

## Digital Empowerment in Austin, Texas

[Austin Public Library](#) has long been a leader in providing public access to information through its twenty-three locations. But a recent partnership opportunity – DECA – is magnifying efforts across the community to ensure that every Austin resident has the opportunity to be fully engaged in our digital society and is comfortable using digital and communications technologies. Working with the [City of Austin Office of Telecommunications & Regulatory Affairs](#), [Austin Free-Net](#) and nearly 80 community stakeholder groups who have adopted the name Digital Empowerment Community of Austin (DECA), the Austin Public Library is part of a plan to strategically expand services to everyone in the community.

### Digital Empowerment Community Austin: How It Works

DECA is the result of the Austin City Council adopting a Digital Inclusion Strategy in 2014. In this strategy, the Library plays an important role in addressing barriers to digital inclusion by providing digital literacy training, and addressing the need for access and language and disability accommodations, but many other agencies play a role as well.

DECA is a group of stakeholders from non-profits, government, private companies, and the academic community who convene in working meetings. Each participant is able to contribute insights drawing from their own client service experiences to help identify common goals and opportunities for reaching a community-wide solutions to make certain that all Austinites are fully engaged with the digital society.

Through a series of facilitated DECA meetings and framing exercises, a list of initiatives that will help fill the identified learning gaps is beginning to bring the entire community forward in a coordinated way. DECA is using the principles of looking outward to define the needs, seeking information about what other organizations are doing, and planning coordinated ways to move forward. Everyone in the community needs, free access to communication technologies that make it possible to be participants in the digital society.

### Planned Initiatives

**Technical Assistance:** Developing a community-wide technical assistance hotline with multilingual services to directly address information technology questions will benefit all agencies. Some Library customers have limited English language proficiency and this is true across DECA agencies. While the Library is working with service providers to make interpretive services available as needed, a way to fill the community-wide gap is to develop a hotline service that everyone can access.

**Uniform Skills-Based Certification:** Individuals taking classes need to know that their time investment will result in acquiring skills that local employers value. Developing a cross-agency certification program so that individuals have the opportunity to earn meaningful certificates valued by local employers would be useful to the community. Because DECA clients are mobile, providing a professional certificate program that can be completed at any participating DECA site would be helpful. Something similar exists at the Louisville Free Public Library (KN) where a coding program results in some students being picked up for internships and employment with local business.

**Curriculum Clearinghouse:** Curriculum for workshops that teach desirable cyber security skills, how to conduct research online, consumer education and financial literacy could also be shared across the community. In order to share curriculum ideas and resources across agencies, an online content

clearinghouse is planned to help coordinate training and build capacity to train; again recognizing that multilingual content is needed, including sign language. Periodic training that teaches new techniques and technologies will also bolster the training curriculum clearinghouse. The Austin Public Library has identified one particular area where staff training can be shared with DECA participants: Safety on the Internet. This curriculum is being developed to share not just with Library staff who need to know how to help Library customers keep themselves safe on the internet every day, but with other agencies who can benefit from it.

**Stakeholder Forums:** Periodic forums to continually receive feedback between stakeholders, their client base, and government are planned to refresh organizational goals and avoid unnecessary duplication. These forums also provide opportunities to discuss barriers like transportation that may result in people being left out in the digital society. Austin holds Conversation Corps sessions with the community, inviting dialog and placing notes from the conversations on the internet. Anyone can participate and everyone can see the results at [www.atxtalks.org](http://www.atxtalks.org). Many Library staff are training in facilitating Conversation Corps, and Library locations regularly host Conversations.

**Marketing:** It's necessary to create outreach strategies that meet residents where they are and to coordinate these efforts across agencies. The recent Digital Inclusion Fair conducted at the local community college is an example of stakeholders coming together with the community to share opportunities and come together around the topic of digital inclusion: [austinfo.net/digital-inclusion-day-connects-austin](http://austinfo.net/digital-inclusion-day-connects-austin). The Austin Public Library participates annually and hopes to host a Digital Inclusion Fair in the future in coordination with DECA partners.

Even in a city like Austin, Texas, with its reputation as a global technology and innovation hub proudly named by the Center for Digital Governance, as one of the "Top 10 Digital Cities in the Country," work is still needed to help people engage in a digital society. Combining efforts with others empowers us all to meet our community's digital inclusion goals. Austin is fortunate to have leadership from its [City Office of Telecommunications and Regulatory Affairs](#) to provide current information and guidance about digital inclusion programs.

#### Sidebar items

- 1,317,528 items circulated using self-checkout creating great operational efficiencies at the Austin Public Library.
- 281,995 Wi-Fi sessions at all Library locations allowing reliable and high-speed access to online resources.
- 23 Million annual page views on Austin Public Library website.
- 707,527 virtual materials circulated erasing the need for many to commute to their libraries. A 39% increase from the previous year.
- More than 85 online resources are available to our customers some of which provide computer training.
- 594 (and increasing) computers internet stations available to the public across branch locations and we logged 689,760 sessions. The usage has increased 5 percent from the previous year.
- The Library has computer labs in four locations one of which features job search help.
- Self-service circulation kiosks to dispense tablets and laptops to the public are being introduced.