METROPOLITAN AREA PLANNING COUNCIL

REQUEST FOR INFORMATION
Digital Navigator Program

MAPC
METROPOLITAN AREA PLANNING COUNCIL

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Notice to Respondents

Respondents to this Request for Information (RFI) are invited to respond to any or all of the questions in this document. Responses to this RFI will assist the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) in building capacity within local communities to support residents in improving their lives through the use of digital technology and the Internet. This RFI does not obligate MAPC to issue or amend a solicitation or to include any of the RFI provisions or responses in any solicitation. An RFI response is entirely voluntary and will not affect MAPC's consideration of any proposal submitted in response to any subsequent solicitation, nor will it serve as an advantage or disadvantage to the respondent in the course of any RFR, RFQ, or RFP that may be subsequently issued or amended.

1.2 Background and Purpose

In partnership with municipalities, housing authorities, nonprofits, and private entities, the Metropolitan Area Planning Council is working to address issues related to the barriers to accessing and using the internet (otherwise known as the Digital Divide) within these communities. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the critical importance the internet in nearly every facet of daily life, and how those without access to the internet and other digital communication tools are excluded from resources, information, and opportunities.

Approximately 20% of households in Massachusetts Gateway Cities do not have Internet access at home, while 30% lack access to computing devices.[1] Where households do have service, it can be too expensive or provide subpar speeds. In MAPC's recent Digital Access and Equity survey of over 2000 residents in the cities of Chelsea, Everett, and Revere, 72% of respondents reported having to cancel or change their internet subscription because it was too expensive.[2] Further, 40 – 50%[3] of households that *do* have Internet access do not have "broadband" speeds, as defined by the FCC.[4] We believe these findings are consistent with issues faced in other communities.

While subsidies exist to support low-income households in gaining internet challenges. Adoption of these programs has faced significant challenges. Statewide, only 46,000 households have taken advantage of the Emergency Broadband Benefit program, rolled out in May of 2021, though at least 500,000 are eligible. Anecdotal accounts of complicated forms, inconsistent messaging between the internet service providers and the FCC, and language barriers have all been cited as reasons for slow adoption.

Supporting these anecdotes, MAPC's Digital Access and Equity survey highlights the need for resource dissemination and support for individuals to take advantage of the opportunities that broadband access offers. 75% of respondents felt confident in their ability to use a computer or laptop, but only 50% had the confidence to resolve issues related to their Internet connection. Perhaps most telling, approximately 96% of Spanish speaking, and 86% of English speaking respondents agreed with the statement *"I would prefer to have a local resource that could support my technology needs rather than relying on Internet service providers."* The qualitative and quantitative data motivates and shapes this Request for Information.

To address the issues described above related to digital access, MAPC is issuing this Request for Information (RFI) to gather interest from organizations, or partnerships, that could host and/or supervise a team of "Digital Navigators." These Digital Navigators are envisioned as individuals that will support community members in signing up for market rate or subsidized internet service, accessing and using digital devices, and understanding basic functions of the internet and online tools like e-mail, in addition to other activities that are still to be defined. It is MAPC's hope that this RFI will activate a network of partners that could be leveraged should a supporting entity such as a municipality, workforce investment board, state agency, or other entity identify funding sources to support these activities.

Respondents are by no means constrained in providing information to this request and are encouraged to provide further information in support of the stated purpose that may be responsive, relevant, and considered noteworthy. MAPC reserves the right to use any information obtained through this process to draft a procurement document in the future that requests responses in a more formal and binding nature than this request. The

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1 https://massinc.org/2020/05/05/gateway-cities-at-the-center-of-the-digital-divide-in-massachusetts/
2 Survey conducted between May-July of 2021
3 Microsoft and Mlab Speed Test Data
4 Broadband Speeds defined as 25Mbps download and 3Mbps upload.

primary goal of this RFI is to gather information from qualified parties to support and inform future digital equity initiatives within the region. This RFI does not constitute a solicitation for bids or proposals and will not result in contract award for these services based on information provided in response to this request. Release of this RFI presents an invitation for interested parties to offer MAPC information regarding the services, support, and systems that could be applied to the use cases described in the following section.

1.3 Use Case

To tackle the lack of digital access in the Gateway Cities, MAPC has partnered with the Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI) to deploy free or low cost WIFI networks in five Gateway Cities.

In order to take advantage of the new planned Internet access, MAPC has identified program models that encourage and support device ownership and digital literacy in communities, described below. The National Digital Inclusion Alliance "NDIA" Digital Navigator program provides individualized or small group assistance to community members or other eligible groups who need affordable home internet service, affordable internet-capable devices, and/or coaching in introductory digital skills in order to become effective home internet users. Boston's Tech Goes Home program trains individuals working in social service organizations to provide digital skills training to their constituents, with participants also receiving Chromebooks and discounted Internet access subscriptions upon completion of the course. These are two exemplary examples of programs tackling the digital divide holistically—and key partners to our work.

With this RFI we hope to identify organizations that can host these kinds of programs that leverage trained community members to provide digital literacy support and resource navigation. Respondents should anticipate and expect that technical training for community members, hourly wages, and administrative/overhead costs for their organization will be provided by any potential program funders.

A host's responsibilities might include:

- Supervision and oversight of program staff, i.e. creating work plans for team members, planning outreach, creating systems of accountability, and mentorship.
- Recruitment of individuals for the program and assistance identifying community members in need of support
- Manage budget, payroll, grant management and reporting
- Create systems for accountability and reward team success
- Provide physical classroom and workspace, and IT equipment necessary for the work

A successful digital equity and/or literacy program is made up of community representatives embedded within the community they serve, equipped with resources both physical and virtual to support learners. An effective host organization has experience initiating new programs and working with a variety of stakeholders within the Gateway Cities, and these organizations often complement digital skills training with other social services including access to housing, healthcare, education employment and social emotional support. Staff at these organizations are dedicated, empathic, patient yet driven to succeed, and utilize best organizational practice in their methods and processes. Program leaders have experience in collaboration between groups and individuals, excellent communication skills, problem solving and the ability to create an atmosphere of common vision, support and achievement.

MAPC and other partners are especially interested in hosts with a focus on youth development and leadership training, but also keen to hear from organizations with staff and constituencies representing other groups including seniors, immigrant communities, and others in need of digital skills training. MAPC hopes, by means of this RFI, to identify and engage with local organizations to craft a coordinated approach to solving the broadband access and digital skills gap in the Boston area.

1.4 Respondent Submissions and Questions

Interested parties should describe potentially applicable services, systems, and program structures that would help communities to meet their digital literacy needs. MAPC is requesting information from interested parties that provide brief and concise expository responses to the following questions as they relate to each use case referenced above.

Question 1: Based on the description provided in section 1.3, describe how this program would be executed by your organization. Respondents should include common program planning elements such as # of staff required, # of individuals supported, program inputs, outputs, outcomes and other components of effective programs.

Question 2: Describe your organization's capacity to accommodate this new initiative. How have you integrated new program and staff services in the past?

Question 3: Who are the key partners that your organization would need/want to work with in order to make this initiative successful?

Question 4: In which municipalities or localities would your organization be able to provide the services described in section 1.3? Please briefly describe any current work you are doing in these communities.

Question 5: Broadly, what are the foreseeable direct costs associated with the recommended solution (we are not seeking budgets, but areas of time that would require compensation)? These costs may include:

- Startup cost
- Host site training cost
- Supervision and hosting cost
- Any other fees or cost not specifically mentioned here.

Question 6: What do you see as the most critical components of a program of this type?

Question 7: What other considerations should MAPC be aware of that are not addressed in this RFI? What blocks or challenges should MAPC be attuned to during this process?

Question 8: How could the recommended solution be scaled to meet the needs of multiple other public sector organizations (e.g. school systems) and/or other towns or neighborhoods in the event that they wanted to join the collaboration?

Question 9: What did we miss? Respondents are invited to provide additional relevant information. Marketing materials are disfavored.

1.5 Posting

Please note that this RFI is issued solely for the purpose of obtaining information. Nothing in this RFI shall be interpreted as a commitment on the part of MAPC to procure or enter into a contract with any Respondent.

Respondents are responsible for entering content suitable for public viewing, as all of the responses and questions are accessible to the public. Respondents must not include any information that could be considered personal, security sensitive, inflammatory, incorrect, collusive, or otherwise objectionable, including information about the Respondent's company or other companies.

1.6 Form of Respondent Submission

Respondents should submit one (1) electronic PDF response to digitalaccess@mapc.org by the date and time set forth in the below schedule. Late responses may be disregarded.

All responses must include a cover page on formal letterhead with the official name, address, and contact information of the firm or entity submitting the response with both contact information and signature provided. Subsequent information provided should be limited to addressing the questions solicited in Sections 1.4. A final conclusion page may be provided summarizing the overall response to the RFI. Please consecutively number all pages of the response.

2. ESTIMATED CALENDAR

Advertise and Post	Mon, August 9th, 2021
RFI Available	Mon, August 9th, 2021
Respondent's Conference	***Thurs, August 12th, 2021 1 - 2:30PM***
Last Day to Submit Written Questions	Wed, August 18th, 2021 5:00PM
Responses to Written Questions	Fri, August 20th, 2021
Submission Due Date	Tues, August 31st, 2021 1:00PM
Anticipated Follow-Up	September 2021

All questions regarding this RFI must be submitted in writing by Wednesday, August 18th at 5PM. Submit all questions via email to digitalaccess@mapc.org. Answers will be provided in writing via addendum and all verbal answers given are not to be considered valid or binding.

3. OPTIONAL VIRTUAL INFORMATIONAL MEETINGS

In addition to written RFI responses, MAPC may invite any or none of the Respondents to make optional, focused, in person demonstrations of experience, offerings, methodologies and expertise applicable to this RFI. Any such demonstrations must relate directly to the MAPC's needs outlined in this RFI and Respondents must not use this time for standard marketing sales presentations. MAPC retains the right to conduct informational session(s) associated with this RFI and retains the right to request additional information from Respondents, including further explanation or clarification from any and all Respondents during the review process.

An optional Respondent's Conference will be held on Thursday, August 12th from 1 to 2:30PM. If you are interested in attending, please click here to download a calendar invite.

4. REVIEW RIGHT, PUBLIC RECORDS, AND COST

Responses to this RFI may be reviewed and evaluated by any person(s) at the discretion of MAPC, including independent consultants retained by MAPCnow or in the future.

All responses to this RFI will be a public record under the Commonwealth's Public Records Law, Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 66 Section 10, regardless of confidentiality notices set forth on such writings to the contrary.

All responses and other documents submitted in response to the RFI become the property of MAPC. MAPC is under no obligation to return any documents submitted. MAPC may use any portion of any submission to formulate any future procurements.

By submitting a response, Respondents agree that any cost incurred in responding to this RFI, or in support of activities associated with this RFI, shall be the sole responsibility of the Respondent. MAPC shall not be held responsible for any costs incurred by Respondents in preparing their respective responses to this RFI.

APPENDIX

DIGITAL NAVIGATORS JOB DESCRIPTION ([PDF](PDF))

Title: Digital Navigator

Reports to: The Digital Navigator will report to [supervisor's title].

Job Overview: The Digital Navigator provides individualized or small group assistance to [community members, or specify eligible group(s)] who need affordable home internet service, affordable internet-capable devices, and/or coaching in introductory digital skills in order to become effective home internet users. This assistance is provided primarily by voice telephone but may also include email, text, video chat, and other communication methods that work for the learner.

The Digital Navigator's work is part of the [agency name]'s efforts to [insert agency integration] and equitable internet access for [residents of community name, or specify target group(s)].

Digital Navigator is a [full, part time position, embedded, or a volunteer position].

Responsibilities and Duties

- Receive, return or initiate telephone contact with clients seeking assistance or identified by [agency name] for assistance.
- Discuss with each client their home internet access or need for home internet access, technology experiences and their devices.
- Assess their access to technology, current digital skill level pertaining to what they need to accomplish the plan, connectivity needs, and internet use priorities. Set agreed goals for Digital Navigator services. Confirm the details with the client.
- If necessary, advise clients about free or affordable home internet service options for which they may qualify, assist clients to apply for services they choose, and support their efforts to secure service.
- If necessary, advise clients about sources of affordable computers or other internet connected devices for which they may qualify, and support their efforts to acquire appropriate devices and where they can get help for repair.
- Coach clients as necessary to use their home internet services in order to meet their internet use priorities. This may include both in person, phone, and online interactions, as well as referral to sources of additional digital literacy skill training.
- Track each client's progress and types of requests, keep accurate and timely records, and report outcomes as required.
- Plan and manage assistance to each client with the goal of fulfilling the agreed goals
- Other tasks as necessary.

Critical Skills and Aptitudes

- Ability to embrace the challenge of learning and teaching basic technological concepts related to internet services, computer and device characteristics, and common online services and applications.
- Excellent self-organization, language capacity, and cultural competency.
- Excellent telephone and online communication skills, including the ability to establish trust with clients of varied educational and cultural backgrounds.
- Ability to demonstrate positive attitude, excellent interpersonal skills, cultural sensitivity and a sense of humor in working with diverse customers, coworkers, and community.
- Ability to creatively solve problems, and negotiate and handle stressful situations in a positive manner.
- Ability to provide excellent customer service, establish appropriate boundaries with clients, and to demonstrate innovation and flexibility.