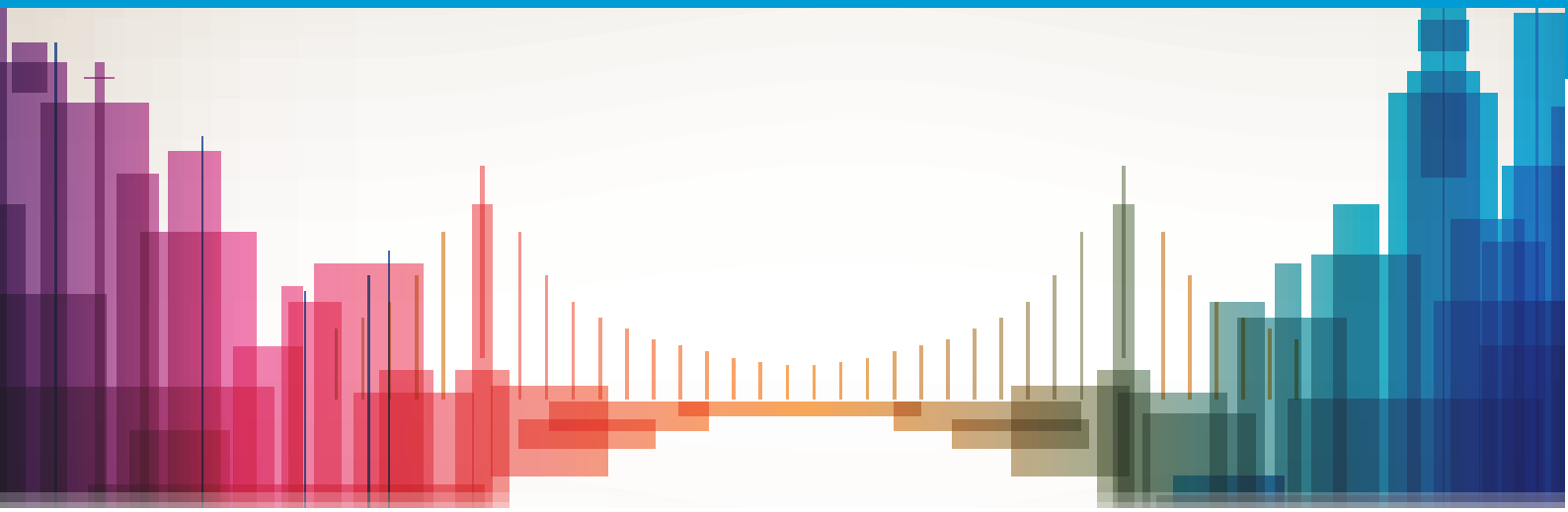
Columbus, Ohio, United States of America

Case study of the U4SSC Guide to Digital Wellbeing



Convention on Biological Diversity

United Nations ECLAC

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

UNIDO

ITU

UNDP

United Nations Economic Commission for Africa

UNECE

UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UN environment programme

UNEP FINANCE INITIATIVE

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

unitar United Nations Institute for Training and Research

UN-HABITAT FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs

UN 4 PARTNERSHIPS

UNU EGOV

UN Tourism

UN WOMEN

WORLD METEOROLOGICAL ORGANIZATION

Columbus, Ohio, United States of America

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Foreword

This publication was developed within the framework of the United for Smart Sustainable Cities (U4SSC) initiative.

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The development of this case study was led and coordinated by Juanisa Jalaina McCoy (Independent Researcher).

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Disclaimer

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of their respective organizations or U4SSC members. In line with the U4SSC principles, this report does not promote the adoption and use of Smart City technology. It advocates for policies encouraging responsible use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) that contribute to the economic, environmental and social sustainability as well as the advancement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Pact for the Future and its Global Digital Compact.

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Contents

Abbreviations and acronyms

Abbreviation	Full Form
ARPA	American Rescue Plan Act
ICT	Information and communication technologies
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
U4SSC	United for Smart Sustainable Cities
USD	United States dollar

1 Introduction

Columbus, Ohio, has been at the forefront of digital wellbeing initiatives, particularly through the efforts of the Franklin County Digital Equity Coalition and Smart Columbus. These initiatives aim to bridge the digital divide and ensure that all residents have access to essential digital resources, including high-speed Internet, which is crucial for education, health care, economic stability and civic participation.

2 Background & context

In 2020, in response to the pandemic, Columbus launched The Franklin County Digital Equity Coalition. The coalition collaborates with various stakeholders, including youth, technology professionals, artists and policymakers, to equip the next generation with the tools they need to navigate the digital landscape.

This initiative aligns with the broader goals of Smart Columbus, which was founded in 2016 after Columbus won the first-ever Smart City Challenge. Smart Columbus focuses on leveraging technology to improve the city's infrastructure, transportation, sustainability and overall quality of life.

By addressing digital equity, Columbus is working to dismantle systemic barriers and promote inclusivity, which is a core aspect of the aspirations. It supports these goals by providing residents with the tools and skills needed to thrive in a technology-driven world, ultimately contributing to the city's vision of equitable growth and prosperity.

3 Digital wellbeing intervention/initiative

The initiative focuses on broadband affordability, device ownership, digital life skills training and technology support to ensure residents have the tools necessary for education, health care, economic prosperity, and full participation in society. Smart Columbus aims to create a seamless experience for residents by integrating technology into the city's systems and services, including projects related to mobility, digitalization and emerging urban technologies, all to increase access to opportunities and promote sustainability, prosperity and equity.

4 Implementation of the digital wellbeing intervention/initiative

The implementation of these initiatives involves multiple phases and timelines. The Franklin County Digital Equity Coalition has made significant progress in providing affordable Internet access, quality digital devices, collaborative youth engagement programmes and digital skills

training. Smart Columbus has implemented various projects such as autonomous shuttles, electric vehicle infrastructure, the Park Columbus app and a pilot driver safety alert system. These efforts contribute to achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by promoting digital inclusion and sustainability.

Achievements:

- **Increased broadband access:** Significant progress was made in providing affordable high-speed Internet access to underserved communities, so ensuring more residents could participate in the digital economy and access essential services.
- **Device distribution:** The initiatives successfully distributed quality digital devices to residents, helping bridge the gap in device ownership and enabling more people to connect to the digital world.
- **Digital skills training:** Comprehensive digital life skills training programmes were implemented, equipping residents with the necessary skills to navigate the digital landscape effectively. This included training on how to use digital tools for education, health care and economic activities.
- **Mobility innovation:** Smart Columbus introduced several mobility projects such as autonomous shuttles, mobility assistance for people with disabilities, electric vehicles and the Park Columbus app, which improved transportation options and pedestrian and bicycle lane safety, and contributed to sustainability goals.
- **Community engagement:** The initiatives fostered strong collaboration among various stakeholders, including youth, technology professionals, artists and policymakers. This collaborative approach helped ensure the programmes were inclusive and addressed the needs of diverse community members.
- **Economic impact:** By improving digital access and skills, the initiatives contributed to economic stability and growth, enabling residents to pursue better job opportunities and participate more fully in the digital economy.
- **Sustainability efforts:** Projects like the deployment of electric vehicles and the focus on sustainable urban technologies helped reduce the city's carbon footprint and promoted environmental sustainability.

Challenges:

- **Infrastructure readiness:** The city's infrastructure was not fully prepared for the deployment of autonomous and connected systems. This required a pivot towards focusing more on digital equity and inclusivity.
- **Funding limitations:** The initial award money from the Smart City Challenge ran out, which posed a significant challenge in sustaining and expanding the initiatives.
- **Digital literacy:** Ensuring that all residents, especially those from underserved communities, had the necessary digital skills to effectively use the provided technology and resources.

- **Broadband access:** Providing affordable and reliable high-speed Internet access to all residents, particularly in rural and low-income urban areas, was a major hurdle.
- **Device ownership:** Ensuring that residents had access to quality digital devices was another significant challenge, as many households lacked the necessary hardware to fully participate in the digital world.
- **Community engagement:** Engaging a diverse range of stakeholders, including youth, technology professionals, artists and policymakers, required continuous effort and coordination.

Overall, through collaborative efforts, strategic pivots and ongoing community engagement the initiatives were able to continue to progress and achieve their goals.

5 Results and outcomes

The impact of the initiative:

- Investment and Funding: The City of Columbus and Franklin County committed over United States dollar (USD) 20 million to the Digital Equity Coalition. This includes USD 15 million from the city's American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding and USD 5.2 million from Franklin County.
- Broadband Access: The initiative aims to increase access to affordable, reliable home Internet among the 80 000 households currently underserved, aiming for an increase in access of at least 50 per cent.
- Device Distribution: 10 000 computers, tablets, smartphones and other Internet-enabled devices are being distributed to households in need.
- Digital Skills Training: 10 000 residents are expected to receive new digital skills through decentralized training programmes at community organizations. An ecosystem of 1 500 trained advocates (e.g., librarians, school counsellors, social workers) across 100 partner organizations is being established to support digital inclusion.
- Economic Participation: By ensuring under-resourced residents have access to affordable, reliable residential Internet, connected devices and digital skills training, participation in the modern digital economy can be inclusively expanded. This includes better access to education, health care, job opportunities and financial management, which are crucial for economic stability and growth.

These data points highlight the substantial socio-economic impact and demonstrate significant investments, as well as tangible benefits for the community.

Conclusion

The main lessons learned from Columbus's digital wellbeing initiatives include the importance of collaboration among various stakeholders and the need for continuous investment in digital

infrastructure. Critical success factors include strong leadership, community engagement and a clear vision for digital equity. The challenges ahead involve maintaining momentum and scaling successful pilot programmes. The transferability of these initiatives to other cities depends on the local context and the ability to adapt strategies to meet specific needs.

6 Assessment of the digital wellbeing intervention/initiative

The digital wellbeing initiative in Columbus has successfully addressed the digital divide and promoted inclusivity. However, challenges such as infrastructure readiness for fully autonomous systems and the need for continuous funding remain. Potential enhancements include expanding digital skills training programmes and increasing the availability of affordable digital devices.

7 Conclusion

The main lessons learned from Columbus's digital wellbeing initiative include the importance of collaboration among various stakeholders and the need for continuous investment in digital infrastructure. Critical success factors include strong leadership, community engagement and a clear vision for digital equity. The challenges ahead involve maintaining momentum and scaling successful pilot programmes.

This initiative's successes and lessons learned can easily be transferred to other cities and rural areas. The key takeaways that can be applied for transferability to another community are:

- **Engage diverse stakeholders:** Columbus's success was partly due to the collaboration between various stakeholders, including government agencies, private sector partners, community organizations and residents. Other cities should foster similar partnerships to leverage diverse expertise and resources.
- **Community involvement:** Actively involving the community in planning and implementation ensures that initiatives meet the actual needs of residents and gain broader support.
- **Scalable models:** Pilot programmes and scalable models used in Columbus can serve as blueprints for other cities, allowing them to start small and expand based on success and learning.

They have thoroughly documented their efforts and plans on Smart Columbus and Franklin County Digital Equity Coalition sites and any city or rural area can use them as a playbook.

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