderly clients became confused and would eventually give up because they found the process frustrating, irrelevant, and uninteresting. The Asian Community and Cultural Center is the only agency in the area with staff members who speak the native language of clients, making them the only organization in the area that can provide these services in language, which makes it difficult for staff to stay diligent in encouraging clients to continue digital literacy programming.

Families and individuals are often preoccupied with other more important priorities, preventing them from spending the time, effort, and resources needed to access the internet. Boat People SOS explained that even though broadband access is beneficial,
5. Historical redlining, rural regions, and infrastructure must be considered.

AANHPI communities are also negatively impacted by the residual effects of historical redlining, lack of coverage in rural regions, and other infrastructure issues. The Chinese Progressive Association of San Francisco raised the importance of studying, understanding, and effectively addressing the impact of historical redlining and inefficient infrastructure that can create additional barriers. In San Francisco Chinatown, many of the residences are single occupant residence units which are incompatible with wire services like cable and broadband. These residents’ only option may be to connect through wireless devices such as hot spots. Thus, any programs or services that are aimed to serve residents of these communities must tailor solutions to the existing infrastructure. Policies and programs that exclude mobile devices ultimately exclude these communities, even if they may qualify based on their income and other factors.

Boat People SOS reported that many of the families that they serve face challenges getting online because they are spread out across rural regions where internet services may be unaffordable, of low quality and speed, or unavailable. Those who are able to acquire connections are disappointed to find that connections are inconsistent and users are kicked offline while attempting to complete tasks online.

In San Francisco Chinatown, many of the residences are single occupant residence units which are incompatible with wire services like cable and broadband. These residents’ only option may be to connect through wireless devices such as hot spots. Thus, any programs or services that are aimed to serve residents of these communities must tailor solutions to the existing infrastructure.

6. Access to broadband is critical for students to maximize educational opportunities, but AANHPI students face difficulties participating in virtual programs.

According to Asian Americans United, immigrant communities were disproportionately negatively impacted by the transition to virtual schooling. Students from immigrant families tend to have lower distance learning attendance rates because they have a more difficult time receiving the support they need from their schools and technical support to successfully get online and participate in class. Asian Americans United also found that when educational programs moved to virtual sessions, immigrant student attendance decreased dramatically because of slow internet and/or limited devices, making it infeasible to continue participating. Asian Community and Cultural Center of Nebraska added that parents and guardians were concerned, but unable to help their children because they were unable to understand how to access online materials or get on to online school portals.

The Asian Community and Cultural Center of Nebraska and others stepped in to offer programs for parents and guardians to learn how to use devices, the internet, and online learning tools and portals. The Arkansas Coalition of Marshallese added that many parents in their community work multiple jobs and were unable to stay at home to overextend families it can feel like an additional burden. Attempting to secure access when devices are scarce and connections are unreliable exacerbates stress, pushing many families to give up.

The Arab American Association of New York also explained that clients who grew up without technology have more difficulty learning and retaining the ability to use new technology compared to clients who had basic access to technology in their upbringing. Mobile apps and other computer programs may not be intuitive and may be uncomfortable to use. Many of the Association’s clients are refugees from rural Yemen who grew up without technology access in their homes or schools. Consequently, these clients have more difficulty growing accustomed to new technologies. These challenges are compounded by the fact that the majority of resources teaching people how to use the technologies are only available online and in English.

Organizations also raised the issue of multiple households and family members attempting to access the internet at the same time. Many households share an address and/or space with other households or large families and as a result, the minimum speeds and bandwidth fail to meet their needs. Policies and programs must consider how to better effectively provide for addresses that house multiple households.
with students even during the pandemic. The Arkansas Coalition found that students who were home alone had a more difficult time focusing on their schoolwork, were unable to fix internet issues, and fell behind without someone available to guide them through the content in person. Some school districts are able to provide online ESL support, but others only have them available to conduct home visits.

In addition to training parents and guardians, organizations like Boat People SOS trained teachers on how to use new tools like Google classroom, how to troubleshoot on behalf of students remotely, and how to navigate technical challenges as they facilitate lessons. Boat People SOS spent three months at the beginning of the pandemic training teachers, creating tutorial videos for students and their families, and recruiting individuals to provide technical assistance to community members. The Japanese American Association of NY added that navigating technical complications was especially difficult for parents and guardians because technical language was even more challenging for those with limited English abilities.

Asia Americans United emphasized that online challenges existed before the pandemic and therefore long-term investments in resources and training are needed to ensure students can continue to have access to educational opportunities when they return to in-person schooling.

Broadband access will continue to be important for students beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Many ESL after-school programs are more accessible to students virtually because students with working family members are often unable to find rides home at non-standard hours. School portals and online resources for homework will also continue to be accessible only online. Teachers and school administrators are increasingly relying on online tools to communicate with parents and administer homework. Asian Americans United emphasized that online challenges existed before the pandemic and therefore long-term investments in resources and training are needed to ensure students can continue to have access to educational opportunities when they return to in-person schooling.

7. Economic development and job training programs rely on broadband access. Community members use tech tools and the internet to learn new skills, improve English proficiency, and apply for economic assistance and benefits. These services became even more important during the pandemic.

Broadband access is critical for workforce development opportunities, small business assistance, and other economic support. Many AANHPI community organizations provide job training opportunities and economic support for clients, with several of these programs focused on teaching clients skills like digital literacy.

- Chinatown Manpower Project hosts skills building programs for both youth and adults and has a Business Outreach Center to support entrepreneurs from the community.
- Chinese Progressive Association San Francisco provides support for clients who qualify for unemployment insurance and Employment Development Department benefits to fill out and submit applications online.
- The Hmong Wisconsin Chamber of Commerce provides technical assistance and other digital resources to small businesses.
- Asian American Federation supports a small business program that provides technical assistance and an immigrant integration program.
- Asian Counseling Referral Services deploys digital literacy, ESL, and job placement programs.

Many of these programs were conducted in-person before the pandemic, but transitioned to online platforms when it became difficult to meet in-person. Even as programs moved online, the demand for them increased with growing economic hardship amongst community members. Chinatown Manpower Project has developed a curriculum to teach clients how to apply and interview for jobs online. They have also hosted job fairs and information sessions virtually. The Lincoln Asian Community Center increased resources and classes dedicated to fostering greater confidence and proficiency with using computers and technology. These skills help clients move beyond lower-paying jobs to higher skilled technical roles that can improve their economic status. The Lincoln Asian Community Center also assists clients with job interview prep, resume development, and applying for jobs online. Chinatown Manpower Project noted that teaching digital job skills and etiquette like composing and managing emails was important to clients before the pandemic and will only continue to become more relevant for greater economic security.

Many organizations redirected resources to focus on providing support to submit unemployment and financial assistance requests. Asian Counseling and Referral Services observed immigrant and refugee clients experiencing extended wait times, significant language barriers, and limited support from government agencies. Individuals struggled to create online accounts, provide the correct documents in
digital form, and translate websites that were only available in English. Because of the complicated online process, some individuals experienced fraud and shared sensitive paperwork with nefarious entities. Ultimately, some members of the community hired dedicated personnel with the skills and language abilities to complete weekly unemployment benefits statements on their behalf.

AANHPI community members also struggled to apply for and receive Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans. The Hmong Chamber of Commerce found that members had difficulty completing the online application and understanding the qualification requirements. Many of the Chamber’s small businesses do not have relationships with financial institutions, so these loans were essential, but the convoluted online process prohibited many of them from benefitting. The Asian American Federation of NY also voiced concerns that because small businesses had difficulty uploading required documentation for applications, some resorted to uploading sensitive information and documentation to insecure platforms like open Google drives. The Asian American Federation of NY worked to address this problem by small businesses to more secure digital platforms.

AANHPI businesses are learning to run their businesses with online tools. When small businesses faced challenges during the pandemic, Asian American Federation of NY assisted them with online marketing strategies. They have engaged with younger immigrants and AANHPI youth to expand online marketing skills to assist these businesses. The Hmong Chamber of Commerce noticed business owners teaching each other how to convert their storefronts to be more e-commerce compatible and use existing market platforms such as Facebook Marketplace. To support this work, the Chamber believes additional educational materials and webinars with translations will be necessary.

Across the board, the organizations participating in convening provided assistance to small business owners by helping them apply for PPP loans and other COVID-19 relief benefits.

8. Existing programs are not enough to bridge the gap. Community members and even leaders are often unaware of what kind of internet/telecommunications programming and assistance is available to constituents. For example, most participants were unaware that their communities could qualify for the Lifeline, Emergency Broadband Benefit, and E-rate programs.

While there are a number of programs designated to expand the digital access of low-income households, language barriers can impact the likelihood that immigrant and refugee communities will participate in these programs. Government programs like Lifeline are largely advertised in English, leaving other language speakers out. Outreach programs have also historically failed to target AANHPI communities specifically with tailored language.

Very few of the participating organizations were aware of opportunities like Lifeline, the Emergency Broadband Benefit program, and E-rate. While they expressed optimism that such programs could be beneficial to their communities, they were also disappointed to realize that they had not received targeted outreach or materials even though they are organizations that provide direct services to the community. Chinatown Manpower Project also reported that some communities that do know about low-cost programs such as Comcast’s Internet Essentials and Lifeline, find that the services are insufficient and unable to meet their family’s needs. Others are unable to register for the program because they may live with several families in shared households with one device and address. Services are not useful to clients if they do not have the necessary equipment.

Other individuals are hesitant to sign up for programs because they are uncomfortable sharing their information with agencies or concerned about their citizenship status. The National Asian Pacific Center on Aging found that elderly populations are especially wary about government benefits and services because of the discrimination and negative treatment they experienced as immigrants throughout their history in the US. Their skepticism increases when they are mistreated in the process of attempting to sign up. Existing programs and services need to become more culturally and linguistically competent to effectively serve the community. APIAVote Michigan added that some community members had concerns about the speed and quality of lower-priced plans, while others experienced price shock when they received billing statements that amounted to larger sums than what was advertised. This is particularly harmful to low-income individuals who do not have the funds to cover extra fees, and are burdened with additional expenditures that they did not account for.
Solutions

“What is something organizations like Advancing Justice | AAJC, corporations, and federal and local governments can do to help community leaders like you tackle these issues?”

Convening participants unanimously agreed that programs, services, and resources that are designed to bridge the digital divide must meet people where they are and address the specific needs and characteristics of each community. Solutions must be localized and tailored to the precise populations they seek to target.

Even amongst AANHPI and immigrant populations, culture and lifestyles vary significantly. Funding should be allocated to conducting community-based research to better understand the needs of real people and update the needs assessments regularly as populations and situations change. Online training and digital literacy programs need to be facilitated with community groups to make sure they are customized to be most useful for communities. Convening participants recommended working with local organizations that are already trusted by communities, because they have the necessary language skills, and can more effectively promote messages and important information.

Many of the convening participants’ digital programming is in dire need of additional funding. The organizations are unable to meet the demand for digital literacy classes and devices that the community needs, require additional technical support and personnel dedicated to technical expertise, and continue to come up against shortages in resources and time. While these organizations have been actively working to bridge the digital divide, each group continues to encounter gaps that current funding and bandwidth cannot cover.

There is also a need for long-term investment beyond the pandemic. While much of the work today is focused on “digital literacy,” community leaders would like to see a shift to “digital empowerment” to go beyond minimal skills training and services to meaningfully improving individual’s lives with the power of technology. While the COVID-19 pandemic expedited digital adaptation, it built greater digital connections with untapped potential. Organizations need support strategizing how they can provide more resources with these new connections and platforms, especially services in multiple languages. They also hope to see continued investment in providing communities with digital tools, equipment, and training. Allowing for community transformation and empowerment beyond minimal connection and computer use to truly harness the benefits and opportunities that technology offers.

Expanding and Replicating Successful Digital Empowerment Programs

Several community organizations are already facilitating limited digital literacy programs for their communities. These include online classes for English learners, digital job skills training, and basic computer classes. Online ESL classes may include providing and administering special software programs that provide services in less accessible languages such as Rohingya. Other programming may be more basic, including the distribution of equipment and simple instructions on how to use the devices, technical assistance and troubleshooting when community members encounter problems with their devices, and beginner level digital literacy such as setting up an email account.

Many of the skills classes are offered in Asian languages, which gives opportunities to individuals who may not be able to participate in local library or school programs because of the language barrier.

Several organizations that participated in the convening already offer some kind of digital literacy programming:
The Arab American Association of New York
- Online Adult ESOL Classes

Asian American Federation
- Job skills and English language classes

Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services
- Digital Inclusion Program, including advanced technology training and employment skills; Computer Center with internet search, web page creation, and PowerPoint training

Asian Counseling and Referral Services
- Basic computer classes offered quarterly throughout the year

Boat People SOS
- 22 training classes on computer skills, computer literacy, test-taking, and ESL

Burmese Rohingya Community of Wisconsin
- Computer and technical assistance

These classes are very popular with community members, but capacity is limited. Obtaining a spot in a class is competitive because class size is limited to improve learning. There are always more questions than instructors have time to answer, and some subjects require more practice and time to master. For example, The Asian American Federation has worked with Sapna NTC to successfully host 6-week digital literacy classes for students, but each class could only accept 20 students, and “almost every class ran over because the students had many questions both out of their enthusiasm, and the need to clarify what had been taught.” Asian Counseling and Referral Services also offers basic computer classes, but is only able to host them quarterly. There is growing demand for these resources and classes, but organizations are unable to meet the demand because such programming requires adequate equipment, broadband connections, the appropriate software, specialized knowledge to teach the courses, and significant staff time.

Additional support and funding for these programs could help these organizations to expand and replicate them to make the offerings available to a greater number of community members in different languages, for varying skill levels, and specialized for other factors like age. With increased capacity and infrastructure support from organizations like Advancing Justice | AAJC or corporate sponsors, successful programs could be replicated in other geographies and communities. While some communities can rely on organizations like the Urban League to replicate and offer digital literacy programs in every district where they have an active chapter, scaling programs in AANHPI communities can be more difficult because of the disaggregation that has naturally evolved from the diversity of languages, cultures, and generation divides that is unique to AANHPI communities. Local community groups will need assistance in coordination across geographies, infrastructure building, and expert knowledge to build the capacity to expand programs to new participants.

The demand for classes from AANHPI communities could also be alleviated if existing government, community, and company programs that are currently only offered in English could also be made available in Asian languages. For example, Comcast hosts an Internet Basics web page that provides resources and lists local classes for users. The web page itself is available in several non-English languages, but local resource and class options in non-English languages are limited. Local libraries, schools, and community centers also provide free internet literacy and computer classes, but these are also often limited to English instruction and curriculum. Expanding language accessibility in existing government, community, and corporate funded programs would increase the accessibility of digital literacy courses and their availability for AANHPI communities.

Expanding Existing Non-Tech Programs to Include Digital Empowerment

While all the organizations that participated in the convening faced digital challenges and needs, many are currently unable to provide direct technology or digital-related resources or programming. None of the participating organizations had a full-time staffer dedicated to working on digital empowerment issues. For many organizations, this is because they are already understaffed and stretched thin with existing programming. Although they understand the critical need for digital empowerment services, they are already struggling to meet the more immediate education, health, civic engagement, immigration, and other urgent needs of the community. Almost all the organizations who participated in the convening serve populations who rely on them exclusively for all of their social services because government and “mainstream” resources have failed them. At times, they are forced to discontinue even the most critical services because of staffing and bandwidth shortages. On average, participating organizations had less than 12 members on their staff with some as few as only two full-time staffers, even though many of them served entire states, high-population and high-needs groups in large metropolitan cities, or had operations that spanned across the country.
This is not to say that with additional support and bandwidth, these organizations could not build on existing programming and infrastructure to begin offering digital literacy and broadband access services. Almost every organization already offers services and skills training that could be expanded to include digital offerings. These organizations have already built trusted relationships with clients, possess the necessary language and teaching skills, and understand the nuances of the communities that they serve. Equipping them to add digital literacy and empowerment to their services could significantly increase broadband access and literacy for the communities that have the greatest need.

For example, several organizations already offer services to assist clients with signing up for government benefits or navigate federal and state programs. With the right training and additional bandwidth, these organizations could conduct effective outreach to raise awareness about and offer services to sign clients up for programs like Lifeline, the Emergency Broadband Benefit, or subsidized/discounted packages offered by the private sector.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arkansas Coalition of Marshallese</th>
<th>Assistance with I-9’s and other government documents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Arab American Association of New York</td>
<td>Caseworker services such as healthcare, public benefits eligibility screening, translations and interpretation for applications and legal services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Counseling and Referral Services</td>
<td>Application and fee waiver assistance for citizenship and immigration procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boat People SOS</td>
<td>Translation and interpretation services for legal issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Center for Pan Asian Community Services</td>
<td>Enrollment assistance with senior housing and services, SNAP, health insurance, refugee services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Community &amp; Cultural Center</td>
<td>SNAP, citizenship, and employment application assistance, tax assistance program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese American Association of New York</td>
<td>Bilingual lectures on housing, immigration, insurance services and legal issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asian American Policy and Research Institute</td>
<td>Visa processing assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papa Ola Lōkahi</td>
<td>Census information</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Community organizations are also uniquely situated to administer digital literacy and empowerment classes. Many of them already offer in-language job skills training and other courses with great success. If existing educational and training programming could be expanded to offer computer skills and internet literacy, clients could gain the digital skills that they need to obtain the information that they need on the internet and also obtain skills that they could apply to higher paying jobs. Throughout the convening, the organizations acknowledged that they needed to expand education and job training programs to include digital skills, but that they often lacked the resources needed to implement these changes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arkansas Coalition of Marshallese</th>
<th>Financial literacy classes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Arab American Association of New York</td>
<td>Civics and naturalization test prep, college prep courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American Federation</td>
<td>Job skills training and workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Counseling and Referral Services</td>
<td>Employment and training services, resume workshops, tutoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burmese Rohingya Community of Wisconsin</td>
<td>English instruction and citizenship classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Center for Pan Asian Community Services</td>
<td>Citizenship classes, youth job skills and training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinatown Manpower Project</td>
<td>Job skills training, vocational training including accounting and QuickBooks, entrepreneurial workshops, SAT prep classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese Progressive Association</td>
<td>Vocational training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese American Association of New York</td>
<td>Business networking and professional skills building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Asian Pacific Center on Aging</td>
<td>Job skills training, technical skills training</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Technical Skills and Support

In order to effectively address the digital divide, community organizations need technical training and assistance. For staff and instructors to teach and assist community members through digital programming, they must become experienced and well-versed in different programs, platforms, change to benefits, and systems that will benefit clients. Companies that provide broadband services or produce equipment, devices, and software can take a more active role by providing instructions, training, and curriculum directly to staff and instructors. This can alleviate the onus for short-handed organizations to stay up to date and find their own means of learning emerging technologies or the most recent iterations of programs.

Organizations that offer digital services and courses are often unable to meet the troubleshooting needs of community members. This leaves many users with technical issues, broken devices, or underused equipment that limits their productive use of technology even if they have managed to secure access. Organizations often become overwhelmed answering the technical questions and problems that their clients call them with, especially because they lack the technical expertise to correctly diagnose and address the issues.

While many companies offer help desks online and on the phone for their customers, these services are not always available in non-English languages. Automated systems...
or English-only services are very difficult for many AANHPI communities to navigate. Without call center agents with the language and cultural competency needed to effectively communicate with non-English speakers on complex and often very technical issues that are foreign to users, any small tech issues can render broadband connections, devices, and programs useless. Simply providing devices and connections is insufficient. For individuals to be able to use technology in ways that will improve their opportunities and livelihoods, they need access to technical support.

**Devices and Equipment**

Many communities have yet to support digital literacy programming because they are still focused on ensuring clients have access to digital tools. Many of the communities that these groups serve are low-income, refugees, or new immigrants, and therefore, do not possess the resources and tools that they need. Some literacy programs were previously conducted at community centers, organizations’ offices, and local libraries; but the pandemic made it impossible for individuals to attain digital skills without their own devices and connections. Thus, much of the work of community organizations like the Burmese Rohingya Community of Wisconsin and the Asian Community and Cultural Center have focused on acquiring, fixing, and setting up devices for clients.

The Burmese Rohingya Community of Wisconsin has provided laptops, desktops, and other equipment such as headsets, keyboards, and ESL software to make sure students are able to stay connected for schooling. They hope to be able to provide equipment to every refugee family beyond the pandemic in order to ensure that people can stay connected to the Rohingya community through their difficult transitions to American life, obtain the digital skills required to find work, and access online language translation and interpretation services.  

The Asian Community and Cultural Center (ACCC) received a grant to provide 75 tablets to their senior citizen clients. These tablets became essential to continuing outreach and programs when in-person programming became limited. Not only were the tablets and internet connections important in maintaining relationships and programming for elderly clients who were isolated during the pandemic, they also became an essential means of delivering information to critical populations. ACCC disseminated important health information about COVID-19 and vaccinations through the devices. Clients who were connected online were more likely to be better informed throughout the pandemic and ultimately were more likely to get vaccinated. This example demonstrates that providing equipment and devices to communities not only improves economic indicators and opportunity, but can also lead to tangible outcomes in other areas like health, education, and civic engagement.

Many AANHPI organizations still struggle to obtain enough devices and equipment needed for their communities. Organizations like Burmese Rohingya Community of Wisconsin rely on individuals to donate used devices that volunteers must spend time cleaning and fixing before they are distributed to community members. Others like ACCC must complete and submit competitive grant applications every time they need devices for their clients. Providing community organizations with the devices and other equipment that they need can alleviate the collection process so they can focus on the work of empowering communities to do more online.

**Continued Convenings and Shared Learnings**

Participants repeatedly expressed that there is a need for regular meetings with other community leaders like this convening to understand the needs across the diverse AANHPI communities and share learnings from effective efforts so others can replicate them. Participants suggested more sustainable infrastructure needs to be built amongst different organizations to continue conversations like this, share best practices with each other, and regularly convene to exchange information. This is particularly critical in
In addition to meeting with other leaders from community-based organizations, some participants expressed the need to speak more regularly with corporations and national advocacy groups about the needs and gaps at the grassroots levels. This convening was the first time many individuals had been invited to share their experience and expertise on how technology affects AANHPI communities, even though they had been working in the space for years. Creating a forum for community leaders to discuss digital divide issues for the first time made it clear that there is much more insight that AANHPI community leaders are eager to share. In addition to supplementary convenings and listening sessions, organization leaders expressed their hope that more AANHPI community leaders will be invited to “mainstream” and non-AANHPI spaces and tables where decisions are made. In doing so, we can better represent and advocate for the digital divide needs, concerns, and solutions for our communities.

Research and Improved Data

Digital literacy and empowerment work is still relatively new in AANHPI communities. While organizations are working diligently to bridge the divide that harms AANHPIs, there are still many unknowns that deter efforts. There are very few digital divide studies that include AANHPIs in their analysis and the few that do fail to address the needs and challenges that lower income and non-English speaking groups face. Too often, excluding AANHPIs from the data altogether. In addition to collating anecdotal evidence and lived experiences at the community level, more research must be conducted to better understand the unique needs and challenges that AANHPI communities face in achieving digital literacy and empowerment.

There is also a need for metrics to be developed and measured to assess the effectiveness of programming spearheaded by AANHPI leaders. To scale successful programs, we must understand what factors have led to their success and identify areas for improvement. Comprehensive information on how broadband access, devices, and educational programming change individual and community outcomes could provide other organizations with valuable information. Ultimately, this can lead to better understanding of the problem, the development of potential solutions, the replication of successful programs, and the funds to conduct this necessary work.
Addendum

Digital Convening Participants

Arkansas Coalition of Marshallese (ACOM) - Springdale, Arkansas
ACOM works hard to improve the health of the Marshallese community, help Marshallese community members integrate in the social fabric of their community and works to share the history and culture of the Marshall Islands.

The Arab American Association of New York (AAANY) - New York, New York
The Arab American Association of New York’s mission is to support and empower the Arab American and Arab immigrant community by providing services to help them adjust to their new home and become active members of society. Our aim is for families to achieve goals of independence, productivity, and stability.

Asian American Federation (AAF) - New York, New York
Established in 1989, AAF is the largest umbrella leadership organization in New York serving diverse Asian American communities that make up the fastest-growing population in the city, state, and country. In partnership with their 70 member and partner organizations, they represent the collective interests of 1.3 million Asian New Yorkers, across critical issue areas such as immigrant integration, mental health, economic development, and civic engagement.

Asian Americans United (AAU) - Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Since 1985, Asian Americans United has existed so that people of Asian ancestry in Philadelphia exercise leadership to build their communities and unite to challenge oppression. AAU sees the right to culture as a human right. AAU’s arts and culture work creates social change through engaging community members in realizing community members’ inherent artistic and creative potential and building pride in cultural heritage.

Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS) - Dearborn, Michigan
The Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS) strives to enable and empower individuals, families and communities to lead informed, productive and culturally sensitive lives. As a nonprofit model of excellence, we honor our Arab American heritage through community-building and service to all those in need, of every heritage. ACCESS is a strong advocate for cultural and social entrepreneurship imbued with the values of community service, healthy lifestyles, education and philanthropy.

Asian Counseling and Referral Services (ACRS) - Seattle, Washington
ACRS promotes social justice and the well-being and empowerment of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and other underserved communities—including immigrants, refugees, and American-born—by developing, providing and advocating for innovative, effective and efficient community-based multilingual and multicultural services.

Asian & Pacific Islander American Vote Michigan (APIAVote Michigan) - Detroit, Michigan
APIAVote-Michigan is a nonpartisan organization committed to justice and equity for the Asian American community through grassroots mobilization, civic engagement, leadership development, and coalition building. They uphold a vision of justice and equity that asserts people power and community connectedness as the framework for democracy, decision-making, community engagement, and service. This vision is realized through an informed, socially conscious Asian American community, unified behind the urgency for greater representation and greater power to uphold the values of our community.

Boat People SOS (BPSOS) - Houston - Houston, Texas
(BPSOS) - Houston is a non-profit social and legal services provider whose purpose is to empower, organize, and equip immigrant communities in their pursuit of liberty and dignity. Our branch provides education, information, and direct assistance to immigrant and refugee families on potential health and legal issues prevalent in the immigrant communities. BPSOS services range from health awareness prevention programs, legal services for low-income families and victims of violence and crime, youth advocacy and senior services programs to encourage community engagement, advocacy, and volunteerism.
Burmese Rohingya Community of Wisconsin (BRCW) - Milwaukee, Wisconsin
The BRCW is a non-profit, formed to serve the resettled Burmese and Rohingya community in Wisconsin with cultural competence and representation by helping facilitate the transition to life here in the United States. They aim to empower these families by providing critical services such as interpretation/translation and other new arrival transitioning services such as workforce development, Education programs and ESL instruction, donation and culturally appropriate food distribution. They created this organization on behalf of the Rohingya community in Wisconsin and invite participation in as many ways as they are able to facilitate.

Center for Pan Asian Community Services (CAPACS) - Atlanta, Georgia
CAPACS is a private nonprofit located in Atlanta, Georgia. Our mission is to promote self-sufficiency and equity for immigrants, refugees, and the underprivileged through comprehensive health and social services, capacity building, and advocacy.

Chinese Progressive Association (CPASF) - San Francisco, California
Founded in 1972, the Chinese Progressive Association educates, organizes and empowers the low income and working class immigrant Chinese community in San Francisco to build collective power with other oppressed communities to demand better living and working conditions and justice for all people.

Chinatown Manpower Project (CMP) - New York, New York
CMP equip low-income immigrants with the skills and networks they need to be economically self-sufficient, and contributing members to the greater New York City community.

National Asian Pacific Center on Aging (NAPCA) - National
NAPCA's mission is to preserve and promote the dignity, well-being, and quality of life of Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, and diverse communities as they age. NAPCA wants to ensure that AAPI elders have the programs and services they need wherever they live in the US.

Papa Ola Lōkahi - Honolulu, Hawai'i
Papa Ola Lōkahi’s mission is to improve the health status and wellbeing of Native Hawaiians and others by advocating for, initiating and maintaining culturally appropriate strategic actions aimed at improving the physical, mental and spiritual health of Native Hawaiians and their 'ohana (families) and empowering them to determine their own destinies.

South Asian American Policy and Research Institute (SAAPRI) - Chicago, Illinois
SAAPRI is a non-profit, non-partisan organization established in 2001 with the mission to serve South Asian Americans in the Chicago area, by using research to formulate equitable and socially responsible policy recommendations. SAAPRI's work has included research and policy initiatives on civic engagement, hate crimes, access to health care, economic development, and immigration.

Asian Community & Cultural Center (Lincoln Asian Community Center) - Lincoln, Nebraska
Since 1992, the Asian Community & Cultural Center supports and empowers all refugees and immigrants through programs and services and advances the sharing of Asian culture and other cultural heritages of our clients with the community at large.

Hmong Wisconsin Chamber of Commerce (HWCC) - Milwaukee, Wisconsin
HWCC is a Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) providing economic development assistance in business planning, market analysis, marketing strategies, effective day-to-day business operations and much more. HWCC acts as an advocate for the Hmong and Asian American communities in Wisconsin regarding business and economic issues. Furthermore, HWCC is a forum for Hmong and Asian American entrepreneurs to discuss successes and challenges, offering support resulting in a win-win for all of Wisconsin.

Japanese American Association of New York (JAANY) - New York, New York
Since 1907, JAANY has been the heart of the Japanese community. They serve their community through bilingual social services, educational programs, and community outreach. With a strong sense of diversity, we have always been a collaborative forum, celebrating and sharing our Japanese culture and heritage with people of all ages and backgrounds.

Blog Posts Written by Community Organizations

How the Burmese Rohingya Community of Wisconsin is Addressing the Needs of the Community and Increasing Digital Access and Literacy17

By Andrew L. Trumbull
Rohingya in the United States face severe language and technological barriers that stem from years of persecution, interrupted education, and denial or lack of access to many services and opportunities that we have. When they arrive in the United States, for many these barriers are overwhelming and there isn’t enough time for them to learn all the systems and technology, let alone hope to acquire a high level of English acquisition and literacy.

While cell phone use is more universal in the Rohingya community, computer use is less frequent, especially so for adults. Rohingya have had limited access and experience using PCs, so learning how to use one while struggling with English is very challenging. Rohingya need access to technology, especially because they have had limited access before their arrival, and certainly because technology plays an ever-growing role in our lives, in our education, and how we get things done.

Here in Milwaukee, the Burmese Rohingya Community of Wisconsin (BRCW) is addressing some of these needs by providing technical training and implementing tech-forward education programs using platforms like DynEd and Khan Academy. We also fulfill needs by sourcing, fixing, and distributing PCs and other hardware and tech. Last year, we purchased and donated 200 Koss Headsets, and have sourced and donated over 60 laptops and desktops. We also assist Rohingya in getting set
up with inexpensive internet for their homes, and make sure that every student has a Chromebook to use during remote schooling.

The pandemic posed serious challenges to our operations and we had to move to technology-based solutions seemingly overnight. It was already clear that we needed to address the digital divide, but the pandemic exacerbated those needs to a great extent. To bridge the divide, we moved our outreach efforts online, offered remote tutoring over the summer, and helped place over 20 tutors during the following remote school year. It has been far from an ideal situation, but in hindsight perhaps these events will serve to remind us how important digital access is, and how important it is for vulnerable and hard to reach communities to gain access.

We would hope that every community that struggles and toils with technology receives the support they need to make sure the baseline digital needs are taken care of, and that everyone in this country can grow up with equitable access to technology. In this day and age, access to the internet is essentially a utility; we wouldn’t allow someone to be denied electricity, gas, or water—the same should be true about internet access.

Andrew Neill is the Public Health Educator Intern at the Asian Community & Cultural Center. To contact the Rohingya Community of Wisconsin, call (414) 502 8893 or email them at info.brcw@gmail.com. To learn more, visit their website at and Facebook at @BRCWMKE.

How One Organization Serves the Immigrant and Refugee Community in Nebraska during COVID-19

By Andrew Neill

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of internet accessibility became clearer than ever. As social distancing, isolation, and quarantine became more common, more people had to rely on the internet to do their jobs, send their children to school, and access social services. Unfortunately, the people who need the internet the most to do these things tend to have little to no access to the internet. Over the course of the pandemic, the Asian Community & Cultural Center (ACCC) attempted to increase access to the internet for the immigrant and refugee community in Lincoln, Nebraska, while also encouraging digital literacy, so that our community members would be able to access important health information, resources, and social activities.

The ACCC normally provides services to our community members in person; however, due to the pandemic, the center has had to significantly alter our methods for service delivery during the last year. Among the services offered, the center provides exercise and community programs for senior citizens in the immigrant communities, which is especially important as it helps to keep the senior citizens active and engaged in healthy practices that help them maintain a good quality of life. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the center was unable to hold these programs in person.

The ACCC was able to tackle the problem of senior citizens being isolated by the pandemic by increasing the ability of the senior citizens in our community to access the internet through an initiative to provide the senior citizens with Kindle Fire tablets. The ACCC applied for and then received a grant to provide senior citizens with seventy-five Kindle Fire tablets so that they would be able to access fitness and health content created by the ACCC in place of the normal classes and activities that could not be held due to the pandemic.

Additionally, increasing access to the internet via the Kindle Fire tablets played an important part in the ACCC’s community outreach initiative to encourage our community members to get vaccinated against COVID-19. In the spring of 2021, as COVID-19 vaccines became publicly available, the ACCC engaged in a community outreach campaign to encourage the people in the immigrant and refugee community that we serve to get vaccinated against COVID-19. Unfortunately, many of the clients we serve were unwilling to get vaccinated against COVID-19 due to a wide range of barriers that discourage immigrants and refugees from accessing healthcare. These barriers include: language barriers, immigration concerns, discomfort with doctors, and distrust in the American medical system. These medical barriers to healthcare and distrust in the medical system caused many of our community members to be hesitant to get vaccinated against COVID-19. For example, we surveyed 30 members of our Seniors Program about their likelihood to get vaccinated and they all refused to get vaccinated. To combat this problem, we created a community outreach campaign using trusted figures in immigrant communities. We aided community and religious leaders in getting vaccinated and then interviewed them about their experiences with COVID-19 and the vaccination. We then used these interviews as part of a social media campaign to encourage our community members to get vaccinated. Through this social media campaign, we were able to encourage many of the community members to get vaccinated.

Overall, all of these initiatives and community outreach campaigns show the importance of increasing internet access to marginalized communities and how internet access is important during the COVID-19 pandemic. The internet is also an important part in increasing access to healthcare and social resources for marginalized populations that have become isolated due to the pandemic. Additionally, by increasing access to the internet, community outreach campaigns to encourage members of vulnerable communities to get vaccinated are much more successful.

Andrew Neill is the Public Health Educator Intern at the Asian Community & Cultural Center.

Digital Literacy in New York’s Asian American Community

By Juo-Hsi (Sylvia) Peng

Last December, the Asian American Federation (AAF) where I am a Community Navigator, partnered with Sapna NYC, a nonprofit serving South Asian new immigrants. Together, we decided to hold a six-week virtual digital literacy class with a cohort of around 20 students. Almost every class ran over because the students had many questions both out of their enthusiasm and the need to clarify what had been taught. Despite audio problems and children making noise in the background, the students successfully interacted with the instructors and completed assignments.

There were three parts to this program: technology, language, and culture. The first class focused on increasing digital literacy, such as how to use their computers and the internet. The second class was about language, including how to use Microsoft Word and Google Docs. The last class focused on culture, especially the importance of the Chinese New Year and how to celebrate it.

The most important part of the program was the interactive sessions with trusted figures in the Asian community. We invited community leaders to share their experiences and insights with the students. These sessions were held online and were facilitated by bilingual moderators.

For example, we invited a local business owner to talk about how to use online marketing tools to promote their business. Another session was dedicated to celebrating Chinese New Year, with guests sharing traditional foods, stories, and cultural practices. The sessions were well-received by the students, and they showed a strong interest in learning more about the culture and language.

Overall, the program was a success, and the students were motivated to learn more about digital literacy. The program also helped to bridge the digital divide and empower students to access resources online. We plan to continue this program in the future and expand it to include more topics, such as job search and career development.
enjoyed the class so much that Sapna held another six-week program. We saw this successful class as a huge leap forward from our experiences just a few months earlier.

But when COVID-19 hit and our operation went virtual overnight, there was a sudden drop in engagement from our immigrant clients. AAJ partners with Asian American-serving community-based organizations (CBOs) across the five boroughs of New York City worked together to bridge resource gaps experienced by the pan-Asian low-income immigrants through a series of community engagement events. But with the pandemic raging, we found ourselves staring at empty Zoom rooms. In a time where our immigrant community was experiencing rampant job loss, and were bewitched by misinformation, we had become disconnected from the community we serve.

The solution was not simple. While the digital divide looked different for each Asian community, the lack of digital skills and literacy was a common issue faced by all. In order to meet where people were, we had to break down the virtual outreach process and evaluate potential barriers at every level. We experimented with various platforms to find the most effective way to communicate with the immigrant community. We found that text messages work well and Google forms are manageable if everything is translated. Above all the minor adjustments, more extensive case management from the CBO had the greatest impact in eliminating some of the digital barriers, but it also tripled the workload of CBOs.

New York City actually provides an array of digital literacy resources for low-income communities. While foreign-born Americans are more than two times more likely to lack digital literacy compared to native-born Americans, most existing public resources are not language-accessible, especially for Asian immigrants. They expect immigrants to first gain English competency before learning any digital skills. Moreover, the curriculums are not created by people with experience teaching foreign-born immigrants. Living in an era when finding a job posting requires computer skills, Asian immigrants are left out from obtaining sustainable and fulfilling employment.

Asian immigrants were one of the hardest-hit groups by the pandemic-induced financial crisis. According to a 2020 Asian American Federation report, Asian Americans had the highest unemployment rate in any U.S. racial group during the pandemic.

Along with job loss, our communities also saw high food and housing insecurity as well as a higher risk of mental health issues. The pandemic’s direct impact on the low-wage service industry once again showed us how the jobs that were available to immigrants were volatile and precarious. Without language-accessible and culturally competent digital literacy and workforce development programs, the current social services landscape does not provide them with many opportunities to escape an uncertain future.

Though the solution to the digital divide is not simple, it is not impossible. Virtual programming leaves out a pocket of the immigrant population — those without stable internet, access to digital devices, or knowledge to turn on computers. We were able to narrow the gap within Sapna’s community because Sapna began its digital literacy courses back in 1999. After a unanimous request for computer classes by the South Asian women they served, the Sapna staff reserved the Bronx Parkchester Public Library computer lab and taught five cohorts of women how to turn on computers and set up their first email accounts. These initial seeds planted in this community allowed us to hold the virtual digital literacy course at the peak of COVID-19. However, a sad fact that can’t be ignored is that Sapna’s digital literacy efforts were not and are still not fully funded.

Building digital literacy in the Asian community requires expanding broadband internet and increasing access to digital devices. It also requires a long-term investment in Asian-led, community-trusted initiatives so that they are able to build out effective and language-accessible curriculums that meet their community where they are at. As the city rebuilds to be more tech-savvy, we must not leave Asian immigrants stranded. Instead, we should be striving for a future where technology enhances the possibility for new immigrants to thrive.

Juo-Hsi (Sylvia) Peng is a Community Navigator at the Asian American Federation.

Stories from Digital Literacy Class: Serving Seattle’s Asian American Community: How Asian Counseling and Referral Service Adapted during the Pandemic

By Alex Olins

At the Asian Counseling and Referral Service based in Seattle, we offer a 10-week introduction to digital literacy class for clients with support from Comcast. We have a computer lab and we offered three-hour classes on Friday mornings in our lab to up to 20 students. This is how we had been doing things since 2016. Then, at the end of the winter quarter in 2020, COVID-19 came to the United States, and it changed everything about how we offered digital literacy programming and everything else that we do.

Thankfully, after a few weeks of envisioning how to do things differently, and a creative and digitally savvy instructor, we were able to move our digital literacy class to a remote format in time to offer a full ten-week class in the spring of 2020, and have done so since.

After working to find a suitable platform which would be easy for our clients to access, we found students who would be able to enroll in the class. For the first virtual class, we decided to invite returning students who wanted to brush up on their skills. We felt that students who were truly digital novices would have high barriers in accessing and benefiting from an online-only class. By April 2020, we found 10 returning students who wanted to improve their skills and who also had access to a device (other than a smartphone) and who had stable internet access at home. From there, the instructor and an assistant went through the critical process of working with each student to practice logging on to class prior to the first class. We have found this one-on-one pre-class training to be a critical element of successful virtual instruction. We have also found it critical to have a teaching assistant who can work individually with students during class (often in a breakout room) so the instructor can continue to teach the
group. Without two instructors, progress would be extremely slow and could alienate students who wanted to move faster.

Over time, we have refined aspects of our curriculum. We have offered office hours outside of class times for one-on-one assistance. We have offered incentives for students who attend all class sessions in order to improve attendance. We have marveled at how much our students have learned and how much their digital literacy skills have improved out of necessity.

One of our student’s son’s elementary school science class coincided with our Digital Literacy class on Friday mornings. Sometimes, when she unmuted herself, we could hear a sixth-grade teacher in the background, teaching about ecosystems while mother and son sat together on different computers, each learning something new. That client was a dedicated and quick student; she thrived in practice sessions, and we were happy she was able to learn so much, becoming an expert who could help her son in school.

Another client with limited English proficiency had never seen an online job search website before. After watching the class demonstration on how to use Indeed.com, he immediately set to work doing his own job search online. Now, he’s always up to date on what jobs are available in his area and applies to new jobs every week.

The pandemic pushed us into entirely new ways of doing almost everything. Little kids attended school remotely. Doctors are doing virtual appointments. Job interviews are conducted online. Applications for unemployment insurance had to be submitted virtually. All this significantly impacts our clients. The need for digital literacy skills increased exponentially during the pandemic as parents struggled to help their kids attend school, as they applied for jobs and needed benefits from home. In order to meet their needs, we changed our way of offering services. While we have missed seeing our clients in person, and the struggles of remote instruction are real, even for adults, we have been amazed by how much our clients have improved their digital literacy skills over the past year and by how essential their digital literacy skills are to their ability to get by in the United States.

Alex Olins is the Director for Employment & Citizenship at Asian Counseling and Referral Services (ACRS).

Endnotes

1. https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6955a2.htm
14. Organization and titles were updated as of March 18, 2021 and may have since changed.