What We Heard: Calgarians experiences with the digital divide

August 2023

How we engaged Calgarians

June to November 2022

From June to November 2022, The City of Calgary Smart Cities Digital Equity team held conversations throughout the city asking Calgarians about their experience with the digital divide. Engagement was conducted in two different formats to meet the needs of Calgarians, drop-in and pop-up.

Drop-in Sessions –City representatives and/or organizational staff scheduled time to spend with groups more likely to be impacted by the digital divide. These sessions were held in the group's regular meeting spaces and participating individuals were invited to spend time sharing their experiences with the digital divide. Eight **drop-in sessions** were held at **five locations** and included virtual as well as in-person options.

Pop-up Sessions –City representatives went into public spaces to talk to Calgarians about their experiences with the digital divide and asked survey questions. Calgarians could opt out of answering questions. In most instances, individuals were unable to participate due to language barriers. Eight **pop-up sessions** were held at **five locations**.

The **goal** for these conversations was to gain insight into the specific barriers Calgarians faced related to technology and the digital divide.

Input provided by Calgarians help to validate and add context to research as well as input provided from engagement with front line staff and social impact organizations. This allowed the Digital Equity team to better prioritize actions and pilot program implementations.

DROP-IN SESSIONS
- The Kirby Centre
- The Women's Center
- The Urban Society for Aboriginal Youth
- Poverty Talks
- Disability Action Hall

POP-UP SESSIONS
- Central Library (x2)
- Shawnessy Library (x2)
- Bowness Park
- Saddle Town LRT (x1)
- Anderson LRT (x2)

Results of the engagement

From the 16 sessions held, the Digital Equity team was able to connect with close to 300 Calgarians, the majority of which were willing and able to share their experiences with us. These experiences and responses provided the Digital Equity team with close to **800 points of data** on the digital divide in Calgary.

Of the Calgarians we spoke with, almost all identified experiencing one or more barriers to digital equity. Our findings indicate equal challenges with all the primary barriers to digital equity.

Internet access

When asked "**Do you have access to reliable, affordable, high-speed internet from your home?"**
- Almost half of participating Calgarians indicated internet in the home was a barrier.
- Most commonly, participating Calgarians lacked home internet.
    - Many Calgarians without home internet indicated they rely on connectivity from the library and other public Wi-Fi spots.
- Most participating Calgarians indicated that they rely solely on their phones data plan or public Wi-Fi accessed through their phone for internet connection.
- Many participating Calgarians indicated that while they currently have an internet connection at home it is not affordable and has or may lead to sacrificing spending in other areas.

Almost half have barriers connecting to the internet

Many individuals who did not feel they were impacted by this barrier still remarked on high prices for service plans and poor internet service.

Device access

When asked, "**Do you have the right device to connect the way you need/want to?"**
- More than half of participating Calgarians said accessing the right device was a barrier.
- Most participating Calgarians indicated they need a computer and/or laptop.
- Many participating Calgarians indicated they need a smart phone to connect.
- Many participating Calgarians also indicated the device they had was outdated and did not function at the level required to participate fully online.
- Another common device barrier mentioned was lack of access to printers.

Indication that their cellular device has become a lifeline or access point into services and support was a common comment. This came from both those who indicated experiencing a barrier to accessing the right device and those who did not feel that devices were a barrier.

The lack of public phones and/or pay phones was flagged on a few occasions as a safety concern.

When asked, "**Are there enough devices for everyone in your household?**"
- Many participating Calgarians indicated that there were not.

Of those Calgarians we spoke with who had one or more devices in the home:
- Most indicated their computer is shared among many.
  - Some of these Calgarians are using a cellular device to bridge the gap for things like work and school.
- Many indicated that when at home they rely solely on an iPad or iPhone to engage in all online services, including education and employment.

We commonly heard that participating Calgarians without enough devices in the home also needed support using the devices that they have.

More than half have barriers accessing the right device

Several individuals specifically stated that the lack of affordable devices is keeping them from getting what they need.

Digital literacy skills

When asked "**Do you feel like you have the information and skills you need to connect and do what you need/want to be able to do online?**"
- Almost half of Calgarians we spoke with indicated they were lacking the skills they needed to fully participate online.

Outside of the most common response of lacking digital literacy skills we heard the following:
- Most individuals experiencing this barrier have a lack of trust and/or are fearful of connecting online.
- Many identified they would like to see the following:
  - Internet security and/or privacy education
  - Device support for elderly
  - More accessible and user-friendly applications and websites
- We frequently heard there is a desire for better messaging about the digital divide issue and of existing programs and services to bridge the digital divide.
- We also commonly heard that participating Calgarians would still like to see in-person programs and supports.

Almost half felt they lacked digital literacy skills to do what they need

Impact of technology and access

Studies have shown that digital access is crucial to Calgarians' ability to participate with our dynamic online world. We asked those interested in sharing further details about their technology use a few additional questions to explore the impact of technology and barrier free access.

When asked, "**What is something you do regularly with technology and why?**"
- More than half of Calgarians we spoke with said they use technology for formal education such as school and informal education (reading the news, searching for information).
- Most Calgarians we spoke with said they use technology for communication and connection.
- Many Calgarians we spoke with said they use technology for entertainment.
- Many Calgarians we spoke with said they use technology for work.
- We frequently heard technology is being used for things such as:
    - Wayfinding
    - Banking
    - Job hunting
    - Shopping

With the above responses, we continued to hear stories of the cell phone being a lifeline for many Calgarians looking to access services and communicate with others.

When asked, "**If all your barriers to technology were removed, is there something else that would open for you**?"
- Most Calgarians we spoke with expressed that the reduction in barriers would allow them to participate in formal education.
- Many Calgarians we spoke with expressed that the reduction in barriers would allow them to access services.
- We frequently heard that the reduction in barriers would allow Calgarians to be more creative.
- Calgarians we spoke to commonly expressed that a reduction in barriers would allow them to:
    - Have more connection to their community
    - Work
    - Feel less stress

During these conversations many Calgarians expressed that they need support for the barriers that exist with common references made to:
- The lack of affordable phone and internet packages
- A need for funding towards universal access and education
- A lack of trust in the online environment

When asked, "**Where would you like to be able to access digital equity services or support?**"

- Most Calgarians we spoke with expressed they would like support to be available at their local library.
- Many Calgarians we spoke with stated they would like supports to be available at existing support centers such as community hubs, shelters, the Kirby Centre, and USAY.

When we asked youth in Calgary, "**If you could pick one thing that would make connecting through technology easier for**"

- The most common response was better internet in the home and/or at school.
- Another very common response was access to a laptop.
- Youth also made reference to the need for better awareness on existing programs and supports as well as locations where these supports are available.

Verbatim responses from this engagement can be found [here](#).