

# **Nashville Digital Inclusion Needs Assessment**

## **Executive Summary**

June 2021

The Nashville Digital Inclusion Taskforce engaged a research team from the Peabody College of Education and Human Development to complete a comprehensive needs assessment as the basis for recommendations on digital inclusion and equity for the city of Nashville. The data for the report comes from interviews with local non-profit partners, focus groups with community members, and a city-wide quantitative survey. This executive summary highlights the overarching takeaways from our analysis.

**Digital inclusion is the right of every person in Nashville, but especially those from underserved communities, to acquire the tools and information necessary to understand and participate in the dismantling of the systems of oppression that keep them from achieving their fullest potential and fulfilling their greatest aspirations.**

Survey results will be publicly available in the Metro Open Data portal, as well as provided to Metro Government organizations and departments for use to inform approaches that maximize the impact of their funding.

### **About the Taskforce**

Organized by Dr. Fallon Wilson of Black in Tech Nashville and Dr. Samantha Perez of the Nashville Area Chamber, the Digital Inclusion and Access Taskforce is a community-based, community-led taskforce focused on addressing the intersecting systemic racial, ethnic, and economic digital inequities found within Nashville's digital landscape to give everyone the means to succeed in today's society.

### **Needs Assessment Overview**

#### **Quantitative Data**

##### **(3,330 responses total)**

- Targeted email, social media (public weblink)
- Random sample mailing
- Targeted field canvassing, with particular focus on vulnerable populations such as underrepresented communities of color, people experiencing homelessness and residents of pre-identified zip codes (37207, 37208 and 37211)
- Translation provided in: Arabic, Burmese, Kurdish, Somali, Spanish, and Vietnamese

#### **Qualitative Data**

##### **(72 total participants)**

- 46 interviews with nonprofit organizations
- 5 focus groups with targeted populations (26 participants total)

## Key Quantitative Takeaways

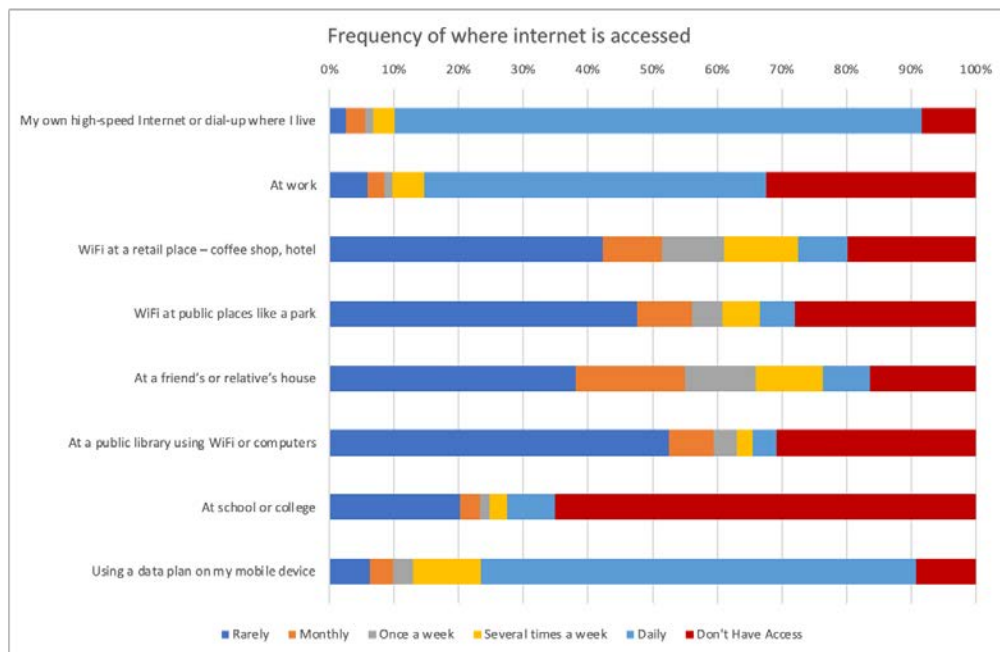
### *Access to Internet and Devices:*

#### **Devices:**

- Respondents were most likely to have smartphones (and multiple smartphones) and least likely to have desktops in households. This trend was seen across different demographic categories. Black and Indigenous respondents had the highest percentage of those reporting having zero of all types of devices - though the types of devices they had followed overall trends (i.e, less likely to have desktops, most likely to have smartphones). White respondents had the highest percentage of those reporting having desktops, laptops, and tablets; Hispanic/Latinx respondents had the highest percentage of those having smartphones in the household.
- Importantly, 20.3% of participants reported sharing devices. Of the devices that were shared, laptops were most likely to be shared, while smartphones were the least likely to be shared. Asian respondents were most likely to report sharing devices, while Black and Indigenous respondents had the lowest percentage of shared devices reported.
- Older adults are more likely to have desktops, younger age groups are more likely to have smartphones, and working age adults are most likely to have laptops and tablets.

#### **Internet:**

- Notably, 18.3% of respondents report not using the Internet at all. The cost of internet services was the most reported reason for not using the Internet (75.7% Agreed or Strongly Agreed). For those that did use the internet, respondents most frequently accessed the internet at home, on mobile devices with data plans, or at work - doing so daily or several times a week.
- Of note, 81.5% of respondents report having home internet access, while 14.6% reported not having home internet access. The most common types of available service were cable modem service (34.7%) and high speed internet plan for a computer or cell phone (33.3%). The most common issues with home internet are slow or no access in certain rooms, dropped internet connections, and slow service from connecting multiple devices.

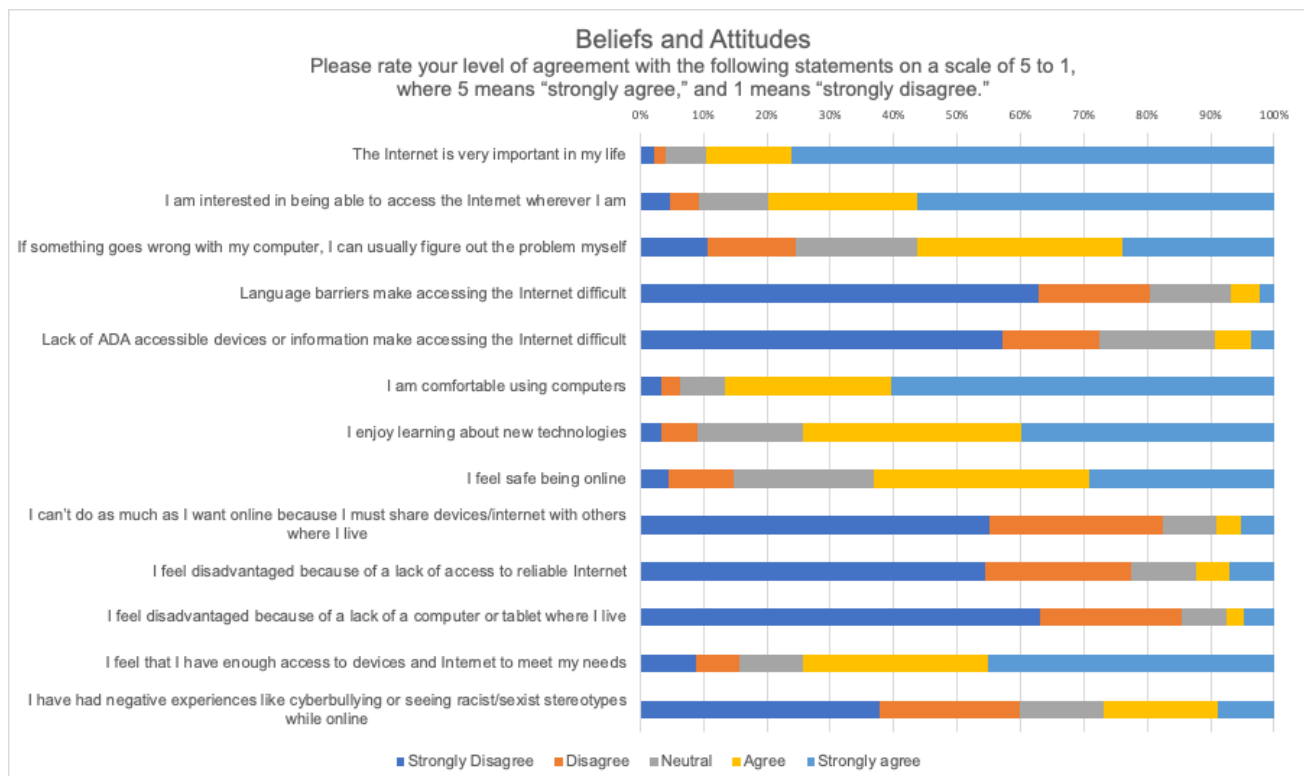


### ***Affordability:***

- There is a large gap between how much people want to pay and how much they actually pay - people want to pay \$21-35 or less per month, but most pay over \$51 per month.
- There is a lack of knowledge around low cost internet options - 8.1% of respondents indicated that they knew about Comcast Internet Essentials; 6.2% about AT & T Internet Basic; and 17.3% knew about multiple low cost options. However, 62.5 % of respondents didn't know of any low-cost options.
- 55.7% of people believe the cost of the internet is too high; 19.1% of people feel they are always searching for free wifi; 61.1% of people agree that the government should pay for those who cannot afford broadband; and 79.7% would sign up for a government program to reduce the cost of Internet service if available.

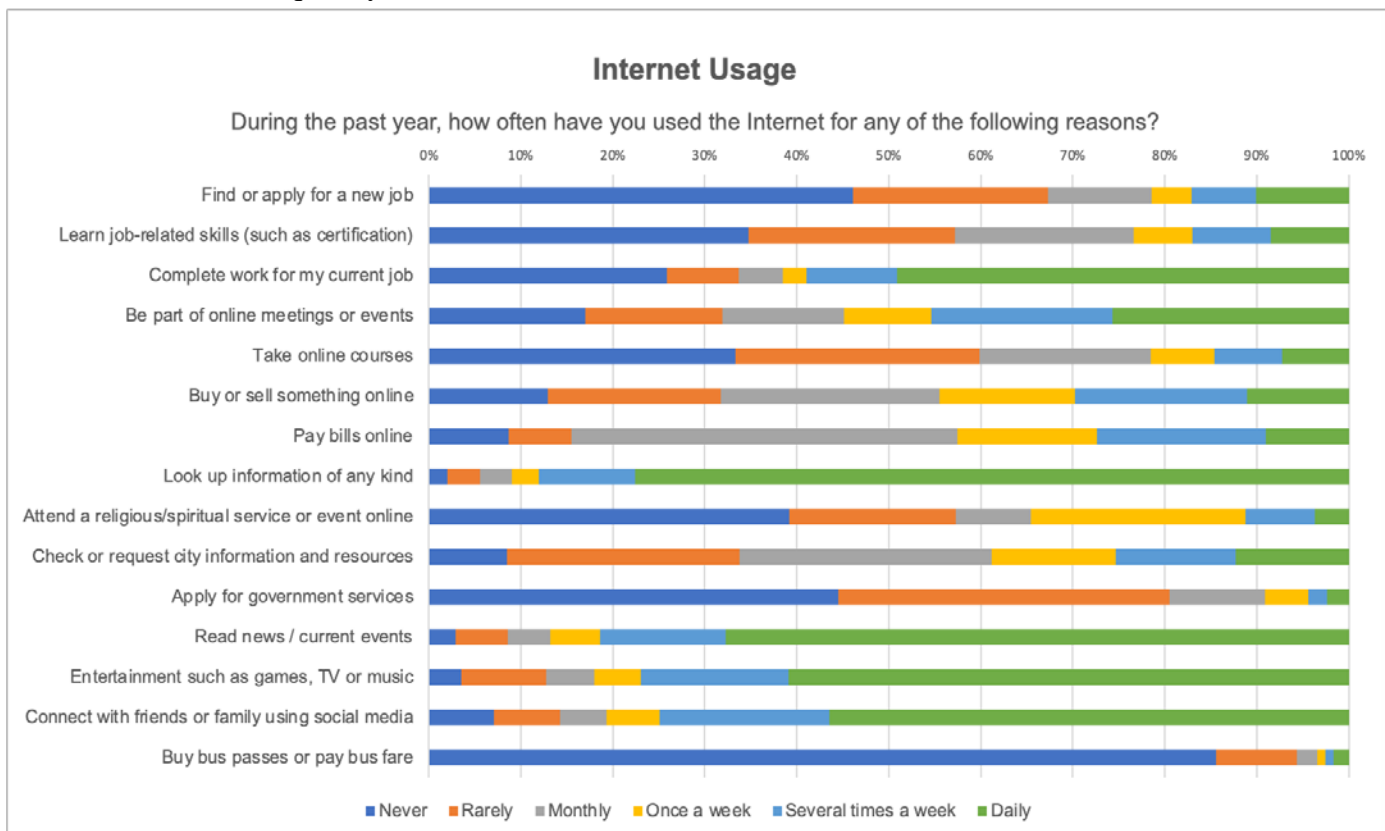
### ***Beliefs and Attitudes:***

- 89.7% of Nashvillians Agree or Strongly Agree that the internet is very important in their lives.
- 74.2% believe that they have enough access to devices and the internet to meet their needs; 15.6% of Nashvillians did not feel they had sufficient access to the internet and devices (Disagreed or Strongly Disagreed); 12.3% overall feel disadvantaged because of their lack of access to the internet; 7.5% overall feeling disadvantaged because of a lack of devices.
- People are less confident in their ability to fix problems with computers (only 56.3% reporting Agreed or Strongly Agreed)
- 17.7% of Hispanic/Latinx respondents report that language was a barrier to internet use
- Asian (19.2%) and Indigenous (20.0%) Nashvillians were most likely to say that lack of ADA accessible devices were a barrier to internet use.



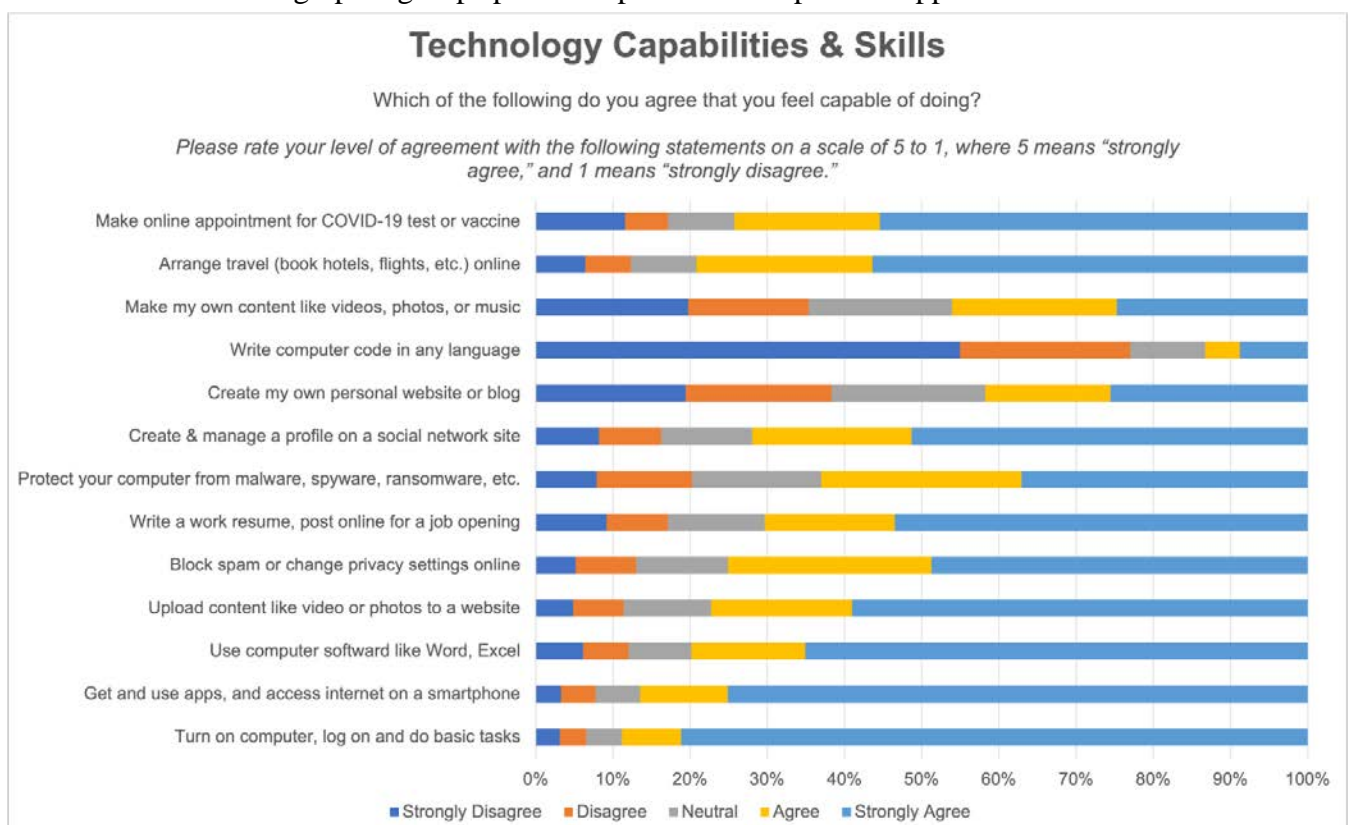
### Internet Use:

- Respondents were most likely to use the internet daily to look up information, read news, for entertainment, and to connect with friends and family.
- About half of all Nashvillians (49.1%) use the internet Daily for completing work on their current jobs - though there were age and race differences in job related tasks.
- Although Nashvillians were least likely to use the internet to buy bus passes or apply for government services (with 94.4% and 80.5% replying they Never or Rarely do so respectively), 38.8% of respondents did use the internet to check or request city information or resources once a week or more frequently.
- Fewer Nashvillians also used the internet to find or apply for a job (67.3% Rarely or Never), take online courses (59.9% Rarely or Never), learn job-related skills (57.3% Rarely or Never), or attend a religious service online (57.3% Rarely or Never).
- However, Black respondents and those 20 and under and 70 and older were most likely to attend a religious service online.
- Although less frequent, significant numbers of Nashvillians also used the internet to pay bills online (84.5% Monthly or more frequently), buy or sell something online (68.3% Monthly or more frequently) or attend online meetings or events (68.1% Monthly or more frequently).



### ***Technology Capabilities and Skills:***

- Nashville residents reported agreement with a range of technical capabilities, with less agreement for skills that required active content creation, coding, or generation of unique technological assets (e.g., photos, videos, websites, blogs, code).
- Differences between agreement levels for these capabilities and skills were influenced by gender, race/ethnicity, age group, and geographic categories; Black/African American and American Indian/Alaska Native tended to report less agreement with technology skills.
- Age group analysis revealed that while older adults may report less agreement with technology capabilities, that for many items, agreement was comparable to other, younger age groups.
- Results indicate that residents in high-need zip codes (37207, 37208, and 37211) may have a skills gap in comparison to other zip codes. This is likely due to access, affordability, and opportunity issues rather than ability levels.
- Being able to log on to the computer to conduct basic tasks was a universally-reported capability, however, important workforce development skills (i.e., writing a work resume to post online and using computer software like Excel and Word) were not as widespread, suggesting key areas of growth for Nashvillians hoping to work in an increasingly digital world.
- Specific interventions based on gender, race/ethnicity, age, and geographic region are warranted in order to bridge gaps in technology skills and capabilities across these groups.
- Most respondents preferred online technology support, though significant percentages of certain demographic groups preferred phone and in-person support.

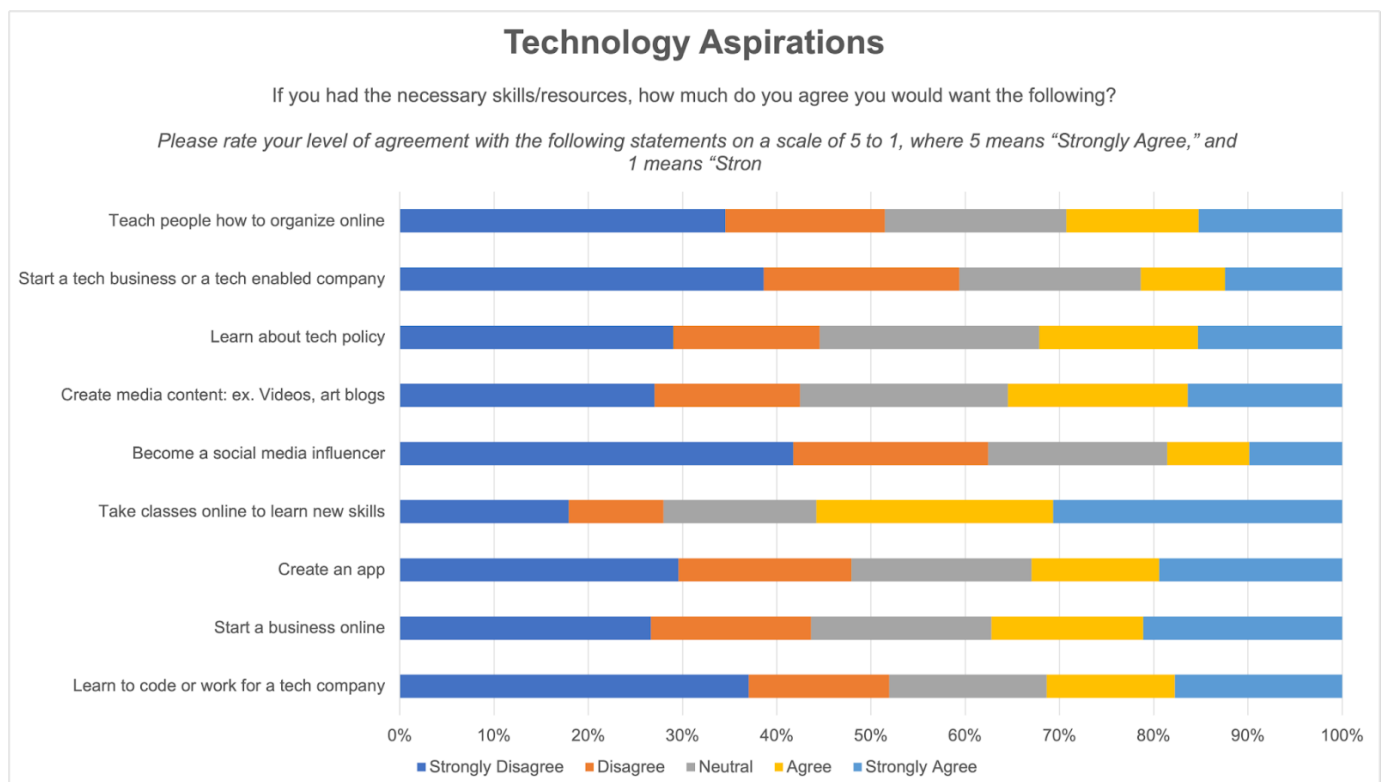


### ***Technology Aspirations:***

- Technology aspiration levels are not as promising; the majority of Nashville residents expressed disagreement with most of the items, which may suggest a lack of understanding or awareness of how these skills could be useful to individuals.
- Lack of aspiration is not only indicative of interest, but may also be reflective of awareness and understanding of what is possible, or the ability one has to imagine their digital future or potential (i.e., digital imagination). In this respect, many Nashvillians may be interested in learning new online skills but are not able to see a connection between a skill and their life. Additionally, lack of foundational knowledge about technology may contribute to not being aware of or understanding some of the aspirations listed here.

**Digital literacy and skills may influence aspirations to the extent that Nashville residents do not know what they do not know or could know and as such, do not (yet) aspire to know it.**

- Over half of Nashville residents Agreed or Strongly agreed that they aspired to take classes online in order to learn new skills (55.8%), which indicates an overall interest in skill development.
- Technological aspiration levels differ by gender, race/ethnicity, age, and geographic location; understanding the differences in aspirations between groups can inform more targeted digital inclusion programs and skills training.



## Qualitative Insight

### *Interviewee Quotes:*

- “Well, I just don't think there are many jobs right now that don't require some level of digital literacy. You know, I don't know why I was thinking this example. But, you know, if you go to Maplewood high schools automotive program, you know, when I was in high school, automotive, there's a bunch of guys under the hood of a car. Sparks flying. It's all it's all computers now.”
- “Our volunteer's digital literacy skills were so low, we were spending all of our time serving our volunteers and trying to get their digital literacy skills up and running that we were not having enough time to serve our learners.”
- “I also want to talk about like how big data is being used to do predictive policing, which is inherently wrong and bias because most of the data that they're getting is coming from public spaces where is most likely being used by black and brown folks...it adds a lot of nuance to talking about the digital divide because the city of the state can somehow figure out a way to provide us with license plate readers in North Nashville, but they can't seem to figure out a way to provide every high school, middle school, and elementary school student with reliable devices and the internet.”
- “But as a it's holding [the organization] back as a business. We're not growing because we have employees who can effectively use the technology that we need to be more efficient. And productive. We have technology here that is under-utilized. That if you utilize the effectively would, we would have a better margin and more successful operation which would just, you know, that all that money just funds serving more women”
- “We just need more credible relationships in the community because I might call somebody I know it'd be like, yo, my phone freezing. I don't know what to do with it. But I might not call somebody I don't know because I don't want to be vulnerable in front of that person. So I think that's what it means to be digitally literate, just being comfortable with your devices enough to be resilient when they're, when they're messing up because the digital isn't always reliable, but also having some type of backup in a community that you can call on when you're having issues with it.”

### *Focus Group Takeaways*

While each group discussion highlighted a different type of “access” issue, not all participants had the same perspectives or needs when it came to technology. For most participants, access issues superseded digital skills training and capabilities. In this sense, access to affordable, reliable internet and devices was a key barrier for participation in society. Further, a lack of up-to-date digital skills training disabled many participants from being able to fully utilize what they did have access to. In sum, focus group participants gave voice to the constraints that access places on one's ability to fully engage in today's world, as well as the limitations a lack of access holds for technological capabilities and aspirations for future use.

## **Recommendations**

Given the data from the study, some general recommendations based on insights from the analysis, as well as specific action items to consider are provided. In terms of general recommendations, a few points to consider include:

1. **A one-size-fits approach will not work for digital inclusion.**
2. **Organizational missions align with and require digital inclusion.**
3. **We must leverage current community infrastructure in support of digital inclusion.**
4. **Facilitating communication and collaboration among digital inclusion efforts across the city (and state) is needed.**
5. **Learning more about Nashvillians' digital imagination and aspirations will inform and guide future digital inclusion efforts.**

### **Key Recommendations:**

- Metro Government should develop a working relationship with Commissioner Bob Rolfe who leads the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development in which all broadband activities fall under. Specifically, Metro Government should have a conversation about how the state should consider "underserved" zip codes in Davidson County who may have access to broadband established by the FCC's definition (e.g. 25 mb/3 mb), but either lack the financial means to get the internet or lack the digital literacy to adopt it.
- Metro Government should work with partners at the state level to apply for state funds (e.g. Tennessee Broadband Accessibility Grant) and Federal Grants to support connectivity. Specifically, NTIA Announces \$288 Million in Funding Available to States to Build Broadband Infrastructure.
- Metro Government should work with metro libraries and MNPS to apply for the E-Rate Emergency Connectivity Fund (e.g. 7.1 billion) which is a federal program targeted for libraries and schools.
- Metro Government should develop MOUs with Nashville HBCUs in or near any zip codes outlined in the report to provide access and digital training: Connecting Minority Communities Pilot Program. A \$285 million grant program to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs).
- Metro Government should develop a Digital Inclusion Officer like the City of Detroit who can guide both private companies and the philanthropic community to establish an "actionable" fund. Detroit's digital inclusion officer developed a partnership with Detroit's public school system, Quicken Loans Community Fund, The Skillman Foundation, DTE Energy and others to launch Connected Futures—a \$23 million program to provide Detroit kids with devices, free broadband and tech support.



## **Acknowledgements**

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### **Peabody Research Team:**

Dr. Hasina Mohyuddin, Dr. Maury Nation, Dr. Marcy Singer-Gabella, Rachel Hanebutt, Sehee Jeon, Sailee Karkhanis, Maggie Kissinger, Marian Knotts, Risa Roth, and Chloe Tamula

### **Study Funders:**

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### **Taskforce Members:**

Dr. Samantha Perez, Founder  
Dr. Fallon Wilson, Founder  
Pearl Amanfu, Metro ITS  
Jurnell Cockhren, Civic Hacker  
Katie Cour, Nashville Public Education Foundation  
Alex Curtis, Greater Nashville Technology Council  
Keith Durbin, Metro ITS  
Kaki Friskics-Warren, The Maddox Fund  
Melissa Jagers, Alignment Nashville  
Dr. Hasina Mohyuddin, Peabody College  
Tom Ward, Metro Nashville Public Schools

### **Data Collection Partners:**

ETC Institute  
The Equity Group Community and Public Relations Firm  
Tennessee Foreign Language Institute

**Link to Full Report:** <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1aoTnRdhL-zR7xWS1sFqf9EkTETs9l7L6/view?usp=sharing>

### **Supplemental Figures and Tables:**

[https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1ixLbTyKz7qQQVQbppLQCaRaBqAK7fho4HWDtqtea\\_vhg/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1ixLbTyKz7qQQVQbppLQCaRaBqAK7fho4HWDtqtea_vhg/edit?usp=sharing)

For inquiries, please contact Hasina Mohyuddin at [hasina.a.mohyuddin.1@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:hasina.a.mohyuddin.1@vanderbilt.edu)