



Digital Equity

How might we ensure people experiencing poverty can use technology in all the ways they want to and need to?



THE PROBLEM

By early March 2021, Columbus had been hard at work trying to address the “digital divide” in our community. The Digital Equity Coalition had stood up under the leadership of The Columbus Foundation, the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC), and Columbus Metropolitan Library. [The Columbus Foundation had commissioned a study by AECOM to understand what was happening.](#)

An assessment of the central Ohio region’s digital infrastructure was useful, but given our earlier work in [digital equity](#) we knew our neighbors would have insights to share that would help provide important details about what was working, what was missing, and what technology workarounds people were using that could be improved.

Prevailing notions were that people experiencing poverty did not have email addresses, nor were they able to navigate online to get what they needed. However, we knew that to understand what was actually happening and to re-create solutions that would improve lives, we had to hear directly from, and partner with, Columbus residents.

THE APPROACH

The Columbus Foundation worked with [Food Soldier](#) volunteers to identify community members who would be willing to join our design team and others who would be willing to be interviewed about their experiences with technology.

The Columbus Foundation compiled a design team led by Heather Tsavaris, from The Columbus Foundation, which included designers [Tania Anaissie](#) and Jessica Nelson with support from Mark Lomax, II and Matt Martin from The Columbus Foundation. Our community co-designers included Sam, Juliana, and Hannah. Throughout our week-long design sprint, our team conducted approximately 15 hours of interviews with people experiencing poverty. We asked them about their internet access, usage, and current technology challenges. As a team, we made sense of what we heard, brainstormed potential solutions, and built and tested those solutions with more members of the community.

THE INSIGHTS

This design sprint unveiled several useful insights:

- Community members have become accustomed to lackluster service when they have discounted or subsidized internet options.

“There has to be a better way to control outages. We’ve had them lately a lot. [The company] sends someone out and they say it must be something in the line or the weather. They always have an excuse. Then the guy says you just need to upgrade and it will work, but that’s expensive. \$15-20 more a month, even though they only quote you at \$8 more. We can’t afford that.” —*Sandy, mom living on the west side of Columbus*

“We have to put up with whatever we get for service.” —*Kristan, young woman living in Linden with a disability who relies on technology to communicate*

“Being at home more during the pandemic the internet has been valuable. Internet is a good thing--for me it is. I’m not going to complain because it’s really cheap. It constantly keeps going in and out though. I live on the West Side, off of Sullivant Avenue. Internet seems to cut out a lot here. Neighbors have similar experiences.” —*Shay, living with her family and receiving \$10/month internet*

- People are digitally savvy. Despite some expressing a lack of confidence in their abilities, when pressed they seemed to be able to do all the things they choose to do online.

“Our whole day involves the internet. School, resources, purchasing products, communicating with family. I use it for browsing, the doctor, my pet care. My husband uses it for work.” —*Sandy, mom living on the west side of Columbus*

“I use the internet everyday. I have a Facebook problem. We use it for everything. Hulu-everything. We can’t live without it.” —*Nyshia, mom of three*

“I start the day with one of my shows; Netflix or Hulu. When I get tired of that, I go to music. Pandora and Apple Music. Sometimes Spotify. I watch a lot of YouTube shows and channels.” —*Monique, single woman currently experiencing houselessness*

“I’m not good at [technology], but I am the one finding and booking discount online trips for my family.” —*Pam, 60+ Columbus resident*

- We learned that individuals know how to do formal tasks online, but may separate social and formal tasks due to previous negative experiences with theft and fraud.

“ I got my information stolen before. The web gives hackers easy access to your stuff. I don't have a lot, so if they steal from me I feel it... My family does everything online. We have Smart TVs, we have Hulu, we have Amazon. We are online constantly. But, I worry about doing some things online... I had to order a birth certificate online and didn't feel safe.” —*Nyshia, mom of three*

“ Someone did open a credit card in my name on the internet. I got \$5,200 bill out of the blue!” —*Sandy, mom living on the west side of Columbus*

“ I don't want a smart TV or internet in my home because I don't trust it. I try not to do facial recognition and other biometric apps unless have to. I work at [an internet service provider], so I understand the need for caution. —*Whitney, 26 year old woman living alone*

- We also heard from community members that many had access to multiple devices that could access the internet, (including phones, tablets, and gaming systems.) Most people we talked to did not have access to laptop computers or desktop computers.
- Finally, at that time, most of the individuals we spoke to were not aware that there were discount internet offerings that they were eligible for.

Based on our learnings, below are some of the design principles and “How Might We” questions we generated:

- **All product offerings should be high quality.**
 - How might we help people reimagine what they deserve?
- **Broaden what digital literacy means. Don't assume users don't know. Teach with humility if users want to learn more.**
 - How might we reimagine what digital literacy means?
 - How might we honor/leverage the knowledge people already have?
 - How might we make learning opportunities more about how to advocate/negotiate for your internet service needs?
- **Design for agency and choice.**
 - How might we ensure people can do all the things they want/need to do online?

The findings from this project were pivotal in the follow-up on digital equity, projects we pursued, and in our grantmaking from the The Columbus Foundation's *Digital Equity Fund*.

- **Design for reciprocity. Users don't always have to be the receiver.**
 - How might we create digital information opportunities more in line with the Food Soldier model? (neighbors helping neighbors)
 - How might we create equitable digital access that is both respectful and efficient?

| THE PROTOTYPES

We thought it would be game-changing to give community members radical transparency and clear understanding of the difference in what internet service providers are offering. So we created a “Provider 411” prototype that allowed individuals to compare internet service providers compared to one another with details including pricing, speed differences, and reviews and ratings from their neighbors. Smart Columbus continued on with this prototype by designing a test of a user experience interface for an ‘Internet Comparison Tool.’ This tested well with residents and received funding in 2023 to build a beta version from the Federal Communications Commission.

March 4, 2021

“I’m paying for the lowest price option and it’s not even fast enough to submit forms online! I want an upgrade in speed at my same price!” -Tisha B (43203)

March 4, 2021

“I need internet for work, and the middle price I pay isn’t enough for my video calls. Help asap!” (43205)

March 4, 2021

“Speeds and service were great for the first year, then they raised my monthly bill by \$20 for the same level of service. Buyer beware!” - Tony R. (43201)

The ‘how might we’ statements of this sprint informed many important nuances of the overall objective statement of the Franklin County Digital Equity Action Agenda—*Ensure under-resourced residents have access to residential internet, devices, and skills training opportunities at an equitable level of quality that enables today’s online experiences at an affordable price point for low-income households.*

The Columbus Foundation
1234 East Broad Street
Columbus, Ohio 43205-1453

614/251-4000

contactus@columbusfoundation.org

2023