

Digital Navigators and Telehealth:

Addressing the digital divide



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Background on Digital Navigators

Digital navigators are trusted individuals who provide ongoing support and resources to community members who may need assistance with internet access, digital technology utilization, or any other foundational digital literacy training necessary to navigate the digital world.¹ Digital navigators can assist individuals with acquiring access to various programs as well as telehealth support. Additionally, digital navigators can provide guidance on how to use basic telehealth services such as accessing a patient portal, downloading appropriate telehealth applications, and scheduling a virtual appointment.

Volunteers or staff associated with organizations that provide any kind of social support such as libraries, social service agencies, or community-based organizations² as well as members of health care teams can all serve as digital navigators. They can also be community health workers (CHWs) who are familiar with digital tools and can help patients

access and utilize digital health technologies to improve health outcomes and receive better healthcare experiences.³

The Digital Divide: Digital and Broadband Access Gap

With the increase in use of digital technologies, especially in health care, the need to address gaps in digital access and utilization has become more important than ever.

Broadband Access Disparities: 2 million Californian households (15%) lacked access to broadband connectivity at home in 2020.⁴ 45% of California households are eligible for the federal government's Affordable Connectivity Program; however, as of June 2023, only 40% of these households are enrolled.⁵

Digital Health Literacy Disparities: 16% of adults in the U.S. are digitally illiterate - these individuals, on average, have lower educational attainment, are older, and are more likely to be Black, Hispanic, or foreign-

¹ Digital Navigators Toolkit. <https://www.digitalinclusion.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Digital-Navigators-Toolkit-Final.pdf>, page 3

² Ibid, page 4

³ Digital Health 2.0: Getting Tools and Services to People Who Need Them the Most. <https://www.frontlinehealthworkers.org/blog/digital-health-20-getting-tools-and-services-people-who-need-them-most>

⁴ Achieving Universal Broadband in California. <https://www.ppic.org/publication/achieving-universal-broadband-in-california/>

⁵ Affordable Connectivity Program Tracker. <https://broadbandforall.cdt.ca.gov/affordable-connectivity-program/acp-enrollment/>

born.⁶ Low digital literacy can be a major barrier in the implementation of helpful digital health technologies such as patient portals and telehealth in areas like cancer care⁷, cardiology⁸, and diabetes management.⁹

How Digital Navigators Can Address the Digital Divide

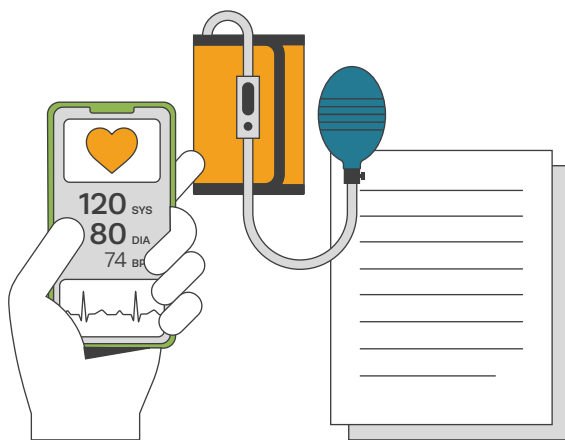
Digital navigators receive comprehensive skill-based training that allow them to navigate new technological

tools and develop skills to keep up with technological advances throughout their career. Digital navigators working in health care settings are well equipped to provide a range of services to assist individuals and communities with accessing telehealth technologies and services, and support health care providers to become more digitally literate in order to promote more inclusive care and telehealth utilization.

Case Studies

1. BLOOD PRESSURE MONITORING

At his annual check-up, Carlos is told he has high blood pressure and should use an app to track his blood pressure at home. After his appointment, Carlos meets with a community health fellow who helps him download the appropriate app and provides written instructions for checking his blood pressure using the app. Two weeks later, Carlos receives a phone call to check if he is experiencing any issues or has any questions when using the app.¹⁰



2. VIRTUAL MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

At Alicia's postpartum check-up, her doctor tells her she is suffering from postpartum depression and suggests therapy. After her appointment, a community health fellow contacts Alicia to discuss virtual appointment options and helps her schedule an appointment during her toddler's nap time. The fellow meets Alicia at her home to ensure she can properly access and navigate the virtual therapy platform. Two weeks later, Alicia receives a phone call to check if she has any issues or questions about the platform.¹¹



⁶ A Description of U.S. Adults Who Are Not Digitally Literate. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018161.pdf>

⁷ Health literacy, digital health literacy and the implementation of digital health technologies in cancer care: the need for a strategic approach. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/hpja.387>

⁸ Digital literacy as a potential barrier to implementation of cardiology tele-visits after COVID-19 pandemic: the INFO-COVID survey. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8501379/>

⁹ The Literacy Divide: Health Literacy and the Use of an Internet-Based Patient Portal in an Integrated Health System—Results from the Diabetes Study of Northern California (DISTANCE). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/10810730.2010.499988>

¹⁰ Nick Mundwiller (Central Valley Health Network), *Community Health Fellowship Digital Health Navigators Presentation*

¹¹ Ibid.



Digital Navigation: Looking Forward

Digital navigators can play critical roles in health care settings as a vital member of a patient's care team; however, there remains a great need to integrate digital navigation within health care as digital navigation has historically been viewed as a social service primarily provided by organizations such as libraries, schools, and other community settings. In addition, digital navigation resources often overlook specific telehealth considerations. Additional funding

is also needed to expand and sustainably support digital navigator training programs generally and those tailored to telehealth, such as those developed by the Northwest Regional Telehealth Resource Center¹² and Central Valley Health Network.¹³ As modern technology continues to advance, investments in digital navigators have the potential to better ensure all individuals can equitably access and utilize telehealth and other digital tools.

¹² Navigating the Telehealth Neighborhood: A Guide to Telehealth Access for Digital Navigators. <https://nrtrc.catalog.instructure.com/courses/navigating-the-telehealth-neighborhood-a-guide-to-telehealth-access-for-digital-navigators>

¹³ Nick Mundwiller (Central Valley Health Network), *Community Health Fellowship Digital Health Navigators Presentation*

The California Telehealth Policy Coalition

The coalition is the collaborative effort of over 170 statewide organizations and individuals who work collaboratively to advance California telehealth policy. The group was established in 2011 when AB 415 (The Telehealth Advancement Act) was introduced and continues as telehealth becomes integral in the delivery of health services in California. Convened by the Center for Connected Health Policy, the coalition aims to create a better landscape for health care access, care coordination, and reimbursement through and for telehealth.

Visit the coalition online at <https://www.cchpca.org/california-telehealth-policy-coalition/>