Digital Divide Amongst Older Adults

Executive Summary

The digital divide continues to create issues for many older adults trying to access basic services and information online. This pandemic has highlighted gaps, inequities, and problematic realities for service providers. Closing the gap in the digital divide amongst older adults will reduce social isolation, improve communication, allow access to direct services online, and enhance overall health and well-being.

The use of technology has proven to be challenging for many based on age, culture, education, income level, geographic location, and in many instances, overall health. Internet usage among cultural and ethnic groups is another factor for consideration when addressing the digital divide.

Older adults living in rural or densely populated areas may not have internet access due to coverage or connectivity issues. The need for internet service providers to expand infrastructure into unserved areas is critical to resolving the digital divide. Additionally, there are a large percentage of older adults without appropriate devices to utilize internet connectivity.

Although these statistics are sobering, what this pandemic has shown us is that this is only a fraction of the seriousness of the issue. C4A is committed to addressing key issues such as education, outreach, and training for older adults who have never used the internet nor have the necessary devices.

Recommendations:

- California Department of Aging (CDA) to partner with broadband internet providers at the State level on an initiative to increase internet accessibility and affordability for older adults
- C4A will take lead and partner with CDA to advocate for a fee to be added to consumer phone bills that will help fund no/low cost internet service
- C4A will advocate for the inclusion of older adults in legislation to provide internet access to older adults lacking financial resources to obtain this service
- AAA's will partner with volunteer organizations to provide older adults appropriate training in the use of devices and the internet to meet their specific needs
- The Master Plan on Aging should include objectives focused on reducing the digital divide by addressing barriers faced by the older adult population
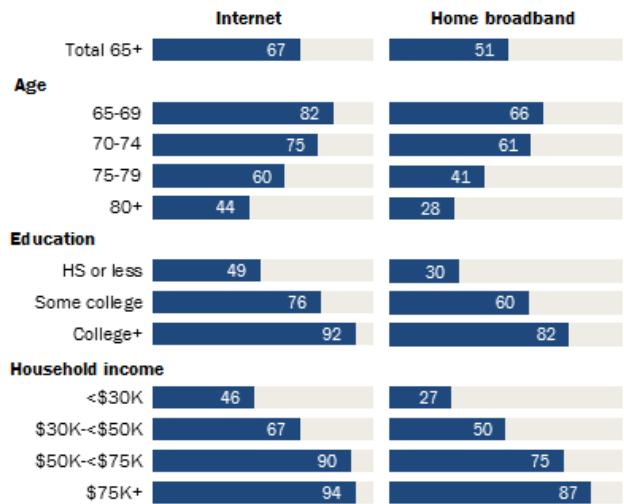
Digital Divide Amongst Older Adults

The internet made its debut 30 years ago, yet the digital divide continues to create issues for many older adults trying to access basic services and information online. This pandemic has highlighted gaps, inequities, and problematic realities that service providers are experiencing while trying to provide virtual services to older adults while the stay at home orders are in place. According to recent research, social isolation, especially in the elderly, brings with it a higher likelihood of psychological and medical risk. It is estimated that Medicare spends $6.7 billion annually in addressing the decline in health amongst older adults as a result of social isolation. COVID has only magnified this issue. Closing this gap in the digital divide will reduce social isolation, improve communication, allow access to direct services online, and enhance overall health and well-being.

Internet use and broadband adoption among seniors varies greatly by age, income and education

% of U.S. adults ages 65 and older who say they use/have the following ...

	Internet	Home broadband
Total 65+	67	51
Age		
65-69	82	66
70-74	75	61
75-79	60	41
80+	44	28
Education		
HS or less	49	30
Some college	76	60
College+	92	82
Household income		
<$30K	46	27
$30K-<$50K	67	50
$50K-<$75K	90	75
$75K+	94	87

Source: Survey conducted Sept. 29-Nov. 6, 2016. "Tech Adoption Climbs Among Older Adults"

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GRAPH 1

The California Association of Area Agencies on Aging (C4A) is the membership body representing the statewide network of Area Agencies on Aging (AAA) charged with providing service to more than 8.82 million older Californians. The AAA network's challenge to reach these 8.82 million older Californians through the use of technology has proven to be difficult based on the older adult's age, culture, education, income level, geographic location, and in many instances overall health. **Graph 1** illustrates that older adults 80 years or older, with a high school or less education, and/or with an annual income of less than $30K, are less likely to have internet to access services online and/or have resources to purchase equipment needed to use it.

Broadband subscription rate steady among Hispanics and blacks between 2010 and 2015, but rises among whites

% of all adults who have home broadband service

■ 2010 ■ 2015

Hispanic	45
	46
White	64
	73
Black	50
	55
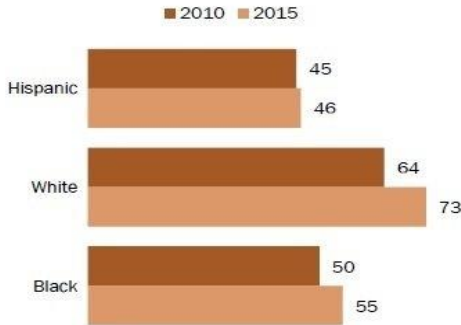
Note: Blacks and whites include only non-Hispanics. Hispanics are of any race.
Source: National Survey of Latinos, conducted Oct. 21-Nov. 30, 2015, and Pew Research Center surveys conducted Oct. 13-Nov. 15, 2015, and Aug. 9-Sept. 13, 2010.
"Digital Divide Narrows for Latinos as More Spanish Speakers and Immigrants Go Online"

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GRAPH 2

The overall health of an older adult is another factor that impacts use of technology. Older adults with a disability or capacity issues may be unable or not interested in accessing services online. In general, disabled individuals in the U.S. are about 3 times more likely not to use the internet compared to those without a disability.

Internet usage among cultural and ethnic groups is another variable in the digital divide. Although the rate of usage has increased over the years (see **Graph 2**), there remains significant cultural gaps in who uses the internet. Older adults in some cultures have never been exposed to or become comfortable with using technological devices and the internet.
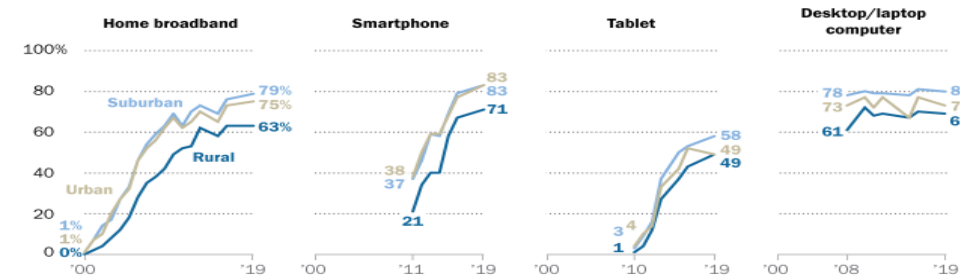
Older adults living in rural or densely populated areas may not have internet access due to coverage or connectivity issues. **Graph 3** illustrates that older adults living in rural areas are less likely to have internet, smartphone, tablet, and/or desktop/laptop access than their non-rural counterparts. This is primarily due to lack of internet service in the area, which makes owning a smartphone, tablet, or computer less useful. The need for internet service providers to expand infrastructure into unserved areas is critical to resolving the digital divide. Area Agencies on Aging (AAA's) have continuously developed and enhanced their service delivery by providing programs and services online. AAA's offer online training for exercise, fall prevention, healthy eating, and

Rural Americans have consistently lower levels of broadband adoption

% of U.S. adults who say they have ...

Home broadband	Smartphone	Tablet	Desktop/laptop computer
Suburban 79% / 75%	83 / 83 / 71	58 / 49 / 49	78 / 73 / 80 / 73 / 69
Rural 63%	38 / 37 / 21	4 / 3 / 1	61
Urban 1% / 1% / 0%			

Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.
Source: Survey conducted Jan. 8-Feb. 7, 2019. Trend data from other Pew Research Center surveys.

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GRAPH 3

caregiving/caregiver support. A number of counties are exploring ways to operate senior centers online by offering social events and opportunities through Facebook Live, ZOOM, and cell or landline phone.

Access to the internet is not the only contributing factor to older adults not being able to access services online. There is a large percentage of older adults without appropriate devices for internet use. Only 4 out of 10 older adults are smartphone owners (see **Graph 4**). Similar to internet access, older adults over the age of 80, high school or less education, and income under $30K are less likely to be smartphone owners.
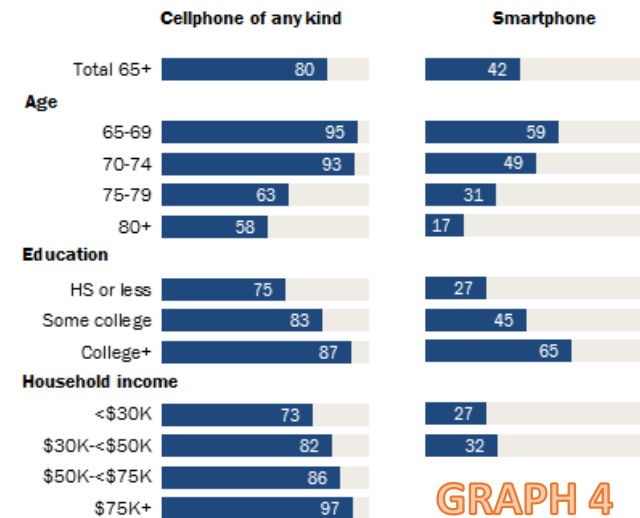
Although these statistics are sobering, what this pandemic has shown us is that it is only a fraction of the seriousness of the issue.

The recommendations the workgroup have developed along with C4A are designed to bridge the digital divide through partnerships and collaboration at the national, state, and local level, as well as with the private sector. These recommendations address key issues such as education, outreach, and training for older adults who have never used the internet nor have the appropriate devices. The recommendations call for funding to be provided for projects that focus on minimizing the digital divide and exploring opportunities for project funding on a larger scale.

Roughly four-in-ten seniors are smartphone owners

% of U.S. adults ages 65 and older who say they own the following ...

	Cellphone of any kind	Smartphone
Total 65+	80	42
Age		
65-69	95	59
70-74	93	49
75-79	63	31
80+	58	17
Education		
HS or less	75	27
Some college	83	45
College+	87	65
Household income		
<$30K	73	27
$30K-<$50K	82	32
$50K-<$75K	86	
$75K+	97	

GRAPH 4

Source: Survey conducted Sept. 29-Nov. 6, 2016.
"Tech Adoption Climbs Among Older Adults"

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RECOMMENDATIONS

1. California Department of Aging (CDA) to partner with broadband internet providers at the State level on an initiative to increase internet accessibility and affordability for older adults to mirror what is being done with children and schools. Internet service providers can partner with their local AAA's to offer low/no cost internet to older adults living alone or with a disability. CDA to identify and partner with communication providers for funding onetime costs and identifying of devices such as smartphones, tablets, or computers.

2. C4A will take the lead and partner with CDA to advocate for a fee to be added to consumer phone bills that will help fund low cost internet service for isolated seniors throughout California.

3. C4A will review the impact of AB 1665, which allocated $330 million to bring internet to remote/rural areas, and evaluate the extent to which it improved access for older adults in all counties. Make recommendations for further steps to be taken to assist counties that did not benefit from AB 1665. C4A will advocate for the inclusion of older adults in AB 3079, which will provide access to older adults lacking financial resources to obtain telephone service.

4. A C4A representative to be included in stakeholder meetings and/or discussions related to digital divide.

5. AAA's will partner with volunteer organizations (i.e. AmeriCorps), libraries, and schools (college/high school) to provide older adults appropriate training in the use of devices and the internet to meet their specific needs.

6. Two million dollars currently being reserved by CDA for statewide initiatives shall be used to fund digital divide projects at the local level.

7. The Master Plan must include objectives focused on reducing the digital divide by addressing barriers faced by the older adult population (age, education, income level, geographic location, and health) in accessing the internet and acquiring the necessary devices. C4A representatives serving on the Master Plan workgroup will include in their discussions the bridging of the digital divide and the importance of it in the execution of the Master Plan.

8. C4A will work with California Long Term Care Ombudsman Association to address digital divide issues in long term care facilities.

9. C4A will partner with N4A on their efforts and campaigns related to the topic of digital divide.

CALIFORNIA'S CALL TO ACTION

When it comes to technology, California is the premier leader among the states, if not the world. The creative and technological innovations that have originated from this State have been nothing short of transformational. The challenges related to the digital divide are not insurmountable. On the contrary, solutions exist and require coordination, execution, and funding.

At the state level, we are asking the California Department of Aging to work with C4A on a plan to address the barriers faced by older adults when trying to gain access to online services and information. This plan should include the digital divide as it applies to older adults in assisted living and skilled nursing facilities and specify projects that CDA and C4A can do together to address the digital divide.

CONCLUSIONS

There is much work to be done to address the digital divide on behalf of older adults. As we have seen during this pandemic, social isolation and access to basic information and services have caused significant issues for many older adults, including those in nursing homes. The pandemic has brought to light the fundamental challenges that the digital divide presents to older adults, especially when they are being asked to stay at home. State leadership in partnership with C4A is paramount to eliminating the digital divide in our communities.

We all use the internet to help us in many activities of daily living; shopping, communication, education, accessing medical care, etc. Older adults must not be left out of this incredible benefit and access to the rest of society.

Through technology we can address many of the needs older adults face on a daily basis. Increased access and use will help older adults engage confidently and safely with the internet. Feeling comfortable, getting exposure, using it routinely, and most importantly finding value, are the key ingredients for an older adult to bridge their digital divide. Educating and exposing older adults to different technology will improve their health and wellbeing, reduce social isolation, and greatly impact their daily lives.