

## OPINION

# We need to close digital divide in Boston

## 1 in 5 people lack computers, reliable internet access

 JULIA MEJIA,  ED FLYNN,  DANIEL NOYES and  THEODORA HANNA

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**EVEN IN THE MIDST** of an unprecedented crisis, our communities are strong. They are resilient. They are full of students, immigrants, small business owners, caregivers, working families, and seniors – all working every day to carve out a better life for themselves and their families. But that strength and resilience is constantly challenged by the systemic barriers standing in their way, including the “digital divide.” Amidst the massive disruption caused by COVID-19, the challenge of securing an accurate census count – which could have implications for the resources available to our communities for years – is a forceful reminder of the deep urgency for us to work collectively to ensure that everyone in Boston has access to the tools and support they need to get connected.

In Boston, the census counting process has underlined just how difficult it is for communities of color, immigrants, people living in poverty, seniors, and transient communities to access basic services and processes. In many neighborhoods, the census self-response rate has remained below 50 percent, even though the census form was made available online. According to federal data, as many as one in five Boston families don't have a computer at home, nearly the same number lack reliable internet access, and thousands more struggle with language barriers and other obstacles to using digital tools.

Deep digital inequity in our communities threatens to lead to a dramatic undercounting of residents – particularly those in traditionally hard-to-count communities – which devalues the lives of those residents in the eyes of the federal government; threatens funding for education, transportation, public health, food access, and more; and underscores the far-reaching impact of digital exclusion.

In the context of COVID-19, as the census and so many essential services move more and more online, the impact of the digital divide has risen to the forefront of the public conversation, particularly as it relates to education. In May, Boston Public Schools revealed that 5 percent of BPS students do not have stable internet access. For context, 5 percent of BPS students amounts to nearly 2,700 people without reliable internet access.

But the challenges posed by digital inequity are not new, and they reach into every aspect of Bostonians' daily lives. For years, students, workers, and elders in our communities, many of whom are immigrants, people of color, or living at or near the poverty line, have faced greater obstacles not just in accessing digital devices and the internet, but in obtaining the kind of training and support necessary to take advantage of these digital tools and opportunities. This is a



fundamental civil rights issue, one that perpetuates racial and economic injustice – undermining an accurate census count, creating barriers to a high-quality education and economic opportunity, preventing reliable connection to loved ones, and so much more.

For years, organizations across the city have been working to fill the gaps and provide communities with the devices, connectivity, and digital skillsets that are critical to thriving in today's world. We hear stories from people every day who benefited from these services, and we know that access to these essential resources creates significant and long-lasting socio-economic benefits.

The census is an important and timely example. Tech Goes Home, a Boston-based nonprofit working to remove barriers to digital equity by providing digital devices, internet access, and training, has reported that among adult learners enrolled in their programming,

72 percent have completed the census, well above Boston's overall self-response rate.

Left unaddressed, the digital divide has a significant and long-lasting impact on our communities, which is only being exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. In order to meaningfully address this inequity, we need a comprehensive strategy that combines access to both digital devices and the internet, as well as culturally-competent training that empowers people with the knowledge and skills they need to use technology to overcome existing barriers.

At the end of the day, our efforts will only be successful if we center the experiences of folks who are feeling the disproportionate impact of digital inequity. We believe in a process that brings together elected officials, businesses, schools, community-based organizations, and residents to develop and implement sustainable, inclusive, and equitable strategies. By working together with the urgency that this issue deserves, we can all move the needle a little bit closer towards digital equity in our city.

*Julia Mejia is a Boston city councilor at-large, Ed Flynn is a Boston city councilor, for district 2, and Daniel Noyes and Theodora Hanna are co-CEOs of Tech Goes Home.*

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