

Rafi Goldberg, Senior Policy Advisor, Digital Equity
National Telecommunications and Information Administration
1401 Constitution Avenue NW, Suite 4725
Washington, DC 20230

Submitted via email to rgoldberg@ntia.gov

August 1, 2023

Dear Mr. Goldberg:

I am writing on behalf of the American Library Association, which represents the nation's 123,000 libraries of all types and has a keen interest and commitment to digital equity. America's libraries are instrumental to ensuring broadband access and improving digital literacy in communities and campuses across the country. Library staff empower individuals to apply digital tools and services to achieve important goals for themselves and their communities.

The NTIA Internet Use Survey is a unique and invaluable source of data about US residents' digital access and adoption.¹ The federal government is the sole source of statistically representative, rigorous information on this topic, which is of profound importance to workers, businesses, community anchor institutions, and other stakeholders. ALA and library staff regularly use and share data from the survey in our work.

It is crucial to ensure that the next iteration of the survey include questions related to digital skills. In the past several years, the world has changed dramatically. In particular, the continuing Covid pandemic has rapidly created new demands: Parents need digital skills to oversee their children's K-12 education; elders and rural residents need skills to receive vital telehealth services; and workers of every age need skills to stay employed as their jobs transform to require new technology skills and capacities.

Indeed, research from National Skills Coalition has documented that [92 percent of jobs](#) now require digital skills. Significantly, this demand is just as high for entry-level jobs – those that require a high school diploma or just 0-2 years of experience – as it is for more white-collar occupations.² This massive transformation in the US labor market has profound implications for individuals of all backgrounds, including those named as “covered populations” under the federal Digital Equity Act. Being able to identify *where there are significant digital skills barriers and needs within US communities* is vital to targeting investments and interventions to ensure people have the skills they need to survive and flourish.

But data gathering on digital *skills* has not kept up. The Public Library Association (PLA)³ and Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)⁴ both gather information about library technology assets and use, but information about Americans' digital skills and barriers are lacking. Neither the federal government nor states, localities, or the private sector have been gathering the type of baseline information about Americans' digital skills that is vital to

¹ Also referred to as the Current Population Survey (CPS) Computer and Internet Use Supplement.

² *Closing the Digital Skill Divide* (National Skills Coalition, 2023).

³ 2020 Public Library Technology Survey: <https://www.ala.org/pla/data/plasurveys>.

⁴ Public Libraries Survey, <https://www.ims.gov/research-evaluation/data-collection/public-libraries-survey>

informing workforce and education policies, including billions of dollars of investment that will flow to states over the next five years thanks to the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. While data on high-speed internet access and digital devices is crucial, we urge NTIA to ensure that the 2023 iteration of the Internet Use Survey also captures specific data on digital *skills*.

To that end, we make the following recommendations:

- **We support NTIA's proposal to ask respondents about specific tasks** they may carry out using digital technologies (pages 7-9 of the [proposed questions](#)). This is a useful proxy measure to help gauge whether people are (or are not) equipped to use computers and other digital tools to accomplish key activities of daily life, including those that are vital to health, well-being, and economic stability.
- **Under NOHM, we propose a new response option:** "Don't know how to use the internet." While library staff hear this as a barrier to home broadband adoption, we do not have national survey data that specifically addresses this.
- **We strongly recommend that NTIA add 3 questions pertaining to education and employment.** The survey includes three targeted questions focused on health, but economic stability is equally crucial to individuals' and families' well-being. Specific questions could include:
 - ***Education/workforce Q1:*** In the past 12 months, have difficulties in using a computer or other technology that requires digital skills stopped you from applying for a job offer or promotion? (YES/NO)
 - ***Education/workforce Q2:*** In the past 12 months, has there been a work task or responsibility that you were unable to complete because of difficulties in using a computer or other technology that requires digital skills? (YES/NO)
 - ***Education/workforce Q3:*** In the past 12 months, has there been an educational or learning opportunity that you were not able to participate in because of difficulties in using a computer or other technology that requires digital skills? (YES/NO)

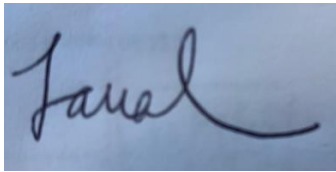
Alternately, NTIA could include two questions related to health (MEDDOC and MEDMON) and add one related to workforce (Q1 above) and one related to education (Q3) to gather information on all three critical topics.

- **We strongly recommend that NTIA add a question probing who people turn to *when they do not know how to do a digital task*.** See example below.
 - **Question:** Thinking of the *most recent time* that you needed help using a computer or another digital device (such as a smartphone) to complete a task, where did you turn to for help? (CHOOSE ONE)
 - I figured it out by myself
 - Online tutorials or videos
 - Friend or family member
 - Co-worker or supervisor

- Community institution such as a library, school, or religious organization
- Business help desk (such as Best Buy's Geek Squad or Apple's Genius Bar)
- Other (*record verbatim answer*)
- Don't know/I can't remember needing help

We appreciate NTIA's careful attention to these important issues and stand ready to discuss any of our recommendations in more detail at your convenience. Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink on a light blue background. The signature is cursive and appears to read "Larra Clark".

Larra Clark
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