



# COLLECTIVE IMPACT REPORT

July 2022 - June 2023



THE CENTER FOR DIGITAL EQUITY is a collaboration  
of public, private, and resident partners  
housed at Queens University of Charlotte



## CENTER FOR DIGITAL EQUITY COLLECTIVE IMPACT REPORT

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### CELEBRATION

Happy recipients at an after-school program with the Learning Help Centers of Charlotte.



**MISSION STATEMENT** The Center for Digital Equity's (CDE) mission is to make Mecklenburg County the most digitally equitable community in America.



**VISION** The Center for Digital Equity is the backbone organization for a collective impact strategy bringing together residents, and public and private sector partners to co-create solutions allowing every resident the opportunity to thrive in our modern culture.



**HISTORY** The Center for Digital Equity is an evolution of two key community initiatives, Digital Charlotte and the Charlotte Digital Inclusion Alliance, and is housed at Queens University of Charlotte.

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# Executive Summary

**A**s we all know, the pandemic highlighted the need for communities worldwide to strive for a more digitally equitable society. But unfortunately, the lack of internet access and adoption, a working device, and basic computer literacy skills place our residents at a disadvantage and prevent them from thriving in our modern culture.

## WHERE WE STARTED

The Center for Digital Equity (CDE), is the result of merging the existing digital equity work at Queens University of Charlotte, known as Digital Charlotte with a border community effort known as the Charlotte Digital Inclusion Alliance.

Since 2015, a coalition of interested parties began convening monthly to advance digital equity work. In 2017 this coalition produced North Carolina's first community-based digital equity playbook. The playbook highlighted existing opportunities and brought to light the opportunities digital equity provides. Supported by an endowment from the Knight Foundation, the CDE has been actively working to advance digital equity in our community for over six years.

Even with all that effort, we know there is more work to be done and in a more coordinated fashion. Housed at Queens, the CDE is a backbone organization for a collective impact strategy focused on making Mecklenburg County the most digitally equitable community in America. The CDE brings together residents, and public and private-sector partners to co-create solutions aimed at this goal.

The CDE is guided by a community council of residents and the aforementioned partners who are organized across five workstreams:

1. Policy, Advocacy, and Ecosystem Development
2. Data, Research, and Program Measurement
3. Device and Connectivity
4. Digital Literacy and Skilling
5. Digital Navigation and Technical Support

An advisory board of public and private-sector leaders helps ensure alignment across our community's anchor institutions.

## WHERE WE ARE NOW

This year, the CDE was named the lead partner for the digital divide priority focus area for the Mayor's Racial Equity Initiative (MREI). Established to advance Charlotte to the forefront of American cities working to achieve racial equity, the MREI seeks to produce equitable access, opportunities, and outcomes for Charlotte's communities of color. Digital equity is a cornerstone of this work. The MREI has connected \$20 million in private sector-funding to develop the CDE's delivery of digital inclusion resources to the community.

With historic federal investments in digital equity taking shape, there is no better time to reorganize, galvanize, and engage our community of partners. With this collective impact approach, the end goal is as important as how we get to it. Our growing team and Community Council are committed to engaging every facet of this work with an eye toward diversity, equity and inclusion.

Becoming the most digitally equitable community in America is within reach!

### IMPACT REPORT SECTION LEGEND

- Co-created Key Performance Indicators (KPI)
- Impact Stories



#### COLLABORATION

U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris and N.C. Governor Roy Cooper, FCC Chairwoman Jessica Rosenworcel speak with CDE Team and community member about the Affordable Connectivity Program.

#### DEVICE AND CONNECTIVITY

# PAVING THE PATH TO CONNECTIVITY

## KPI: Supporting Internet adoption for at least 10,000 households

Internet Service Provider (ISP) adoption is the foundation of digital connectivity. Our distribution events helped generate a three percent increase in internet service adoption countywide. One of our major goals was to support internet adoption for 10,000 Mecklenburg County households. We exceeded this goal, raising awareness for the program among 13,000 residents.

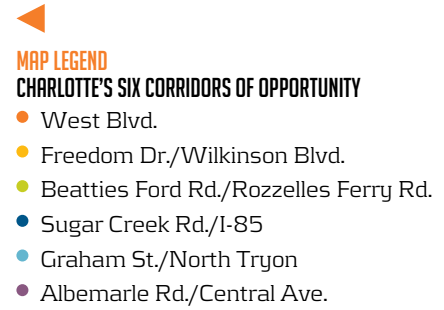
Through the Your Home Your Internet grant with INLIVIAN (formerly the Charlotte Housing Authority), we were given access to Universal Service Administrative Company (USAC), a platform that administers the ACP and enables us to view the backend of ACP enrollment. This insight has proven

invaluable and has helped us develop new strategies to improve the quality and usefulness of the information we collect. We have implemented follow-up phone calls after distribution events to determine if residents completed the application and to offer assistance with any challenges they might face. Demographic information regarding age, race/ethnicity, and gender identity is also collected to help pinpoint any trends that could further impede the adoption process.

Trusted partners like Charlotte Mecklenburg Library, E2D, and Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) collaborated with the CDE to further raise awareness for the program. The

CDE also partnered with national non-profit, EducationSuperHighway to increase awareness of the ACP throughout Mecklenburg County and to train Digital Navigators and other partner organizations. These efforts will be carried out in close collaboration with the communities the CDE serves, with a particular focus on Charlotte's six Corridors of Opportunity:

- Graham Street / North Tryon
- Sugar Creek Road / I-85
- Albemarle Road / Central Avenue
- Beatties Ford Road / Rozzelles Ferry Road
- West Boulevard
- Freedom Drive / Wilkinson Boulevard



Federal census data shines a light on the digital landscape of Charlotte, revealing the peaks and valleys of connectivity. The most connected areas of the community boast connection rates of 91 percent. But that rate falls below 80 percent for residents of most of the corridors — and even lower than the city-wide average of 85 percent. This is why our partnership with the City of Charlotte is so vital. Specifically, our Digital Navigators' holistic approach to supporting programs like Access Charlotte helps bring digital connectivity and all its benefits to thousands of Charlotte households.

# THEIR OWN DEVICES

## KPI: Supporting the distribution of 20,000 laptops

Collectively our partners, Charlotte Mecklenburg Library and E2D, distributed over 27,000 laptops between July 2022 and June 2023 exceeding our initial goal of 20,000 devices. In addition to providing laptops, these distribution events showcased the CDE's Digital Navigator service.

Real-time support and access to vital resources, empowered residents to maximize the potential of their new devices. This holistic approach to serving the community is vital to our mission.

**Charlotte Mecklenburg Library received funding from the Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF) to purchase and distribute 20,000 laptops.**





**INCLUSIVE**  
CDE team members provide Charlotte residents in-person support.

IMPACT STORY

# LEVELING THE DIGITAL PLAYING FIELD

## Charlotte Mecklenburg Library Connects the Community with Free Laptops

**The Center for Digital Equity has played an integral role in developing and fulfilling like-minded partnership missions. Two collaborative efforts include the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library and E2D—a non-profit organization providing residents with low and no-cost laptops.**

Emery Ortiz, chief strategy and innovation officer with the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library, and Pat Millen, co-founder and president of E2D, understand the importance of digital equity and have been working diligently to address the community’s need for functional devices.

### WHO IS DOING THE WORK?

The Library currently allows residents to borrow hotspots and Google Chromebooks, but they wanted to do more. Joining forces with E2D and the CDE was the first step.

Millen started E2D in 2013 when his 12-year-old daughter, Franny began voicing concerns about student access. Now, the organization has served over 30,000 families and provided resources at 167 schools in Charlotte Mecklenburg County.

### SOLVING THE PROBLEM

There are many reasons why people need devices with employment, healthcare, education, and digital literacy being the biggest. Ortiz explains how these four areas impact residents.

“So many jobs moved to either all remote or at least partial remote options, and if you do not have devices and knowledge on how to navigate that field it can limit your opportunities.”

Community laptop distribution has been an effective way to provide devices to residents who need them.

Additionally, Ortiz observed how the pandemic exposed the need for digital equity, “After COVID, almost everything transitioned online. Whether or not it was a predominately online industry before, like banking. Everything took a hard shift,” she said. “The school system also had to migrate to online learning. Students without devices at home fell behind in their curriculums”.

The Charlotte Mecklenburg Library has long recognized the need for digital equity Ortiz explained. “What the library has always aimed to do is increase the amount of opportunities that anyone can have in the community regardless of socioeconomic background. Regardless of where in the city you live, The Library just really wants to make those opportunities available.”

E2D has adopted a similar, all-inclusive approach. “We do pretty good marketing of our products. One hundred percent of the people that are getting a computer from us are by definition low income,” Millen said. However, he feels it’s essential to meet residents where they are. “We used to go directly to area high schools and market to school-age families (in Charlotte Mecklenburg County). Now we don’t care. If you have a need, we want to fulfill it.”

Beyond the obvious need for devices, Millen feels everyone should have access to information. “People having the ability to seek information on their terms is very important.”

### FULLFILLING THE NEED

While the library was awarded an \$8 million grant from the MeckTech Computer Program, the funds only covered the cost of devices. The CDE stepped in and provided additional funding to help with implementation, supplies, and volunteers on distribution days. From September 2022 to June 2023, the library distributed 20,000 devices. The 11 distribution days were held at Avidxchange – a central location for residents between Uptown Charlotte and the North End area.

Recipients were required to be at least 18 and show proof of residency in Mecklenburg County. The CDE was on site to help residents sign up for The Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), a federal program providing free or discounted internet.

Ortiz said the program has been overwhelmingly positive for residents. “We have received so much positive feedback from laptop recipients. So many of them were senior citizens without experience owning technology.”

E2D’s partnership with the CDE has helped streamline their efforts. “When we paired people with computers, we also tried to get them access to digital skilling, but as time moved on the CDE became more engaged and took over most of this aspect.”

### THE FUTURE OF THE DEVICE DIVIDE

As the mission continues, thoughts about the future of technology and resident needs are at the forefront of the CML and E2D’s plans. “There is no finish line,” Ortiz said. “It is always progressing and constantly advancing.”

Ortiz said CML will continue to champion the community’s need for digital skilling. “The public library system hopes to be a strong digital literacy component for all. Since we have 21 locations and a dedicated workforce, we want to help teach and get people comfortable with technology.”

She credits collaborations for success, “With the great work the CDE is doing, and our great corporate partners in Charlotte, funding and opportunities for refurbishing devices will be plentiful.”

Millen is on the other end of the spectrum. “There will be no need for E2D in a few years because everyone will have access to a fully functioning computer.” Like Ortiz, Millen credits the diligent work of his organization and CDE’s collective mission. Because of partnerships like these, digital equity is within reach.

**“So many jobs moved to either all remote or at least partial remote options, and if you do not have devices and knowledge on how to navigate that field it can limit your opportunities.” — Emery Ortiz**

## INNOVATION

Community Council member leads ideation session at TechRising Summit 2023.

## DIGITAL NAVIGATION AND TECHNICAL SUPPORT

# THE JOURNEY OF 1,000 STEPS BEGINS — WITH A MAP

## KPI: Development of the Journey Map

The pathway to digital inclusion is anything but straight and obstacle free. Visualizing the desired end result at the beginning can help manage issues as they arise. This proactive approach to problem solving has led to an exciting new project — the creation of a journey map. A journey map is a user experience (UX) document that details, or maps, the necessary steps toward accomplishing a goal.

We created a special task force from our Community Council to work on this project. The Community Council is a

mix of residents and partners dedicated to our mission, and we are proud of this alliance. The task force includes: Byron McClendon from Ernst & Young, Renee Carter from PerScholas, Kimberly Edmonds, William McNeely from DoGreater, Chantez Neymoss of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library and CDE Program Directors Ameera Bratholomew and Amy Crippen.

Led by Barings Head of Client Experience Strategy Enablement, Sarah Dudley, the team has already begun work on this audacious task. Ernst & Young spearheaded the development of eight personas or fictional target users who mimic the needs and desires of the true target audience. These personas will be

used to understand the consumer better and will help inform design decisions throughout the project. We are currently seeking a UX designer to develop the first version of an interactive, web-based version of the journey map and expect this task to be completed by the second quarter of fiscal year 2023-2024.

This is a shining example of the level of commitment our corporate partners have for our shared goal of making Charlotte the most digitally equitable community in the nation.





# THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

## KPI: Developing SLA and OLA between key service partners

Having clearly defined, public-facing agreements with our partners is essential to maximizing favorable outcomes for our constituents and meeting or exceeding the goals we set. We have made progress in defining our Service-Level Agreements (SLA), which govern how the CDE engages with community members and individuals. Transparency and trustworthiness are crucial in our dealings with the community, and responsiveness

to our customer base is key. We aim to respond to anyone who contacts us within 48 hours, setting expectations for caring and accessibility from the start. Consumer-friendly automation and a trackable ticketing system are also under consideration.

An Operating-Level Agreement (OLA) sets expectations for business partnerships. Certain parameters

outline the existing alliance between CDE and the City of Charlotte. We are now working to create the same level of expectations and agreements with Spectrum, a third party, to our agreement with the City. The City currently funds two Digital Navigators dedicated to city initiatives – most notably, Access Charlotte, a program that provides no-cost internet service for a certain number of properties.





**TRUST**

A Digital Navigator guides a Charlotte Resident through the Affordable Connectivity Program application.

DIGITAL NAVIGATION AND TECHNICAL SUPPORT

# THE TICKET TO EQUITY

## KPI: Outreach to increase digital navigator ticket volume

Digital Navigators help community members navigate the pathways to digital inclusion. They assist with tasks like signing up for affordable home internet service, purchasing affordable devices, addressing basic connectivity issues and learning new digital skills. Our staff of Digital Navigators was on hand at many events to assist recipients and to create awareness for our Digital Navigator program. Since the fall of 2022, we have ensured the presence of Digital Navigators at all in-person events. E2D has also utilized Digital Navigators at their distribution events.

In 2022 our Digital Navigators responded to 614 tickets for various service requests. Remarkably, ticket volume

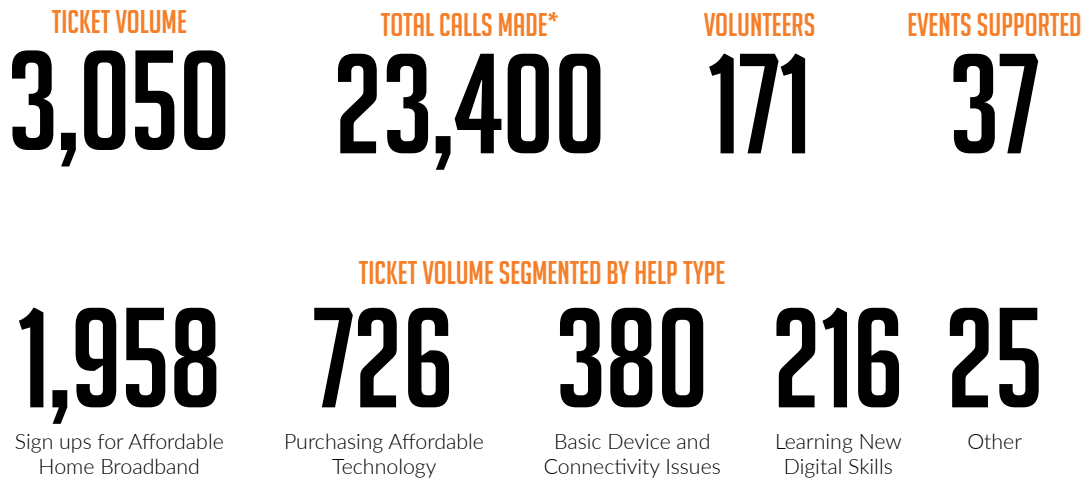
increased to 3,050 tickets in 2023. The largest spikes in activity centered around our grassroots collaboration with Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools (CMS). In April 2023, students took flyers advertising the program home with their report cards. As a result, we were able to help more than 400 eligible families access high-speed internet service through the ACP. About 71,000 CMS students' families were automatically eligible for the program. Over 40 percent of those served were Spanish-speaking households.

Partners like CMS help increase visibility and awareness for the CDE and create an organic swell in demand for our services. These relationships are our most valuable

asset. Continuing to leverage this exposure to expand our influence will be critical to our ongoing success.

Digital Navigators are our feet on the ground, our community agents who represent CDE in the community and help grow awareness for our mission. We knew bolstering our corps of Digital Navigators would be essential to continuing this positive trajectory, and we committed to expanding personnel in this area. Starting with two, part-time Digital Navigators, we hired two more who are funded by our contract with The City of Charlotte. These individuals will focus on city initiatives and the ACP through third-party partner Spectrum.

## CDE DIGITAL NAVIGATOR FY23 NUMBERS



We now have four, full-time Digital Navigators (including the Access Charlotte Digital Navigators), one part-time Digital Navigator manager, and three part-time Digital Navigators from City Startup Labs’ entrepreneurship program, for a total of eight Digital Navigators.

The Your Home Your Internet grant with INLIVIAN will allow the CDE to recruit five additional part-time Digital Navigators. The success of the CMS campaign generated an uptick in service requests which are managed by the Digital Navigators from City Startup Labs.

On June 18, 2022, the CDE and its Community Council activated the first phase of our corridor innovation

campaigns in collaboration with the North End Community Coalition (NECC). This was the first in a series of county-wide resident engagement events. These events were designed to bring available resources directly to residents while also creating engagement opportunities for residents to co-create additional solutions.

At this time, we also implemented the Voice of the Citizen Survey sent to those served by CDE within the year. However, the federal government’s Infrastructure Investment Jobs Act (IIJA) allocated significant funding for digital equity initiatives. One of the components of this legislation involved the creation of a

state-level digital equity plan. As a result, North Carolina created its own survey. To avoid duplicating efforts, CDE created a new survey to assess the efficacy of the services we provided to our customers. Issued at the close of every single ticket handled by our Digital Navigators, feedback at this granular level is needed to improve our everyday interactions with those we serve.





PERSONALIZED  
Digital navigation services  
tailored to resident needs



# COMMUNITY IMPACT WITH PROVEN RESULTS

## IMPACT STORY

### Charlotte Resident Receives Laptop for Career Advancement

**W**hile it may seem that every home has access to digital devices, many residents still lack this valuable resource. This void poses socioeconomic challenges for Charlotte-area residents related to employment, education, and healthcare.

Charlotte resident and mother of three, Tamika Okelly, shares how receiving a laptop through The Center For Digital Equity's community efforts and partnerships has advanced her professional development.

#### RECOGNIZING THE NEED

The most effective way to advance your career is through education, and many educational classes are now remote. Okelly wanted to take a few Microsoft Office courses offered by Goodwill, but she had one big problem. "The need was I could not afford to purchase one (a laptop). At the time, I couldn't afford to buy one from Goodwill for a couple of hundred dollars," Okelly said.

Although she is no stranger to computers, she knew she needed a refresh. "I was in the IT field when I went to college, but life happened, and I hadn't touched a computer or remembered anything," said Okelly. "I just wanted to get back to working with computers. It was important to take Office suite because things have changed."

#### CONNECTING TO RESOURCES

Earlier this year, Okelly began researching ways to get a laptop. She had previously used her local library's computer lab but needed something more accessible and permanent. During a Google search for affordable laptops, she found the Center for Digital Equity. Okelly said she requested a device and was contacted by Jarvis Miller, a Digital Navigator Manager with the CDE. Miller has been in his role for a year. "The Digital Navigator Service includes assisting community members in receiving affordable home internet service and affordable internet-capable devices," he explained.

In addition to these services, devices are free of charge. Digital coaching and technical support are also provided.

After a brief screening for income, address, and need, Okelly received a laptop in about a month. Since receiving her computer in April, she has completed her online courses and landed a job as data entry specialist. The CDE also noted her special request for a touchscreen device due to her struggles with arthritis.

#### LOOKING AHEAD

Residents need to know these resources are available because there are benefits to having your very own device. Okelly explained why this is important. "A few times I have been to the public library and used the computer. You reserve it, and there is a time limit because another person has booked it. With your own device, You can be on there for ten minutes or ten hours."

Although digital life moves fast, Okelly feels confident with where she is today. Sharing her thoughts on the future, she said, "Technology will be the standard."

She already has plans to continue her digital education, "In August, I am going to take another Excel class so I can get certification through Microsoft at the mastery level." She advises anyone needing a device to contact the CDE, "They would not regret it."

Miller believes the advancement of technology will help level the playing field. "The need for digital literacy classes will increase. Students must have computers, and technology is used throughout the classroom," he said. "Young adults are getting the training needed to use devices properly."

However, Miller feels accessing digital solutions will be difficult for some. "Access to the internet and devices will decrease because living costs are growing drastically," he said. "Families are barely able to afford mortgages and utilities, so it will be problematic to afford devices that must be replaced every other year."

Access to digital resources, Miller says, is a must, "From education to communicating with friends, just about everything is digital now. Because so much is done online everyone must have access, affordability, and skills development to function in our society adequately."

This level of transparency and accountability is one of our core values. Collective impact. Collective accountability.

# MINING THE DATA AND MINDING THE GAPS

## KPI: Corralling current data and identifying areas for improvement

Measuring our progress is critical. We collaborated with the City of Charlotte to initiate a system to corral the data as it relates to our Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). The first iteration of this effort was an ArcGIS story map. This interactive, web-based document tells the story of our progress through data via an interactive, digital interface. Information will be updated every six months.

We have also revised our data collection process to work in tandem with customer management solution tool, HubSpot. This effort will allow us to transfer what we have learned about our customers' needs into action items crafted to address them. We are also working with a private vendor to create an interactive dashboard which will be fed by data from the story map.

These efforts will help us determine where gaps in service exist. For example, many residents do not have access to reliable transportation, so establishing additional locations for digital literacy classes along Charlotte's public transportation routes could be helpful. The interplay between the map and dashboard could help pinpoint other issues making our services more accessible to our customers.

During the last quarter of fiscal year 2023, we began collecting digital equity data across the ecosystem with four key partners: Per Scholas, E2D, The Library and Goodwill. During this pilot venture, we vetted the efforts of these partners against the needs of the community in an attempt to identify service gaps or to highlight progress. The reports generated will be readily accessible to any interested party. This level of transparency and accountability is one of our core values. Collective impact. Collective accountability.

We will also implement a data management/governance process, which will clearly define guidelines for partners sharing data with CDE. Every month partners will submit a form with attention given to potentially sensitive issues like sharing data publicly and identifying preferred methods of data sharing and transfer.



**LISTENING**  
Hearing directly from residents helps inform the strategy.



**CO-CREATE**

Public and private-sector partners create the next iteration of digital equity at the TechRising Summit 2023.

**DIGITAL LITERACY AND SKILLING**

# BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND

## **KPI:** Increase use of Northstar for baseline assessment

Northstar Digital Literacy is a learning management system developed to help individuals learn and assess computer skills they need to work, learn and fully participate in today's fast-paced, tech-based society. Consisting of online, self-paced modules on various digital literacy topics, anyone can take an assessment for free.

We wanted to utilize this tool in our community and to increase usage among consumers. Proudly, we exceeded this goal increasing usage by 145 percent among organizations affiliated with our partners. We also added seven new partner organizations including: Renaissance West Community Initiative,

Freedom Communities, Camino, Center for Community Transitions, Beatties Ford Road Vocational Trade Center, Care Ring, First Mt Calvary Baptist Church.

The Camino Center will play an integral role in increasing digital literacy among Mecklenburg County's Latino population. Currently, there is a pending request for funding to help purchase devices for the center.

Three of the seven new organizations are already reporting data around the use of Northstar. Most notably, we trained Charlotte Rescue Mission staff to use Northstar, which enabled them to host learning and informational

sessions and to provide open hours for interested parties to ask questions. Participants are granted access to work on the assessments of their choice at home using self-paced modules. Ideally, we'd like to establish Northstar as a baseline. Its utilization of basic assessment modules is the perfect entry point for our customers.



# PLOTTING THE COURSE

**KPI:** Develop version one of a digital literacy journey map

We will create a journey map to underscore the importance of digital literacy. We have created three personas and are currently seeking a User Experience (UX) designer to create an interactive dashboard by the first quarter of the next fiscal year. The journey map will create an image of the process of working with CDE from start to finish. For example, if a customer with no computer experience wants to learn how to code, the journey map would create an image — from start to finish — of all the steps and resources within the ecosystem they needed to help them reach their goal. It could look something like this:

1. **CONNECT:** Customer receives a device at a CDE-sponsored event
2. **LEARN:** A Digital Navigator helps the customer locate and a computer literacy course at the Library
3. **FOCUS:** Customer takes a coding class at Per Scholas
4. **IMPLEMENT:** Customer starts an internship with a local organization



## COMMUNITY

Community Council partners bring thought leadership.

# FROM LEARNING TO LEVERAGING

**KPI:** Hours of digital literacy sessions

A functional device is a powerful tool, and an essential one along the path to digital equity.

Yet, without basic digital literacy skills, its full potential can never be realized. Through partner-sponsored events, we helped 8,294 individuals take advantage of digital literacy sessions across the CDE ecosystem. Partners like the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library,

Per Scholas, and Goodwill also hosted Northstar sessions. Additionally, through its DigiLit program, The Library offered basic skills and workplace classes.



**EQUITY**

CDE staff leverages resources at hand to provide a meaningful experience.

## IMPACT STORY

# DIGITAL LITERACY IN THE CLASSROOM

## A Fresh Start: Center For Digital Equity Provides Support to Charlotte Rescue Mission

Charlotte Rescue Mission (CRM), is a non-profit focused on substance abuse recovery for men and women. Some of the mission's goals include helping residents find employment or return to school. Through a recent partnership with Charlotte Works and the Center for Digital Equity, CRM has implemented a digital literacy program designed to help residents learn vital skills to aid them on the road to recovery.

These collaborative efforts have benefited residents who come to CRM seeking a new beginning. "They come in and say, 'I have this problem and want to change,'" said Resource Room Manager Terry Wilder.

### MEETING RESIDENTS WHERE THEY ARE

The digital literacy program began before Wilder joined CRM in January, but she understands how important this additional resource is to the people they serve. "My part is to get them ready to go out in the world in different areas, including digital literacy."

Although residents range in age from 18 to 70, the need for digital literacy is a common issue. For most residents this deficit is due to a lack of exposure. "Even if they are young, they might have been in a house with drug addiction. Once addiction kicks in, that is all they care about at that moment," Wilder explained.

### PROGRAM OVERVIEW

CRM operates a four-and-a-half-month program to help residents get back on their feet. The last month of the program is dedicated to the digital literacy program. Some areas covered include: social media footprints, telehealth, understanding online classes, and Microsoft Word and Excel.

Each resident must pass 15 different areas to complete the program. They also receive a laptop from E2D, a non-profit organization that provides digital devices to Charlotte-area residents who need them.

Although the digital literacy program is only for residents, Wilder took her support efforts to the next level by completing the course herself. She happily shares her recent experience with two residents. "I had two ladies that shine out in my head. They knew nothing about

computers, and one student couldn't even understand how a mouse works. She could operate it when she was done."

So far, Wilder has had about 50 women go through the mandatory program — and each of them completed the course.

### A SECOND CHANCE

When thinking about the residents' future, Wilder is hopeful their alliance with the CDE will continue to help. "I like the opportunity the students have for digital literacy classes. It's awesome because some have been on the streets for years."

Wilder said these resources give residents the kind of confidence that comes from knowing you have educated yourself. "There are people out there that may try and knock them down because they know they are in recovery. Just because of that fact, it's just another thing that builds their confidence."



**INTEGRITY**

FCC Commissioner Geoffrey Starks, N.C. Governor Roy Cooper, Charlotte Mayor Vi Lyles and partners work to serve our community.

**POLICY, ADVOCACY, AND ECOSYSTEM DEVELOPMENT**

# A PLAN OF ACTION

## **KPI:** Developing a policy and advocacy agenda

Initially designed to fund highway and transit projects, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) was amended to provide funding for broadband access in November 2021. Enacted by the 117th United States Congress, the IIJA is part of the foundation of the CDE's development of a policy and advocacy agenda. We reviewed federal and state-funding requirements to ensure that our plan fully considered the nine populations identified and supported by the IIJA. We developed a listening session format to replicate a policy agenda process and to aid us in

establishing a sustainable tool for setting priorities each year. We are developing, documenting and implementing this process to ultimately draft a robust policy and advocacy agenda.

An effective policy and advocacy agenda hinges on receiving feedback from each of the nine covered IIJA populations. Since we don't have ready access to these groups, we partnered with organizations that serve these communities. These organizations form the Digital Equity Champion Cohort and represent their populations at

listening sessions as part of a six-month, contractual collaborative process. In return, each organization receives a stipend from CDE, which covers the time/travel of individuals coming to meetings, and also funds efforts to replicate events or surveys tailored for their populations. It also covers whatever resources the organization might need to plan and execute events, surveys, etc.



# PARTNERING WITH THE COMMUNITY

## **KPI:** Supporting Recruitment and Onboarding of new partners/residents

Any resident of Mecklenburg County committed to helping make this the most digitally equitable community in America can be a resident partner as outlined by our Community Council charter. We recognize the power in working closely with those we serve and met our goal of installing 25 resident partners out of 59 overall partners.

Official partners must submit a partnership agreement. At the start of 2022 we created a governance document to manage these agreements.

Residential and organizational partners have different agreements to manage their disparate needs and the transfer of information with CDE. Community Council meetings are open to anyone, but only those who submit a partnership agreement can vote on items and influence ecosystem objectives.

## CDE FY23 PRESS

PIECES OF COVERAGE

37

ESTIMATED VIEWS\*

138K

AUDIENCE\*

53M

# BETTER COMMUNICATION. BETTER RELATIONSHIPS.

## **KPI:** Supporting Communication efforts related to CDE primary activity

We implemented a calendar of events and created event categories for any partner, organization, or community member to add their events and receive a level of support from CDE. For example, if a local church is hosting a digital literacy class, they can add it to the calendar and receive Digital Navigator support for the event. This public-facing calendar fosters a two-way stream of communication between CDE, our

partners and the community. We also began distributing a monthly newsletter. Previously, we would provide an agenda before each community council meeting. Based on feedback and requests for additional information, we expanded the agenda into a newsletter. Topics covered ranged from onboarding of new employees, CDE events, to state and federal updates.

Growing our volunteer corps was also an important part of our community outreach efforts. Within the past year, we increased the number of volunteers from 154 to 319. Advisory Board Member, Ernst & Young, helped in this effort by providing a large number of volunteers for many of the CDE's events.



#### TRANSPARENCY

TechRising Summit helps inform best practices.

#### ORGANIZATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

# FUELING PROGRESS

## Pushing the needle toward digital equity takes a collective effort.

We work with community partners every day to deliver solutions that help individuals compete and thrive in today's fast-paced, tech-driven society. But our contributions aren't always obvious. Often, we are the engine that powers the efforts of our community partners, humming quietly under the hood, funding initiatives and sponsoring events — driving home all the things that make it happen.

#### Addressed staffing needs to improve our ability to serve the community

- Hired two full-time Digital Navigators
- Hired one part-time Digital Navigator manager

#### Developed a marketing campaign publicly announcing CDE, including a logo revamp.

- Generated general interest and awareness for the CDE and Digital Navigators by sharing the brand story and the stories of partners, residents, and the Community Council
- Initiated a logo revamp to showcase the new brand identity.

#### Initiated an organization-wide diversity, equity, and inclusion strategy to ensure our organizational culture, policies and practices were reflected.

Some early findings include:

- Drafted our organizational values to guide the development of our culture and work
- Promoted data disaggregation in our collection and interpretation to inform our work
- Emphasized learning with respect to cultural competency among

organizational leadership, staff and Community Council leadership

#### Appointed an official advisory board and are in the last stages of establishing governance.

*The members of the advisory board are:*

Reenie Askew  
 Leslie Johnson  
 Brad B. Wallace  
 Blair Stanford  
 Rob Phocas  
 Charles Thomas  
 Rich Majerus  
 Zachary White  
 Candace Salmon-Hosey  
 Andrew Bowen  
 Kenneth Kennedy  
 Emery Ortiz  
 Terik Tidwell  
 Crawford Pounds  
 Michael E. Giles  
 Pat Millen  
 Amy Huffman

#### Created baseline governance for the Community Council, putting a charter in place and establishing partnership agreements.

# FY2023 FINANCIALS

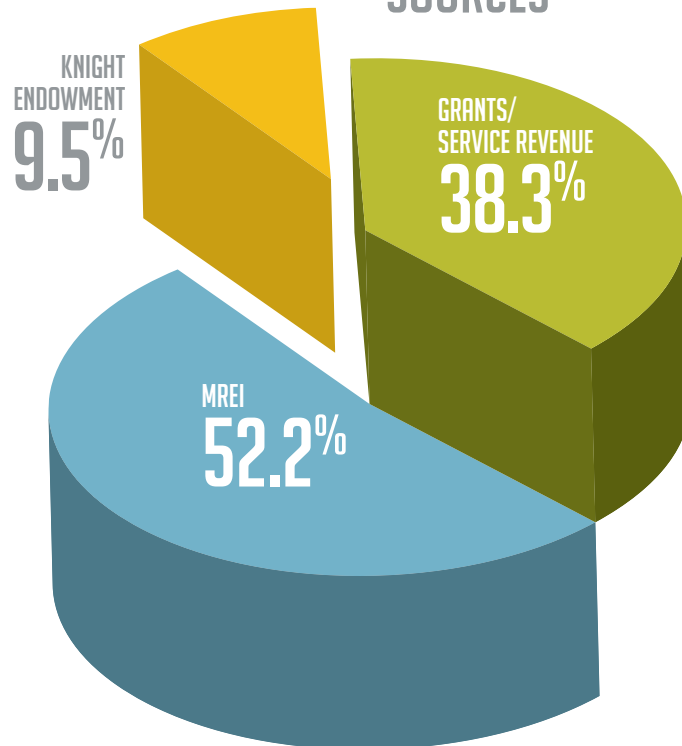
The Knight Foundation endowment, the CDE's original funding source, supports the basics of the organization's structure including staff development and personnel expenses for leadership.

**In FY2023 grants/service revenue includes the following:**

- The North Carolina Broadband Infrastructure Office to design, develop, and deploy **digital health literacy** in coal-impacted counties
- The City of Charlotte to support the Access Charlotte program through **Digital Navigator** service including the funding of two full-time digital navigators. The City was the first to invest in the development of one of the nation's first countywide digital navigator programs with the CDE (under previous organization name).
- CharlotteWorks to support an ongoing **digital literacy** collaboration with Charlotte Rescue Mission. Approximately \$30,000 of this funding was utilized to purchase devices for participants through our partner E2D.
- North End Community Coalition to support a year of connectivity for devices and **digital literacy** sessions funded by Knight Foundation.
- Your Home Your Internet federal grant through INLIVIAN to support

a campaign around the Affordable **Connectivity** Program through the Digital Navigator service including the funding of five part-time digital navigators to be onboarded in FY2024.

## CDE FUNDING SOURCES



**Mayor's Racial Equity Initiative (MREI)**

FY2023 was the first year the CDE received MREI funding. This funding allowed CDE as the lead agency of the initiative's digital equity pillar, to develop and implement foundational components that will continue to support the scaling of a sustainable digital equity framework. Nearly half of this year's funding was allocated to community-driven initiatives (referred to as corridor innovation

## HIGHLIGHTS OF CORRIDOR INNOVATION FUNDING FOR FY2023

MeckTech	33%
Policy work ( <i>consultant, organization stipends/other incentives</i> )	19%
Community Council Technical upskilling around broadband and digital equity ( <i>ILSR in progress to be completed FY2024</i> )	11%
Batteries for E2D laptops	8%
Data management	7%
Digital Literacy Collaborations	4%

funding). Approximately 75 percent of that portion of the investment was utilized through the CDE's Community Council.

Ideas that aligned with the Key Performance Indicators and created opportunities across the ecosystem were co-created and funded. Initiatives supported with this part of the investment include the Library's MeckTech (laptop distribution) program, a community-centric plan to inform policy and advocacy agenda development processes, batteries for approximately 800 E2D laptops, and various "train the trainer" digital literacy collaborations.

The rest of the funding ensured the organization's structure could support the

execution of the co-created initiatives. This included the addition of four full-time and five part-time team members. In addition, operational support items like HubSpot (customer management system used for communications and Digital Navigator service), community engagement materials, PR and marketing vendors, and staff development comprised about nine percent of MREI's total FY2023 investment.

### Future revenue sources

Through IJJA and North Carolina's state-sponsored digital equity efforts, there are several upcoming opportunities for funding. Promising opportunities include: a possible \$500,000 from the

NC Division of Aging, and competitive grants and funding to support the implementation of the state's digital equity plan. Although many of the exact dollar amounts are unknown, part of our FY2024 planning includes creating a funding strategy with a field expert that will help us successfully approach some of the competitive opportunities as well as identify possibilities for more permanent and sustainable funding sources.