

Austin: A Case Study in Connecting What's Available to What's Needed

As the “Silicon Hills” of the technology industry, Austin, Texas is leading the way in new technology innovations and careers. Austin residents demonstrate every day what amazing and creative possibilities can come from creating and using digital and communications technology. But 55,000 adult residents living in our city today are disconnected from this increasingly connected world.

The City of Austin’s vision is for every resident to have access to the knowledge and resources needed to participate in our emerging digital society. We need affordable and available devices for all residents. And it is critical that all Austinites understand technology and its relevancy to their daily lives, whether for helping with their kids’ homework, looking for jobs, getting access to health information, or accessing online government information.

Austin is fortunate to have a robust system of nonprofit organizations committed to digital inclusion which fosters an environment of collaboration and learning about challenges and best practices. Austin also benefits from a competitive broadband market represented by four Internet providers: AT&T, Google Fiber, Grande Communications and Time Warner Cable. Internet access and usage in Austin outpaces the national average. But as technology continues to become more ubiquitous in the workforce, government services and interpersonal communication, the digitally excluded are falling further and further behind.



Representatives from Texas Time Warner Cable, Google Fiber, Grande Communications and AT&T speaking at Austin's Broadband Providers Forum about how they connect Austin

Residential technology usage research conducted by the City of Austin in partnership with The University of Texas at Austin’s Technology and Information Policy Institute shows that approximately eight percent (or 55,000 adult residents) do not have a home broadband connection, and roughly the same amount does not use the Internet at all. Of those 55,000 Austin residents not currently using the Internet, two-thirds are working age (18-65) and 84 percent have a high school education or less. Many of these residents lack the necessary resources to secure stable employment and maintain a comfortable standard living. According to our research, cost was the top reason for not using the Internet, with two-thirds of non-users reporting that they cannot afford this technology. Relevancy is another major barrier to digital inclusion, with two in five of resident non-users stating that they were simply not interested in the technology. This means that tens of thousands of Austinites are not realizing the benefits digital technology can provide like online banking, electronic health portals and even social media.



Austin Children's Museum Tech Reach Program is a GTOPs recipient

The City of Austin has a long history of supporting front-line programs that help residents overcome these barriers to digital inclusion. The City’s Grant for Technology Opportunities Program (GTOPs) was launched in 2001 and since then has provided and been a match to more than \$6.5 million dollars in support to digital inclusion programs throughout the community. From one-on-one trainings on building a resume, to new cognitive software for disabled individuals, to STEM camps for youth, the programs funded by GTOPs are paving the way for a more skilled and equitable society.

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GTOPs allows the City to build vital relationships with some of Austin's most dedicated and successful service organizations. Austin Free-Net provides free computer centers throughout the city and teaches basic computer skills like filling out online job applications. Skillpoint Alliance is a workforce development organization that offers in-depth computer training courses that empower residents to compete in today's modern job market. Texas Folklife's Stories from Deep in the Heart program helps youths use technology to tell their stories through radio documentaries that are broadcasted on public radio. These and other organizations are the boots on the ground, sharing knowledge and providing tools for digital inclusion. It is our goal to help these organizations achieve their missions through financial and strategic support.



Skillpoint Alliance's Empower Computer Proficiency Program is a 10-week training course for adults

Technological devices, capabilities and expectations are evolving daily, and the City of Austin recognized the need for strategic direction to keep up with changing community needs. In March of 2014, Austin City Council adopted a resolution that called for the development of a Digital Inclusion Strategic Plan that would act as a roadmap to address access and adoption of digital technology. This plan was developed over six months based on strategic insights from leaders in the nonprofit, K-12 and higher education, public health, business and entrepreneurial, public service and other key sectors. These leaders spoke to their sectors' challenges, assets and opportunities regarding technology and digital inclusion. And most importantly, they established priorities for taking action.

The foundation of the 2014 Digital Inclusion Strategy is an evolving set of *Taking Action: Initiatives* centered on objectives to help overcome identified challenges. Twenty-five action items, their primary audiences and accountability metrics are outlined across five action categories: Connect, Engage, Include, Integrate, and Coordinate. The City is now working with its digital inclusion partners across all sectors to execute these Initiatives. *Taking Action: Initiatives* represents the top priorities from ongoing brainstorming and strategy sessions, but it is by no means complete. The 2014 Digital Inclusion Strategy remains a dynamic document, always open to new ideas for civic and social innovation. It will be updated annually to reflect progress made and new opportunities related to digital inclusion.

It is our connection to technology, creativity and collaboration that will allow Austin to thrive in this constantly changing world, leaving no one behind. Austin has the resources, knowledge and expertise to address the challenges we face in bridging the digital divide. The real challenge is that we must connect what's available to what's needed, and determine how government, the private sector and nonprofits can work together to ensure all residents are able to participate in our digital world. Austin looks forward to continuing to participate in and learn from local and national discussions about how we can connect our communities.

More information about the City of Austin Digital Inclusion Program can be found at www.austintexas.gov/DigitalInclusion. Digital Inclusion Program Coordinator, John Speirs, can be reached directly at john.speirs@austintexas.gov or 512.974.3510.