

# Digital Navigator Program Report

DIGITAL EQUITY UNIT

# Acknowledgments

## **Washington State Department of Commerce**

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# Executive Summary

The Digital Navigator Program (DNP), located in the Digital Equity Unit (DEU), provides essential components in community and economic development across Washington. The DNP supports the DEU's mission to advance digital inclusion for all Washington residents to participate and collaborate online to thrive in today's global society. Through collaboration, DNP, grantees and their partners promote digital literacy and services, creating equitable digital inclusion. The DNP also supports the Washington State Broadband Office's (WSBO) initiative, "Internet for All in Washington," in reducing digital barriers for Washington's residents, through digital literacy, supported connectivity and device distribution.

The DNP defines a Digital Navigator (DN) as "a trusted member of a community and or organization who assists individuals, groups and or households in the internet adoption and use of computing devices." Digital navigation services include the distribution of internet-supportive devices (laptops, computers, hot spots), and real-time assistance with an option to use digital learning platforms to teach the digital curriculum through in-person, webinar-based and at-your-own-pace options.

The DEU and the WSBO anticipate an increasing need for Digital Navigator (DN) services due to the expanding broadband infrastructure in Washington. Through synergistic partnerships, the DNP's outcomes will include measurable data to assist in eliminating barriers of connectivity. The DNP's strategic approach is to inform and collaborate with communities, entities and governments. Program staff help identify current policies and systems that could benefit from incorporating grant-funded Digital Navigator roles and services. DNP anticipates meaningful outcomes including baseline data and success stories documenting the positive impacts of obtaining resources, tools and knowledge through accessing the internet, as well as improving users' abilities to live sustainable, healthy lifestyles.

## Key Highlights

- In Fiscal Year 2022 (FY 22), the DNP awarded \$7.5 million in grant funding to 4 grantees through a competitive Request for Proposal (RFP).
- In Fiscal Year 2023 (FY 23), the DNP awarded \$37,603,711 million in grant funding to 32 grantees through two competitive RFPs.
- In Fiscal Year 2024-2025 (FY 24-25), the DNP awarded \$29 million in grant funding to three consortiums to implement the digital navigator proviso in the 2023-25 biennial operating budget. The goal is to increase digital equity and navigation services for state residents. The collective knowledge and experience of the current Digital Navigator Grantee Cohorts provides progress through services and device access. There are 68 committed consortium members and continuous partnership growth throughout communities in Washington.

# Introduction

## Background

Directed by state biennial budget in 2021 (ESSB 5092), the Washington State Broadband Office (WSBO) developed the Digital Navigator Program (DNP) to provide digital navigator (DN) services, devices and subscriptions with a budget of \$7.5 million in funding. Chapter 332, Laws of 2021, amended in the 2022 supplemental capital budget, section 1042, directs the WSBO to fund broadband equity and access through a state grant program.

## The Digital Navigator Program (DNP)

The WSBO developed and implemented the first DN Request for Proposals (RFP) in January 2022, awarding \$7.4 million to four grantees. Within six months, the grantees provided 39,000 DN services to individuals, including 7,969 services to Medicaid clients across the state. This first round of funding offered critical indicators of a greater need for individuals and households to understand how to use a computer and navigate the internet.

WSBO utilized just over \$37 million of the FY 23 general fund to implement two RFPs providing DN services to approximately 3% of people in Washington with digital access needs.

- 1) The first RFP project period awarded \$24.3 million in funding to 22 grantees with a project period of eight months to provide services that would advance digital literacy skills and digital equity. The initial funding advanced digital literacy skills, digital equity and connectivity in communities across the state.

This project served approximately 152,682 individuals. Services included:

- Households Served: 112,773
  - Digital Literacy Services Provided: 142,146
  - Internet Connected Devices Distributed: 103,532
  - Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) Assistance Provided: 17,922
- 2) The second RFP project period awarded \$4.9 million to 10 grantees with a project period of six months to provide DN services to individuals formerly incarcerated and reentry populations. The objective of this second funding was to advance workforce development, systems and social navigation, digital skill literacy, digital equity and digital connectivity across the state.

This project serviced approximately 2,900 individuals. Services included:

- Digital Literacy Services: 2,921
- Internet Connected Devices Distributed: 2,817
- [Affordable Connectivity Program](#) Services: 594
- Workforce, Employment and Entrepreneurial Services: 1,943

## Digital Equity Unit

The Washington State Department of Commerce (Commerce) established the Digital Equity Unit (DEU) in January 2023, and subsequently transitioned the DNP from WSBO to DEU. Commerce implemented the DEU to drive strategies, objectives and performance of digital inclusion through affordable access, internet

connectivity and adoption, and digital skill building. To achieve this work in collaboration with WSBO, DEU developed strategies to promote sustainable practices of digital inclusion by:

- 1) Eliminating barriers to access infrastructure and enabling access to devices and tools to maintain reliable, affordable, high-speed broadband service.
- 2) Providing residents with the information, support, and skills to obtain and cultivate digital knowledge and skills to advance digital inclusion (education, workforce development, access to government services, social connectivity, information access, and telehealth).
- 3) Empowering residents to navigate digital resources in ways that promote self-sufficiency, participation and collaboration.
- 4) Collaborating with tribes, various levels of government (state, local, county) and communities through continuous learning and skill sharing by in-person and digital platforms.

## Fiscal Year 2022-2023 Grantees

The DNP awarded \$32,779,164 to 32 grantees (see **Table 2**) supporting projects to provide DN services across Washington during the FY 2022-2023. DNP grantees provided digital services and devices to approximately 369,581 (see **Table 1**) Washington state residents in 2022-2023.

## Fiscal Year 2022-2023 Summation of the 32 Projects

The 2023 DNP provided meaningful outcomes in assisting the current and emerging digital equity needs across Washington. The 2023 grantees identified the expanding needs for DN services with the growth of infrastructure now serving communities previously underserved and unserved. Individuals and households continue to seek DN resources to learn how to navigate the internet with confidence, to access social services such as housing, health care, food, education and workforce skills to achieve independent living. There has been an increase of service requests from older adults specifically in understanding cybersecurity and accessing social services. The 2023 grantees provided meaningful outcomes that included identified challenges and suggested resolutions. This provided the DNP guidance in a strategic approach for the next notice of funding opportunity (NOFO). Resolutions for the challenges included 1) that the next NOFO require Consortia apply with a membership minimum of 3 entities, and 2) the lead applicant would be the fiscal agent and provide oversight of all grant deliverables, work directly with consortium members and be primary point of contact for the DNP. Consortia will have the ability to negotiate bulk purchases of digital devices and provide coordination in the delivery of devices and services, effectively reaching a broader number of individuals without duplicative efforts.

Washington communities have many unmet needs in digitally connecting to social determinates of health. Currently, there is no reference providing guidance on the specific role and responsibilities of a Digital Navigator (DN). Few entities in Washington have a sustainable DNP with staffing available to provide DN services. Additional challenges included the lack of infrastructure and lack of affordable internet connectivity (i.e.: high monthly fees, cost of purchasing devices capable of internet connection). Many individuals and households do not have the basic skills needed to operate a digital device and navigate the internet with basic cyber security knowledge. Populations, such as older adults, BIPOC, low-income and rural communities, have limited-to-no internet access, resulting in unfamiliarity in navigating and accessing complex health and social systems.

The DNP grantees provided DN services in 35 of the 39 Washington counties and served approximately 213,000 individuals (**Table 3**). Outcomes included:

- New community partnerships.
- Distribution of digital devices with supported connectivity to the internet to individuals and households.
- Increased skills and knowledge providing new pathways for sustainable and independent living among the most underserved in communities across Washington.
- The innovative delivery of services through trusted community members and leaders in providing one-on-one assistance in participation of webinar-based trainings. This was a critical component of reaching a broader number of individuals in many projects.
- Community hubs offering individuals a place to utilize computers and receive digital literacy trainings were available in locations such as libraries, senior centers and schools.

### **FY 22-23 Challenges included:**

- Contractual
  - Many grantees were new to state contracting and experienced difficulty in navigating the process; this required increased technical support from the DNP staff.
  - The extended timeframe needed to negotiate and execute contracts; this was many grantees' first time applying for a government contract.
- Project
  - More time needed to implement projects.
  - Hiring project staff for only a few months.
  - ACP Connectivity support was difficult because many individuals did not have or were unwilling to submit required documentation, and others had difficulty accessing the program because it was a digital platform.
- Devices
  - Negotiating a reasonable price; some projects could not meet the required minimum purchase for the often-required bulk purchase.
  - Negotiating the service duration for connected devices; services must end June 30 of each fiscal year, per the State policy.
  - Delivery delays of purchased items due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Success Stories**

The DNP often starts serving clients by providing a device that allows clients to access digital services. Digital Navigators help clients in a variety of ways including engaging with service providers, navigating online resources, and accessing patient portals. Below are two client stories from FY 2022-2023 that show the positive impacts of the DNP's services:

- A minor, who was previously homeless, applied and was accepted into college. Through the Digital Navigator grant, the minor received a high-end laptop that will support the student in completing a 4-year college degree, provide opportunity for employment, and facilitate access to sustainable housing.
- An elderly mother received a phone call stating her savings account had been hacked and a security update was required. Unaware this call was a scam, she provided access to her computer and the caller installed spyware, malware and viruses. Family members contacted their local Digital Navigator who provided an in-person visit to the mother's home; the Digital Navigator successfully removed threats from her computer and provided the family with basic training on cyber security. The Digital Navigator continued to monitor the mother's computer activity to ensure all threats were removed, and provided the mother additional digital literacy training. Now, the mother knows how to use the internet safely.

## Fiscal Year 2024-2025 Strategies and Priorities

The DNP defined FY 2024-FY 2025 strategies and priorities that strengthen efforts to deliver current funding priorities. Additionally, the DNP identified emerging opportunities of connectivity, resources and tools that can empower state residents to use the internet to improve their standard of living.

### The DNP FY 24-25 Strategies for Grantees:

1. Public Engagement – to inform and engage
  - a. Informational Engagement
  - b. Transparency – DNP web page current resources
  - c. Data – Informative
2. Digital Navigator Role – define the role and develop a module providing guidance on how an entity could incorporate existing and/or new programs to deliver DN services.
  - a. Defined to meet Washington needs
  - b. Module created
3. Digital Navigator Services – define the various services and supporting devices as a component of the DN module.
  - a. Digital Device
  - b. Digital Educational
  - c. Digital Security
  - d. Delivery
4. Policy, System and Environment (PSE) – meaningful measures with sustainable outcomes
  - a. Equity and Inclusion
  - b. Mapping of existing PSEs with the opportunity of integrating DN and or DNS
  - c. State and local partnerships

### The DNP FY 24-25 Priorities for Grantees:

- Develop and implement a broader mobilization of in-person digital navigator services to Washington's most geographically challenged locations.



- Integrate DN services and increase access to health care through telehealth, health care portal and online resources and tools.
- Continue and expand digital device distribution to include laptops, computers, hot spot devices and other digital supportive devices.

The DNP Fiscal Year 2024 -2025 awarded \$29 million in grant funding to three consortiums. The purpose of this current funding is to implement [SB 5187 Proviso](#) through a consortium of three or more entities, to implement a project in achieving the goal of increased digital equity and navigation services for Washington residents. The collective knowledge and experience of the Cohort members will provide forward progress toward digital equity through services and access to devices. The Cohort meets monthly to share Cohort project progress and identify opportunities of partnerships in meeting deliverables. To learn more about the current grantees and their projects visit the [Washington State Dept. of Commerce Digital Navigator Program web page](#).

## Needs of the DNP

During the 2021-2023 biennium, the DNP showed there are many areas of Washington with unmet internet connectivity needs. The DNP anticipates that in the next 5 years, digital inequities will outpace the current funding of \$30 million for biennium 2023-2025. The continuity of Digital Navigator services is imperative to delivering impactful outcomes that eliminate barriers to equitable digital inclusion.

The DNP is developing a community engagement plan to provide informative discussions with community leaders and members. The DNP will implement this plan during the first quarter of calendar year 2024 and will include a focus on building relationships with the 29 federally recognized tribal nations across Washington. This plan allows the DEU and the WSBO to share information and resources about current programming and priorities to broaden community awareness of future funding opportunities.

The DNP FY 24-25 Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) received 26 applications requesting \$115,331,157 in funding; the DNP could only award \$29 million to three grantees. The NOFO application process revealed a greater need for funding of Digital Navigator services and resources to address the current digital inequities across Washington.

Commerce submitted requests for additional grant funding in the 2024 legislative session. The funding requested is required to provide a broader mobilization of in-person Digital Navigator services to Washington's most geographically and economically challenged communities. The funding will support efforts to integrate Digital Navigator services into existing programs to increase access to social services and health care through telehealth, health care portals, and online resources and tools. There is a need to continue current activities such as digital device distribution including laptops, computers, hot spot devices and other digital supportive devices.

The DNP serves an essential role in developing processes necessary to ensure individuals and communities across Washington have access and knowledge to utilize the internet. The DNP continues to work collaboratively in building and promoting digital literacy and services; the DNP promotes equitable digital inclusion through grant-funded initiatives.

# Data Tables from Fiscal Year 2022-2023

**Table 1 — Approximate number of residents served and types of assistance received**

Please note due to concerns regarding sharing personal information from marginalized communities, some interactions are not included in the data.

Service Category	Category Defined	Number of Services Provided
Digital Navigation	Individual case management, group classes, healthcare access, social services, and legal	212,205
Digital Literacy	Navigating an internet connected device, creating an email account, privacy and security, education and skills training	32,540
Internet Connected Devices (distribution)	Laptops, tablets, smart phones, operational supporting devices	106,349
Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP)	Limited federally funded subsidiary program assisting low-income individuals and households to connect to the internet.	18,487

**Table 2 — DNP FY 2022-2023 Grantees**

- DN project - Funding period 10/01/2022 — 06/30/2023
- DN and Workforce Development Reentry Support Project - Funding period 12/20/2022 — 06/30/2023

Grantee	Funding Awarded
Answers Counseling	\$210,000.00
Better Health Together	\$451,129.00
Cambodian American Community Council of Washington	\$238,187.00
Centro de Servicios Comunitarios	\$499,697.18
Cielo Project Radio Ranch	\$302,546.02
Communities of Rooted Brilliance	\$184,889.28

Grantee	Funding Awarded
Community Health Network of WA	\$686,015.38
Community Health Network of WA	\$2,353,824.48
Computer Link Northwest LLC	\$292,342.00
Congolese Community of Washington	\$500,000.00
DVA General Fund	\$2,498,305.33
East African Community Services - DN and Workforce Development Reentry Support Project	\$498,833.71
Equity in Education Coalition - DN and Workforce Development Reentry Support Project	\$999,986.02
Equity in Education Coalition	\$4,779,999.98
Freedom Project - DN and Workforce Development Reentry Support Project	\$462,383.82
House of Mercy - DN and Workforce Development Reentry Support Project	\$281,656.00
Mission Africa	\$500,000.00
Multimedia Resources and Training	\$360,887.67
Nisqually Indian Tribe	\$421,775.43
Prison Scholar Fund - DN and Workforce Development Reentry Support Project	\$499,535.27
The Seattle Clemency Project - DN and Workforce Development Reentry Support Project	\$286,677.01
Seattle Housing Authority	\$5,455,214.99
The Silent Task Force - DN and Workforce Development Reentry Support Project	\$1,000,000.00
Stevens County Rural Library District	\$499,848.00
Tacoma Goodwill Industries	\$5,464,032.26
TRAC Associates Inc.	\$315,827.00
Underground Ministries - DN and Workforce Development Reentry Support Project	\$169,635.12
Weld Seattle - DN and Workforce Development Reentry Support Project	\$432,564.09

Grantee	Funding Awarded
The Whitener Group LLC	\$500,000.00
Whitman County Rural Library District	\$496,724.71
Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County	\$988,405.00
YouthCare - DN and Workforce Development Reentry Support Project	\$148,242.25

**Table 3 – FY 2022-2023 Grantee Outcomes**

Service Category	Individuals Served
<b>Digital Navigation Services</b> Types of Literacy service included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Individual Case Management</li> <li>Group Classes</li> <li>Access to Health Care</li> <li>Social Services included: Family Reunification, Housing, Transportation</li> </ul>	Approximately 213,000 individuals served
<b>Digital Literacy Services</b> Types of Literacy service included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Navigating the Internet</li> <li>Creating Email Account</li> <li>Resume Building</li> <li>Cyber Security</li> <li>Workforce Education and Skill Training</li> </ul>	Approximately 34,000 individuals served
<b>Internet Connected Devices Distributed</b> Types of Devices included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Laptops</li> <li>Tablets (i.e.: iPad, Surface Pro, etc.)</li> <li>Smart Phones</li> <li>Operational Supporting Devices</li> </ul>	Approximately 106,000 individuals served
<b>Affordable Connectivity Program Assistance</b>	Approximately 18,000 individuals served