



THE DIGITAL EQUITY LEADERSHIP LAB [DELL]

A CASE STUDY OF

Community Leadership Development
to Promote Digital Equity and Justice

This report was written by Dr. Colin Rhinesmith with research assistance from Jie Jiang and Malana Krongelb and published by the Robert W. Deutsch Foundation.

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Rhinesmith, Colin. "The Digital Equity Leadership Lab: A Case Study of Community Leadership Development to Promote Digital Equity and Justice." Baltimore, MD: Robert W. Deutsch Foundation, October 2021.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank the following individuals for their assistance and support: Jane Brown, amalia deloney, Jia Jiang and Malana Krongelb.

ROBERT W. DEUTSCH FOUNDATION

The Robert W. Deutsch Foundation invests in innovative people, projects, and ideas that improve the quality of life in Baltimore and beyond.

DIGITAL EQUITY PROGRAM

We believe that the internet is a powerful catalyst for change; it's a job creator, an education provider, and a driver of innovation, creativity, and social change. The Digital Equity Leadership Lab (DELL), a foundation-led-and-designed program was established in 2021.

Visual Identity and Report Design:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“The Digital Equity Leadership Lab (DELL) is a program for city residents who want to increase their understanding of the internet and strengthen their ability to advocate for fast, affordable and reliable broadband for all of Baltimore’s neighborhoods.”

ROBERT W. DEUTSCH FOUNDATION, 2021 ¹

¹ “The Digital Equity Leadership Lab (DELL),” *Robert W. Deutsch Foundation*, accessed October 1, 2021 <https://www.rwdfoundation.org/dell>



In spring 2021, 25 community leaders from across Baltimore came together with national experts in areas related to network engineering, federal policymaking, community broadband networking, and grassroots organizing for a five week online program, created by amalia deloney, and named the “Digital Equity Leadership Lab” (DELL). DELL was created as a response to other digital inclusion programs across the U.S. that have failed to consider the technical aspects of the internet and social inequalities alongside broader internet policy and advocacy goals.

GOALS OF THE DELL PROGRAM

- **TO CONVENE ADVOCATES** from across sectors, zip codes, disciplines, and backgrounds to share and learn together;
- **TO STRENGTHEN THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN INTERNET ADVOCATES** through meaningful interaction;
- **TO INTRODUCE NEW CONCEPTS AND INFORMATION** that will help to advance shared goals;
- **TO SUPPORT A CULTURE OF COLLABORATION** and encourage participants to work together to analyze and refine current solutions to digital equity challenges in their organization, and in the field;
- **TO ENCOURAGE REFLECTION, ADAPTATION AND INNOVATION** by learning from each other’s successes and failures.

DELL builds upon the Deutsch Foundation’s many years of community engagement to address the digital divide and promote social justice in Baltimore.



THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

The purpose of this research was to investigate the Digital Equity Leadership Lab as a case study of community-based leadership development to promote digital equity and justice in Baltimore and beyond.

The case study sought to examine the following research question:

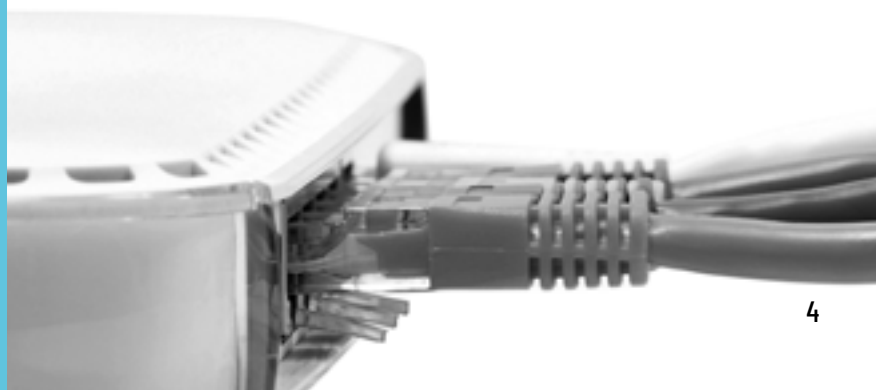
How might DELL serve as a community-based leadership training model to develop the next wave of digital equity leaders?

The case study is significant because it addresses a lack of understanding in both the scholarly literature and in practice about the role of community-based leadership development to promote digital equity and justice. By providing qualitative data and analysis, the goal of the research is to help explain how DELL's model of community-based leadership can inform the next wave of digital equity leaders across the country. Findings from the study should also be useful for other grassroots organizers, philanthropic organizations, policymakers, and other key stakeholders interested in promoting leadership in digital equity and justice initiatives nationwide.



The following three key findings emerged from the analysis: (1) **Bringing national policymakers and advocates together with community leaders is powerful and transformative;** (2) **digital inequality is a social not a technological problem;** and (3) **community leaders need access to a shared platform and each other to create change.**

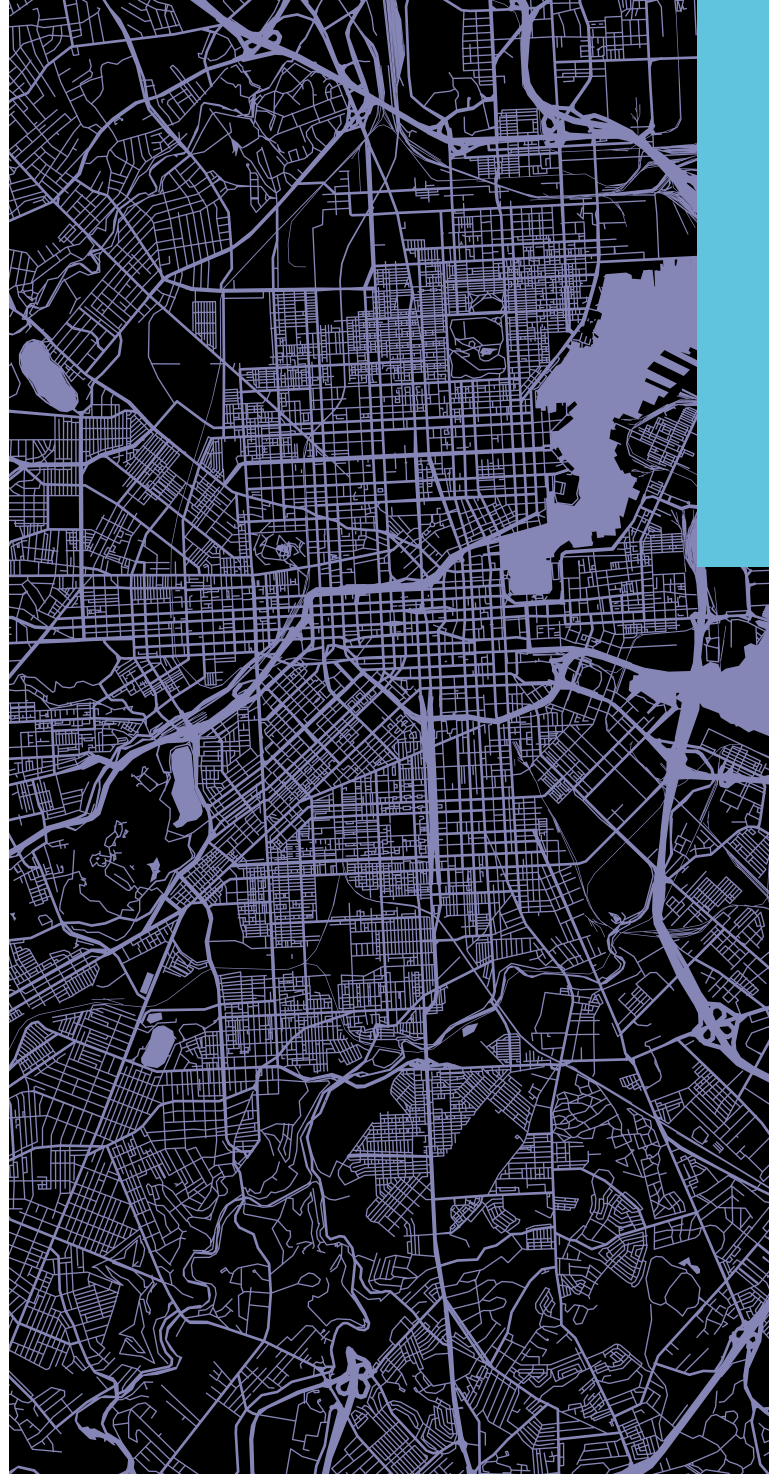
Findings from this case study of participants in the spring 2021 Digital Equity Leadership Lab program reveal several key ideas and action steps. The following three recommendations are provided in this report to help inform future work and research to advance community leadership development related to digital equity and justice.



RECOMMENDATION **1**

Capacity building and train-the-trainer models are important for community leadership development, but without access to policymakers and advocates on a national level, community leaders may lack a holistic view and understanding of the problems and community-developed solutions to these problems. The qualitative data gathered from community leaders, outside experts, and Deutsch Foundation staff emphasize the important role community leaders play in leading digital equity and justice work.

It is necessary to broaden the understanding of how the internet works and how this knowledge can be used to advocate for policy changes. Community leaders can affect change and engage politicians as empowered citizens when able to use vocabulary, identify problems, and articulate comprehensive solutions on their own.





RECOMMENDATION 2


Several DELL participants mentioned that a critical part of internet advocacy is the ability to increase their knowledge around the “technical stuff” and its relationship to digital equity.

Community leadership development programs to promote digital equity and justice must provide support systems for community leaders to come together through a shared infrastructure, including both platforms to share ideas and spaces to convene, to continue the work after the training is over.

Findings from the study support the idea that “digital equity ecosystems” ² matter for community leaders working to create change in their communities.

This is because digital equity ecosystems recognize the importance of “interactions between individuals, populations, communities, and their larger sociotechnical environments that all play a role in shaping the digital inclusion work in local communities to promote more equitable access to technology and social and racial justice.”

These interactions, or relationships, need to be cultivated and sustained over time. Identifying organizations, resources, and support within these ecosystems are vital to the success of the work.

² “Digital Equity Ecosystems,” *Community Informatics Lab*, accessed October 1, 2021
<https://comminformatics.net/digital-equity-ecosystems/ert> 



RECOMMENDATION 3

For some of the outside experts the connections between social inequalities and digital inequalities are often invisible to the general public, but the pandemic made digital (in)equity much more visible in ways it had previously not been for many Americans. Regardless of race or ability, the digital divide is always associated with poverty. The uniquely American association of poverty being shameful adds additional barriers in addressing the digital divide.

Digital inclusion work is vital to help those without access to computers and the internet. However, this work must be rooted in an understanding of how power, privilege, and oppression shape digital inequality, as well as how this knowledge can be used to address systemic barriers to social and racial justice.

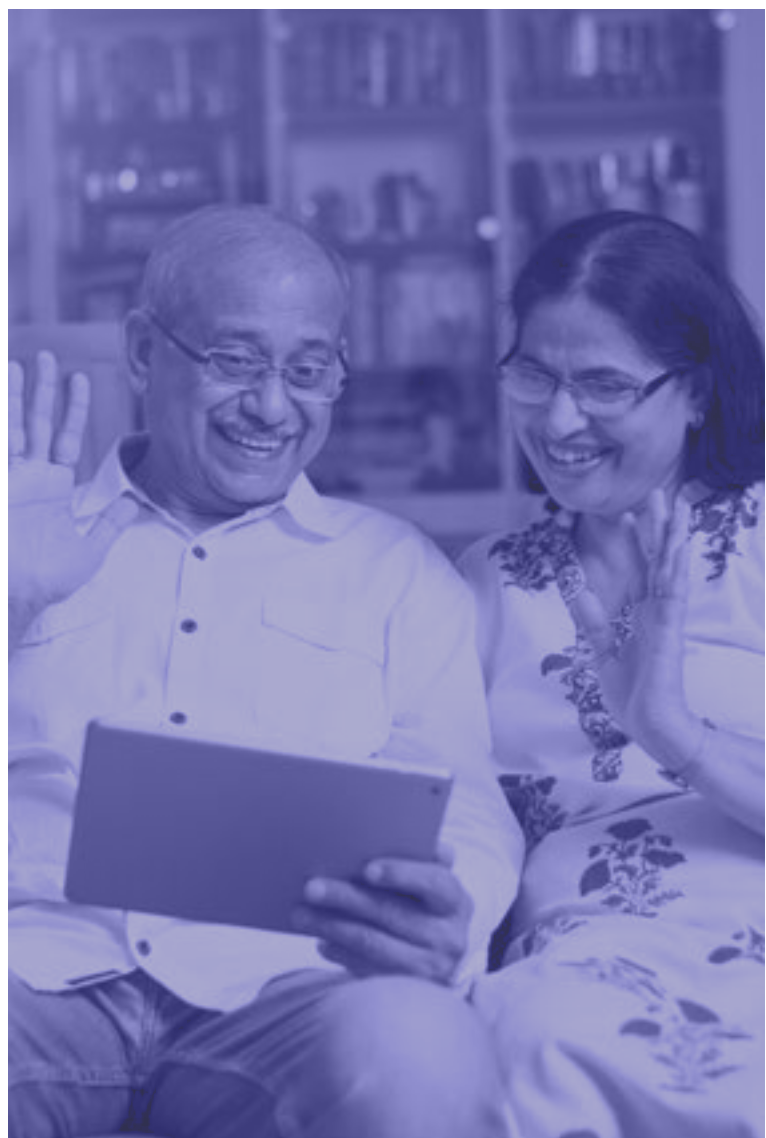




The qualitative data from this case study indicate participants' desire to use the knowledge gained in the DELL program to promote what Wolfson, Crowell, Reyes, & Bach (2017) refer to as “emancipatory broadband adoption.”³ By this, the authors mean the following,

*Programs aiming to bridge the digital divide must address some of the other reasons that marginalized communities do not adopt broadband. To this end, we contend in this article that a community's relationship to communication technology—and their ability to see it as a political and cultural tool that can be utilized not just instrumentally, but more broadly as a way to fight oppression and build collective political power—is a substantial factor leading to what we call emancipatory adoption.*⁴

This conceptualization of digital inclusion programs as having emancipatory goals can help researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to understand the importance of rooting the work within a social justice framework. The idea of digital equity ecosystems offers a way to move from digital equity to digital justice, which also builds upon the Detroit Digital Justice Coalition's principles of “access, participation, common ownership, and healthy communities.”⁵



³ Todd Wolfson, Jessica Crowell, Camille Reyes, and Amy Bach, “Emancipatory Broadband Adoption: Toward a Critical Theory of Digital Inequality in the Urban United States,” *Communication, Culture and Critique* 10, no. 3(2017): 441–459.

⁴ Ibid, p. 442.

⁵ “Principles,” *Detroit Digital Justice Coalition*, accessed October 1, 2021 <http://detroitdjc.org/principles>



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