

# Cook County Library Digital Navigator Network Listening & Learning Circles

March 2026



COOK COUNTY  
DIGITAL EQUITY

 **RAILS**  
REACHING ACROSS ILLINOIS LIBRARY SYSTEM



# Monica Harris

## RAILS Executive Director



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# How we got here



- ✓ Cook County sees libraries as central to advancing digital equity across the County
- ✓ Many are doing this work without dedicated funding or structured support
- ✓ Cook County + RAILS convened a representative library Digital Equity Guiding Team to help co-design
- ✓ This group is co-designing alongside you to shape equitable, practical funding programs for digital access in libraries
- ✓ The goal: equip libraries to sustainably support patrons with their digital needs



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# Partners Guiding Our Work

## Digital Navigator Guiding Team



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Library	Representative
Blue Island Public Library	Mike Byrne
Broadview Public Library District	Tanya King
Eisenhower Public Library District	Molly Bitters
Flossmoor Public Library	Jessica Barnes
Forest Park Public Library	Skye Lavin
Franklin Park Public Library District	Leah Knobbe
Grande Prairie Public Library District	Tracy Ducksworth
Indian Trails Public Library District	Sam Swift
Niles-Maine District Library	Todd Miller
North Riverside Public Library District	Maddie Borth
Oak Lawn Public Library	Elaina Dague
Palatine Public Library District	Ivan Sanchez
Schaumburg Township District Library	Courtney Cosgriff
Skokie Public Library	Amy Budzicz
Steger-South Chicago Heights Public Library	Ana Brown



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# Why We're Here

Today is part of a broader regional effort to:

- understand real library experiences
- identify barriers and opportunities
- co-design practical solutions
- inform upcoming funding opportunities

What you share today shapes future decisions and resource allocations that aim for a more digitally inclusive library system.



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# Why We're Here



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# Today, we aim to:

- Strengthen a shared vision for libraries' role in digital equity
- Learn directly from library staff and stakeholders about real experiences, capacity constraints, and practical needs related to digital access
- Inform future digital inclusion program and funding design for libraries
- Build regional collaboration and make connections across our network



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# Our Agenda for Today

Time	Activity
10 min	Welcome + Why We're Here
10 min	Framing Libraries' Role in Digital Equity
30 min	Small Group: Empathy Mapping: Pain Points & Barriers
10 min	Whole Group Share Out
5 min	Break / Reset
35 min	Small Group: Solutions + Program Design Workshop
10 min	Whole Group: Equity + Feasibility Discussion
5 min	Reflection, Next Steps & Closing



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# Community Agreements for Today

Let's create a productive space:

- ✓ Speak from experience
- ✓ Make space for all voices
- ✓ Be honest — messy truths welcome
- ✓ Focus on practical realities
- ✓ Assume positive intent

Can you give a thumbs up if you can agree to these?



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# Digital Equity and the Role of Libraries

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# Kyla William Tates

## Digital Equity Director, Cook County Office of the President

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# What do we mean by "Digital Equity"?

Digital Equity is a condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy and economy. Digital Equity is necessary for civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services.

*Also referred to as digital opportunity.*

*-National Digital Inclusion Alliance*



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# What do we mean by "Digital Equity"?

The Census Bureau's American Community survey data tells us that County residents face real challenges with accessing internet service and internet-enabled devices:

- 27% of Cook County households do not subscribe to home wireline internet service (service delivered via fiber, cable, or digital subscriber line infrastructure)
- 11% of households depend on a cellular data plan to connect to the internet
- 21% don't have a computer
- Many lack the skills needed to fully participate in digital life to advance their personal and professional goals



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# Libraries Are Already Leading

Libraries are essential digital access hubs:

- internet access
- devices & technology
- digital skills support
- trusted community relationships

Digital navigation builds on work already happening.



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# What is Digital Navigation?

## Digital navigation helps people:

- Get connected online with Internet and devices
- Learn digital skills
- Access online services safely
- Solve real technology challenges

**We are evolving from “digital navigators” as individual roles → to libraries serving as digital navigators for the broader community system** — acting as trusted hubs that coordinate support, partnerships, and pathways to digital access.

It is relationship-based, community-centered support that often involves vulnerability and trust.



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# Turn and Talk



Turn to a partner, and introduce yourself:

- 1) Where do you already see digital navigation happening in your library?
- 2) What feels successful?
- 3) What feels hardest right now?

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# Barriers to Digital Opportunity: Empathy Mapping

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# This Work Starts With Your Experience

Empathy mapping helps us step back and look at the full experience — not just tasks.

It helps us understand:

- What's happening around us
- What we're responding to
- What it feels like to do this work

Digital navigation isn't just a service —it's an experience for staff and patrons.



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# Empathy Mapping Activity

In your small groups, please:

Take 2 minutes to reflect on your experience with digital navigation your library.

Take 20 minutes to discuss, and write on your chart papers:

-  What are you seeing?
-  What are you hearing?
-  What are you doing?
-  What are you feeling?

3) Each group will have 2 minutes to share out

# You're the Expert: Tell us about....



## SEEING —

**What patterns are you noticing?**

Who needs help most?

What challenges or requests repeat?

What technology gaps or barriers do you observe?



**HEARING — What are people saying?**

Patron frustrations, fears, or expectations

Common questions or misconceptions

Messages from leadership, partners, or funders



**DOING — What does the work actually look like?**

Workarounds or improvisation

Informal support or extra responsibilities

Where your time and energy go



**FEELING — What emotions are present?**

Stress points or burnout

Pride or motivation

Moments that feel meaningful or difficult



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# Whole Group: Share Out

- Each Group take 2 minutes to share out some themes that came up at your table
- What do you think some of the Root Causes are? Put another way: What drives these issues underneath the surface?



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# Break!

## Stretch Out, Grab a Snack

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# Moving Toward Solutions: Program Design Workshop

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# Building toward a Digital Navigator Network

Our initial ideas for how to build a network:

1. **Shared training resources** across the network
2. **Community of practice** to share ideas and resources
3. **Funding** individual libraries through a grant program

We'd like your input on:

1. Is this the right direction? What is missing?
2. How can we make this accessible, especially for libraries most impacted by digital inequities?



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# Solutions Discussion

At your tables, please discuss and jot down your ideas for the following:

- What kinds of support would actually make this work easier?
- If funding were available, where would it make the biggest difference?
- What would NOT work for your library — even with funding?

Think about:

- 👉 supports you need
- 👉 training & staffing models
- 👉 funding structures
- 👉 partnerships
- 👉 reporting realities
- 👉 what would NOT work



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# You're the Expert: Tell us about....

 **Solutions: What ideas do YOU have?**

 **Bad Ideas: What would NOT work?**

 **Barriers: What could keep libraries from participating?**

 **Supports: What can help libraries succeed?**

# Whole Group: Share Out

- Each Group take 2 minutes to share out some themes that came up at your table.
- How can we ensure libraries impacted the most by the digital divide are accessing these supports and resources?



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# Close & Next Steps

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# What Happens Next?

- **March:** Continued engagement of libraries to understand barriers and solution ideas
- **April:** Guiding Team to synthesize what we learned to inform new Digital Navigator Grant Program for libraries
- **May:** Circle back to share what we learned
- **Summer:** Launch Digital Navigator Grant Program to the end of building a Digital Navigator Network across Cook County



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# Thank You

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