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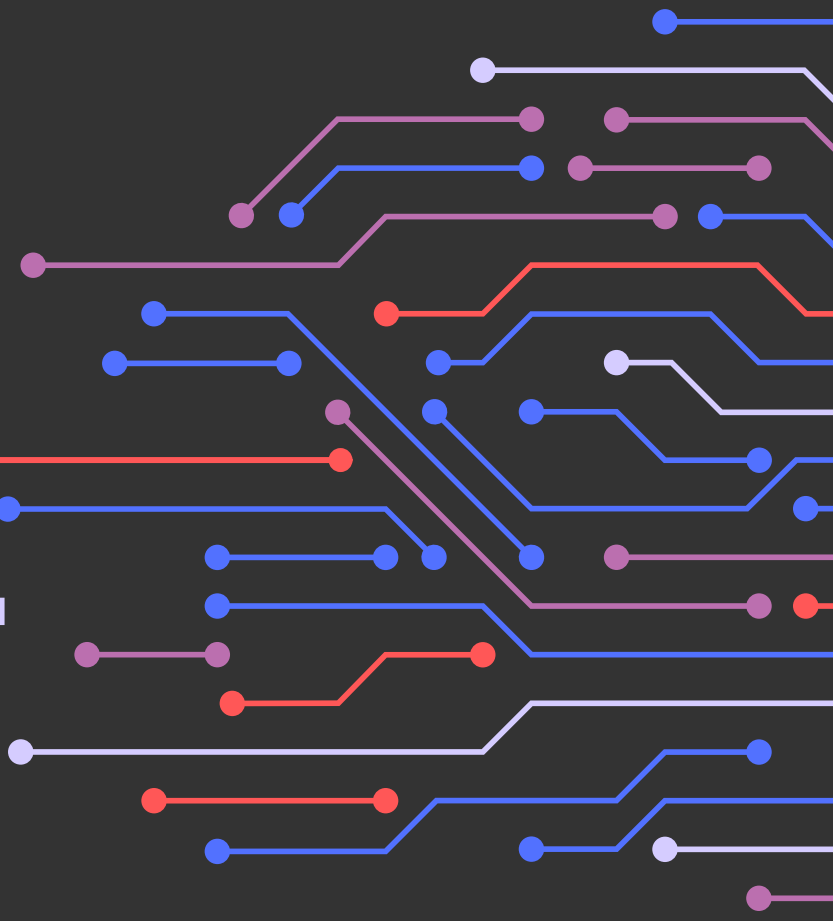
THE LGBTQ+ DIGITAL DIVIDE



LGBT TECH

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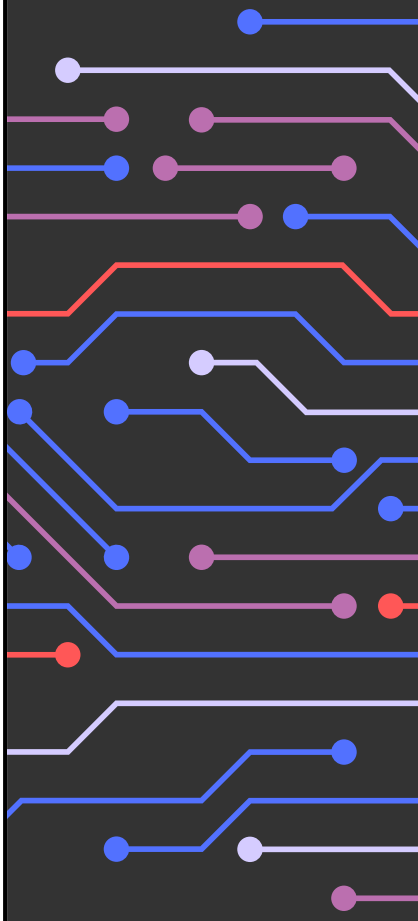
LGBT Tech is the nation's premier organization working to bridge the technology gap for LGBTQ+ individuals through partnerships with tech companies, non-profit groups, policy makers, scholars, and innovators. Grounded in empirical research, we develop programs and resources that support LGBTQ+ communities and work to educate on the unique needs LGBTQ+ individuals face when it comes to tech.

While this report presents original insights and analysis, it would not have been possible without an established groundwork of research. LGBT Tech expresses particular gratitude to the Movement Advancement Project (MAP), the Trevor Project, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), Pew Research Center, and the Williams Institute at UCLA, whose work was crucial in the formation of this report.

Endnotes in this report include original links to all referenced content.



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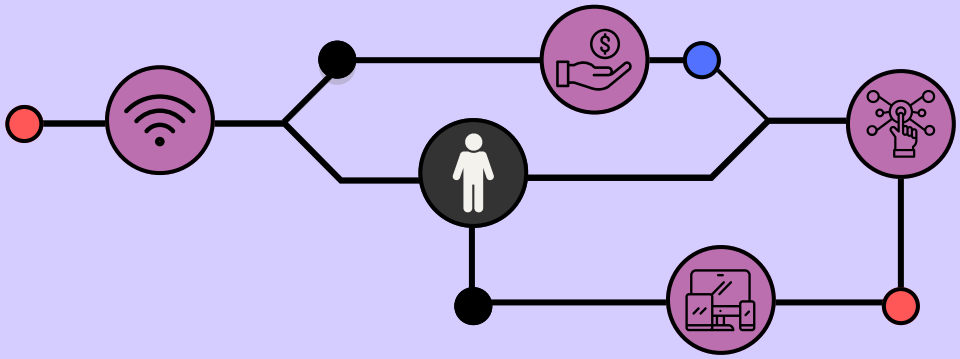
INTRODUCTION

The **digital divide**, defined as the gap between those with and without reliable internet access and digital devices, represents a significant barrier in our increasingly interconnected world. While digital access is essential for full participation in modern society, many individuals and communities still face substantial obstacles in achieving this access. For the LGBTQ+ community, these challenges are particularly pronounced and have far-reaching implications.

Digital access is not merely about having an internet connection; it encompasses the quality of that connection, the affordability of digital devices, and the ability to use these technologies effectively. The digital divide exacerbates existing social and economic inequalities, limiting opportunities for education, employment, healthcare, and social interaction. For LGBTQ+ individuals, who often face additional layers of discrimination and marginalization, overcoming the digital divide is crucial for achieving equity and inclusion.



This report looks to break down the specific ways in which the digital divide impacts LGBTQ+ individuals, providing a comprehensive analysis of the barriers faced by members of the community and underscoring the critical importance of digital access in fostering inclusion and equity. This report is largely intended for policymakers and stakeholders who may be unfamiliar with the intersection of digital access and LGBTQ+ experiences, and ultimately seeks to inform and inspire action towards bridging this gap.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WHAT IS THE DIGITAL DIVIDE?

The digital divide refers to the gap between individuals and communities with access to modern communication and information technologies and those without. This gap is multifaceted and encompasses disparities in internet connectivity, device availability, infrastructure, and digital literacy. LGBTQ+ individuals affected by this often face compounded barriers to equity and success.

HOW DOES THIS DIVIDE IMPACT THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY?

Courtesy of worsened socioeconomic outcomes, members of the LGBTQ+ community can be left particularly susceptible to the digital divide and restricted from access to supportive communities, resources, and visibility. A lack of reliable internet and devices can hinder essential academic performance and employment opportunities, and isolate LGBTQ+ individuals from vital health information and support.

HOW CAN WE BRIDGE THIS DIGITAL DIVIDE?

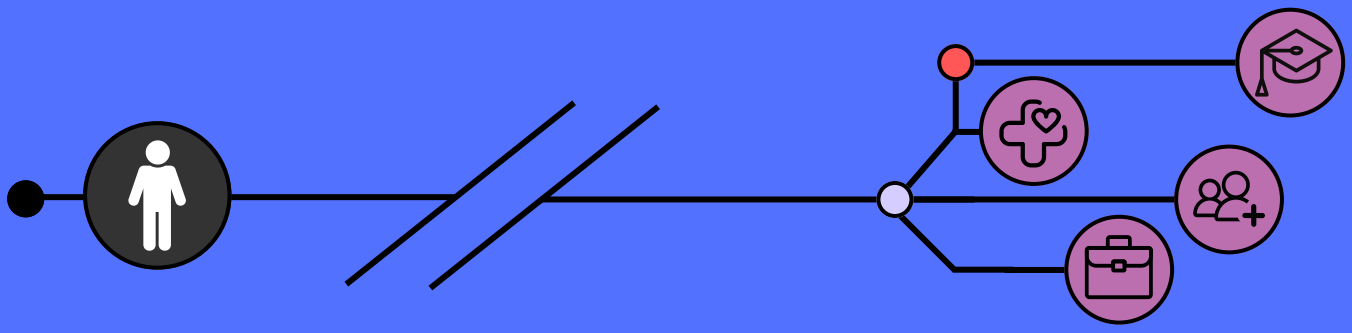
To bridge this LGBTQ+ divide, several key strategies can and must be implemented. These include funding digital inclusion programs that support underserved communities; making significant investments in, and removing unnecessary barriers to, the deployment of broadband infrastructure; implementing policies to make high-speed internet affordable for marginalized communities; designing inclusive policies to prevent digital discrimination; and promoting comprehensive digital literacy programs to empower LGBTQ+ individuals with the skills needed in our increasingly digital world.

HOW DOES LGBT TECH WORK TO BRIDGE THIS DIVIDE?

Alongside and in coordination with our research and policy work, LGBT Tech builds programs that use technology to solve equity challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community. Our programmatic branch reaches the community through technology distribution (PowerOn), STEAM visibility and mentorship (PATHS), and literacy and skills training (Digital Navigator). By engaging with these programs, individuals and allies help LGBT Tech create meaningful digital experiences in an inclusive digital ecosystem.

IDENTIFYING THE DIVIDE

The digital divide refers to the **gap between individuals and communities that have access to modern communication and information technologies, and those that do not.**



Ultimately, bridging the digital divide involves achieving digital equity while avoiding digital discrimination.

Digital equity is the condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in society, democracy, and the economy. Achieving digital equity involves ensuring that everyone has access to affordable internet, devices, digital literacy training, and online resources. This means not only providing the necessary tools and infrastructure, but also fostering an inclusive environment where everyone can develop the skills needed to navigate and benefit from digital technologies.

Digital discrimination refers to practices that result in unequal access to digital technologies and services based on factors such as race, income, geography, or other characteristics, including LGBTQ+ identity. These practices can manifest in various ways, from the availability of high-speed internet in affluent areas while underserved regions remain unconnected, to the cost of devices and services being prohibitively high for low-income individuals. Policymakers and industry leaders can work together to eliminate these disparities and ensure that all communities can benefit from advancements in digital connectivity.

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COMPONENTS OF THE DIVIDE

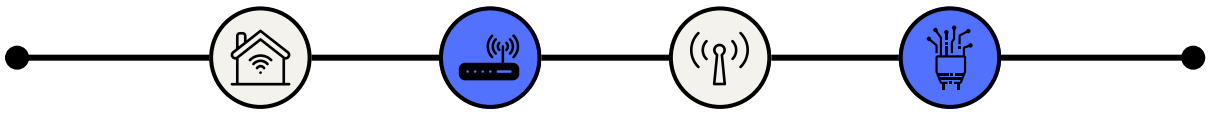
The digital divide has evolved alongside increasingly complex technologies, but at its core can be identified in unequal access to connectivity, devices, infrastructure, and digital literacy. Each of these four components plays a crucial role in an individual's ability to participate fully in the digital world.

CONNECTIVITY

Reliable **connectivity** is essential for accessing information, engaging in remote education and work, and maintaining social connections. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) defines **high-speed broadband** as having download speeds of at least 100 Mbps and upload speeds of at least 20 Mbps.[1] High costs and inadequate service coverage remain significant barriers, particularly for low-income LGBTQ+ individuals.

In response to these challenges, industry leaders have made efforts to expand broadband coverage, invest in new technologies, and offer affordable internet plans. For instance, several internet service providers have initiated programs to extend high-speed internet access to underserved areas, providing free or discounted services to low-income households, including those within the LGBTQ+ community.[2] Various types of broadband, such as cable, fiber-optic, DSL, wireless, and satellite, offer tailored solutions to meet the diverse needs of LGBTQ+ individuals across different regions.[3] Collaborations between the private sector and government initiatives have also played a critical role in enhancing digital infrastructure and making high-speed internet more accessible.[4]

LGBTQ+ individuals heavily depend on broadband connectivity, and 96% of LGBTQ+ adults report using the internet daily.[5] Public resources such as community centers, libraries, and coffee shops are vital for internet access, especially for those who cannot afford home broadband. For example, nearly half of LGBTQ+ adults and two-thirds of transgender adults have relied on community centers for internet access, highlighting the crucial role these spaces play in bridging the digital divide.[6]

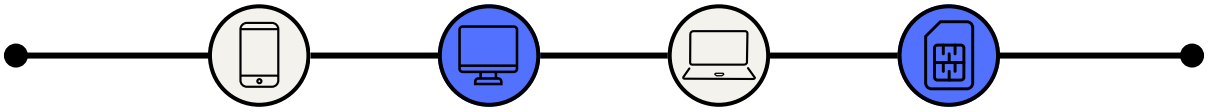


DEVICES

Access to necessary hardware such as **smartphones, tablets, and computers** is crucial for connecting to the internet and performing digital tasks. Without these devices, participation in the digital world is severely restricted. The cost and availability of these devices can present significant barriers, and for many LGBTQ+ individuals, especially those from low-income backgrounds, can prove extremely prohibitive.[7]

Community spaces such as LGBTQ+ centers, libraries, and community organizations play a crucial role in providing access to devices for those who cannot afford them or safely use them at home. These spaces offer safe environments where LGBTQ+ individuals can use computers, tablets, and other digital tools to connect with resources and support networks.[8] However, recent legislative attacks targeting LGBTQ+ resources in public schools and libraries have threatened the availability of many of these safe environments, further restricting access to critical support systems.[9]

Programs that provide affordable or subsidized devices are essential for bridging this aspect of the digital divide. One such program is **LGBT Tech's PowerOn initiative**, covered in further detail in this report.[10] PowerOn distributes technology to isolated, disadvantaged, and at-risk LGBTQ+ individuals. As of 2023, PowerOn has reached more than 622,395 individuals, distributing more than $582,300 worth of technology. PowerOn, and other programs like it, mitigate LGBTQ+ barriers and enable community members to engage more fully in the digital world.

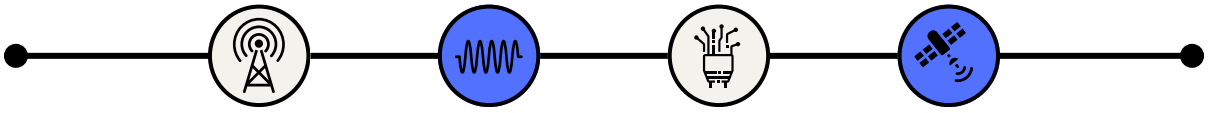


INFRASTRUCTURE & SPECTRUM

Infrastructure includes the physical and technical components required for internet access, such as **cell towers, cables, and satellites**. Improved and increased infrastructure directly benefits the LGBTQ+ community by providing reliable and high-speed internet access, essential for accessing critical services and support networks. Enhanced infrastructure ensures that LGBTQ+ individuals in rural and underserved areas can connect to the digital world, reducing isolation and improving access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities. Deploying advanced infrastructure and removing unnecessary barriers to such deployment, such as 5G networks and fiber-optic cables, is crucial for improving connectivity and ensuring high-quality internet services for all communities.[11]

Spectrum refers to the radio frequencies allocated for wireless communication, which are essential for mobile internet and other wireless services. Equitable spectrum allocation is vital for expanding wireless coverage and improving service quality.[12] A balanced allocation of low, mid, and high-band spectrum is critical for comprehensive and equitable connectivity, with low-band spectrum ideal for rural areas and mid- to high-band spectrums necessary for urban and densely populated regions.[13]

Adequate spectrum and robust infrastructure are necessary to ensure widespread and reliable internet access, especially in rural and underserved areas.



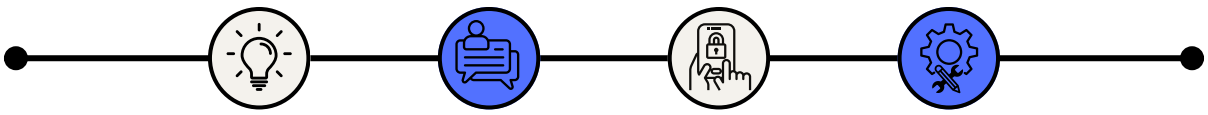
DIGITAL LITERACY

Digital literacy refers to the ability to use digital devices and internet technologies effectively to access, manage, and create information. It encompasses a range of skills, including understanding how to navigate the internet, evaluate online content, use digital tools for communication and productivity, and protect one's privacy and security online.[14] Without digital literacy, even those with access to the internet and devices may struggle to fully participate in the digital economy and society.

For LGBTQ+ individuals, digital literacy is especially crucial as it enables them to connect with supportive communities, access health information, find employment opportunities, and engage in advocacy and social change.[15] However, barriers to digital literacy, such as lack of access to training and educational resources, disproportionately affect LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly those from low-income or marginalized backgrounds.

Recent efforts to improve digital literacy include initiatives from both the public and private sectors.[16] Governments, nonprofits, and tech companies have launched programs to provide digital skills training, often targeting underserved communities. **LGBT Tech's new Digital Navigator Program** offers digital literacy training to ensure that recipients can effectively use technology to enhance their lives.[17] Public libraries, LGBTQ+ centers, and community organizations also play a vital role in offering digital literacy workshops and resources.

Improving digital literacy is essential for closing the digital divide. By empowering LGBTQ+ individuals with the skills they need to navigate the digital world, we can help ensure that they can fully benefit from the opportunities that technology offers.



Connectivity, devices, infrastructure, and digital literacy are interdependent components that together shape digital access. Connectivity relies on the availability of devices and robust infrastructure; devices require reliable connectivity and adequate infrastructure to function optimally; infrastructure needs both connectivity and devices to justify and sustain investments; and all three depend on digital literacy to ensure that individuals can effectively utilize the technology available to them. This interconnected relationship underscores the need for a holistic approach to digital equity. Addressing one aspect without the others leaves gaps that can perpetuate the digital divide, particularly for marginalized communities like LGBTQ+ individuals.

THE LGBTQ+ IMPACT

For LGBTQ+ individuals, who often face additional layers of discrimination and marginalization, the digital divide can profoundly affect their daily lives, limit their opportunities, and exacerbate existing inequalities. The negative impact of the divide is felt across various areas and intersectional identities, as is the positive impact of efforts to bridge it.

EDUCATION

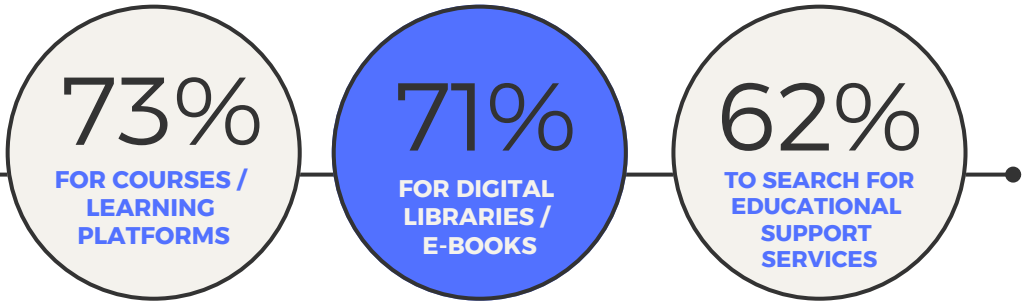
Students without reliable internet access or digital devices struggle to keep up with their peers, particularly as schools increasingly incorporate online learning. The FCC reports that nearly 17 million school children lack internet access at home, creating a "homework gap" with long-term effects on academic achievement and future opportunities.[18] For LGBTQ+ students, reliable internet and digital devices are crucial.

> **"THE HOMEWORK GAP IS THE CRUELEST PART OF THE DIGITAL DIVIDE, BUT IT IS WITHIN OUR POWER TO BRIDGE IT."**
>
> -FCC COMMISSIONER JESSICA ROSENWORCEL[19]

Research shows that LGBTQ+ students often have poorer outcomes, lower educational expectations and motivation, reduced school engagement, and a lessened sense of belonging.[20] According to the Human Rights Campaign, *"the cards remain stacked against LGBTQ+ youth in terms of... their mental health and safety in schools. Transgender and gender-expansive youth also face unique challenges, with harmful anti-trans laws, and a lack of inclusive school policies and procedures, creating obstacles to their safety and well-being."*[21] For these LGBTQ+ youth, connected access can provide both a safer space for exploration and resources necessary to unlock personal growth opportunities. This boost extends into adulthood, with more than three-fourths of LGBTQ+ adults engaging in online courses and skills development, and more than 70% relying on digital libraries or e-books.[22]

HOW LGBTQ+ ADULTS RELY ON ACCESS & DIGITAL PLATFORMS:

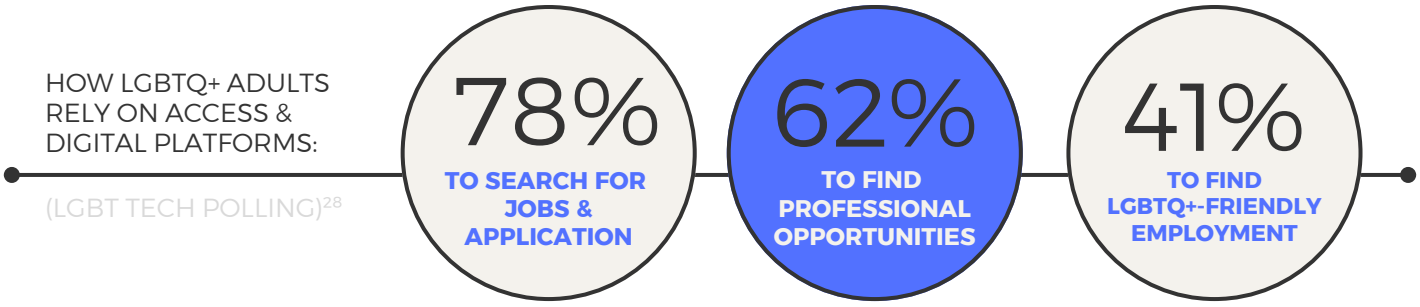
(LGBT TECH POLLING)[23]



EMPLOYMENT

Job searches, applications, and many modern roles require internet access, and those without it are left at a significant disadvantage. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the percentage of unemployed job seekers using the internet to search for openings skyrocketed from 25.5% in 2000 to 76.3% in 2011 - a number that can only be expected to have increased further in the years since.[24] The National Skills Coalition reports that 92% of jobs in the U.S. labor market require digital skills, with the digital skill divide disproportionately impacting marginalized individuals due to historic underinvestment and structural inequities.[25] The inability to participate fully in the job market and to access opportunities for remote work, skill development, and professional networking is devastating, particularly when considered alongside the significant workplace discrimination and economic instability reported by LGBTQ+ individuals.[26]

Digital access can help bridge this. For example, LGBT Tech polling found that 41% of LGBTQ+ adults and 70% of transgender adults have used connectivity to find specifically LGBTQ+-friendly employment.[27] Technology serves as a gateway to job opportunities and career development, helping members of the community overcome traditional workplace barriers.



HEALTHCARE

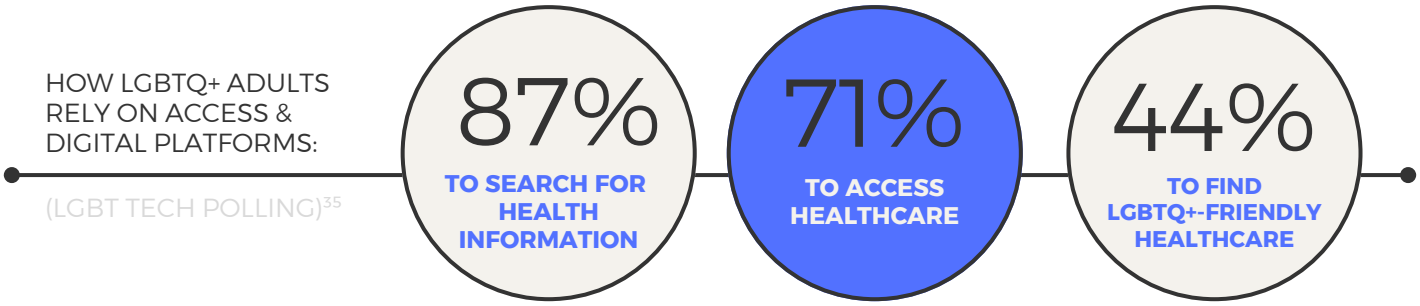
Access to online **health resources, telemedicine, and health information** is crucial for managing health conditions and accessing medical care, with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) coining digital access as a "*super determinant*" of health, "*play*[ing] *a role in health care outcomes and influenc*[ing] *more traditionally recognized social determinants of health, such as education, employment, and healthcare access*."[29] The digital divide risks severing individuals from scheduling appointments, receiving medical advice, and accessing critical health information, with COVID demonstrating starkly how crucial telehealth access in particular has become for all communities.[30]

For LGBTQ+ individuals, who face unique health challenges and discrimination in healthcare settings, digital access is often their only option to find LGBTQ+-specific health resources, mental health support, and access to non-judgemental and gender-affirming care.

> **"HEALTH EQUITY, AT ITS HEART, MEANS THAT EVERYONE HAS ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE. NO MATTER WHERE THEY ARE, NO MATTER WHO THEY LOVE, NO MATTER THEIR RACE, OR THEIR ETHNICITY, OR THEIR GENDER, OR THEIR AGE."**
>
> -ADMIRAL RACHEL L. LEVINE, MD, ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR HEALTH, HHS[31]

The increased discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in their daily lives is mirrored in their healthcare experiences, with community members far more likely than non-LGBTQ+ individuals to report negative healthcare experiences that caused their health to worsen (24% compared to 9%), made them less likely to seek healthcare (29% compared to 15%), or caused them to switch healthcare providers (36% compared to 16%).[32]

These numbers, in conjunction with research showing that LGBTQ+ individuals face significant health disparities in areas of behavioral and physical health, underscore the importance of digital access.[33] Technology, and the connectivity powering it, allows individuals to seek health information discreetly, access telehealth services, and find LGBTQ+-friendly healthcare providers. LGBT Tech polling found that nearly 90% of community members say they search for health information online, with 44% of LGBTQ+ adults and 70% of transgender individuals having used the internet to locate safe healthcare environments.[34]

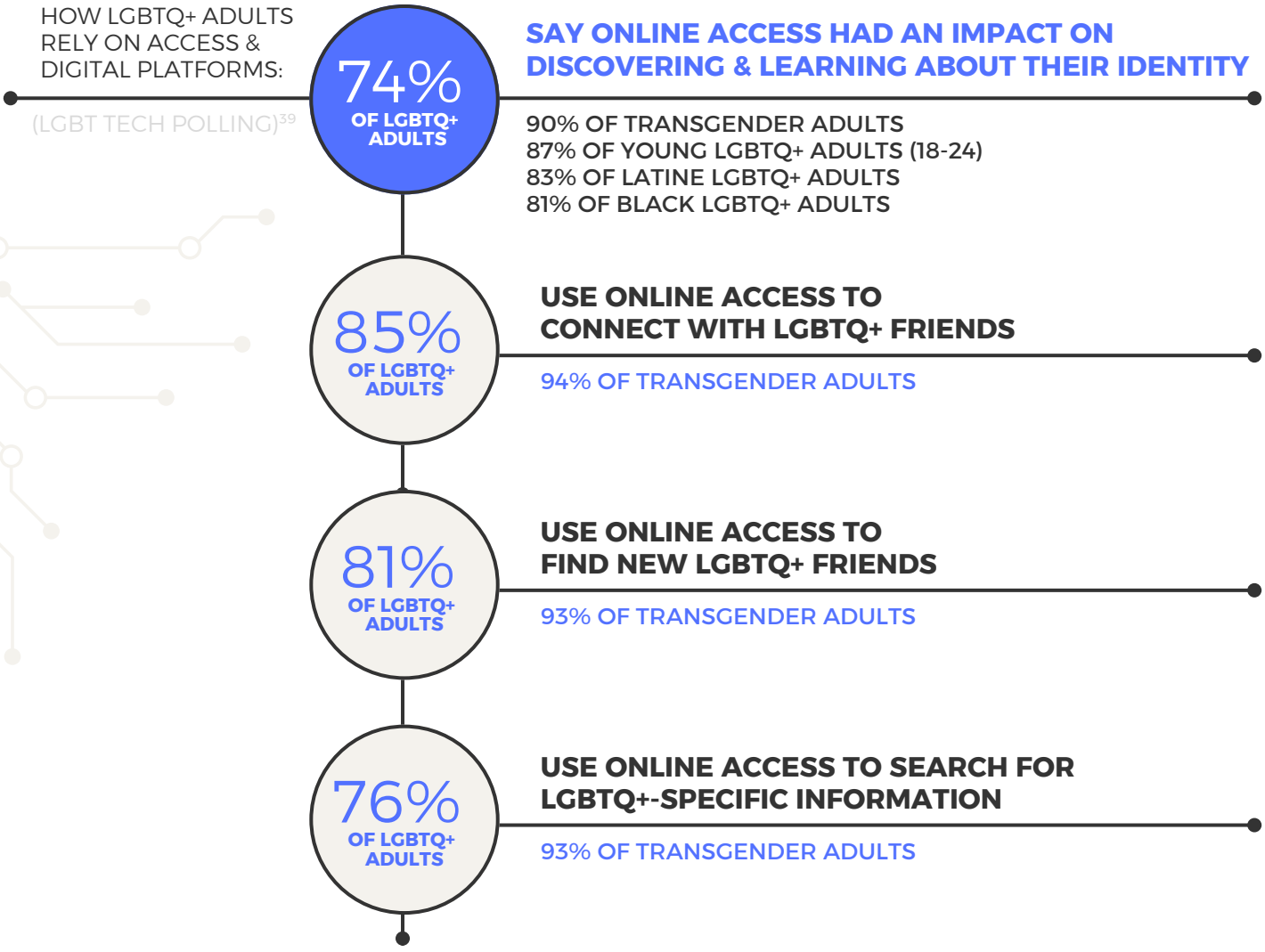


SOCIAL CONNECTION & INFORMATION

For many LGBTQ+ individuals, digital access serves as a **crucial lifeline to supportive networks and inclusive spaces** where they can connect with others who share similar experiences. In physical spaces where LGBTQ+ communities may be less visible or accepted, especially in rural areas or small towns, finding such networks can be especially challenging.[36] Through smartphones, tablets, and computers, services like social media, forums, and dedicated LGBTQ+ apps can offer safe environments for emotional support, experience sharing, and fostering a sense of belonging.

The internet is also a **key source of information on news, public services, and community resources.** For LGBTQ+ individuals, access to accurate and relevant information is essential for navigating legal rights, social services, and community resources. The internet provides a wealth of information that helps LGBTQ+ individuals understand their rights, find supportive services, and stay informed about issues affecting their community. The digital divide risks leaving many without this crucial information that impacts their lives and well-being.

Moreover, connectivity has been a **powerful tool for visibility and advocacy** within the LGBTQ+ community, and LGBTQ+ individuals were reportedly some of the first to adopt technology, in part as a tool to demand visibility and greater recognition of their rights.[37] Online platforms amplify LGBTQ+ voices, allowing individuals to share their stories, raise awareness about issues affecting the community, and advocate for legal and social change. Social media campaigns, online petitions, and virtual events have become essential tools for mobilizing support and effecting change.[38] Digital access enables LGBTQ+ individuals to participate in and contribute to global conversations about equality and human rights, providing a platform for marginalized voices to be heard and for allies to show their support.



THE INTERSECTIONAL IMPACT

The digital divide affects a wide range of communities, but its impact is particularly severe on those who are low-income, face multiple marginalization, and/or live in rural areas. For LGBTQ+ individuals within these groups, the digital divide can exacerbate existing inequalities, making it even harder to access essential services, opportunities, and support networks.

LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES

The digital divide disproportionately affects **low-income communities**, for whom the cost of internet access and digital devices can be prohibitive. An estimated 80% of Americans have access to home broadband. However, that number dips to 57% for low-income Americans while skyrocketing to 95% for high-income Americans. Similarly, 90% of Americans overall own smartphones, but there exists a significant disparity between low- and high- income Americans, at 79% and 98% ownership, respectively.[40] This gap is the digital divide at work.

LGBTQ+ individuals are more likely to be low-income due to systemic discrimination and economic marginalization.[41] This economic disadvantage limits their ability to afford reliable internet services and digital devices, essential tools for accessing education, employment, and healthcare.

25% OF LGBTQ+ AMERICANS HAVE AN INCOME BELOW $24K (COMPARED TO 17% NON-LGBTQ+)[42]

9% OF LGBTQ+ AMERICANS ARE UNEMPLOYED (COMPARED TO 5% NON-LGBTQ+)[43]

MULTIPLE MARGINALIZATION

The intersection of **multiple marginalization**—such as being LGBTQ+ and a person of color—intensifies the impact of the digital divide. Marginalized communities often face compounded barriers to accessing technology due to systemic racism, economic inequality, and discrimination. For LGBTQ+ individuals in these communities, the digital divide can limit access to culturally competent healthcare, educational opportunities, and social networks that are vital for their well-being and empowerment.[44] This compounded marginalization makes it harder for them to benefit from digital inclusion programs that are not specifically tailored to address their unique challenges.

40% OF LGBTQ+ AMERICANS IDENTIFY AS PEOPLE OF COLOR[45]

45% OF LGBTQ+ PEOPLE OF COLOR EXPERIENCED DISCRIMINATION WITHIN THE PAST YEAR[46]

RURAL COMMUNITIES

Rural communities often lack the infrastructure needed for reliable internet connectivity, making it difficult for residents to access high-speed internet. For the millions of LGBTQ+ individuals in rural areas and small towns, this lack of connectivity can be particularly isolating, as they may already face limited access to supportive communities and resources in their physical environments.[47] For youth, rural isolation can be tragic. The Trevor Project reports that nearly half (49%) of these youth stated that their rural community was somewhat or very unaccepting of LGBTQ+ people, accompanied by greater rates of discrimination and physical harm.[48]

> **"[RURAL LIVING] SURFACES THE DIGITAL INVISIBILITY OF PEOPLE BASED ON THEIR SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND PREFERENCES WHO HAVE BEEN UNABLE TO LIVE OUT LOUD AND OPENLY IN COMMUNITIES WITH FIERCE REPUDIATION OF THEIR LIFESTYLES.**
>
> **THAT IS WHY RURAL IS NOT JUST THE FAMILIAR POLITICAL PERSUASION OF WHITE, HETEROSEXUAL FARMERS, RELIGIOUS CONSERVATIVES, AND OTHER STARK IDEOLOGUES... HERE IS DIVERSITY, [WHICH] REQUIRES ONLINE ACCESS TO FULLY EXPRESS THEIR NEEDS AND THEIR SENSE OF BELONGINGNESS."**
>
> -NICOL TURNER LEE, AUTHOR, OF "DIGITALLY INVISIBLE"[49]

Reliable internet is crucial for connecting with LGBTQ+ networks, accessing specialized healthcare, and finding community support. The absence of robust digital infrastructure in rural areas risks hindering these connections.

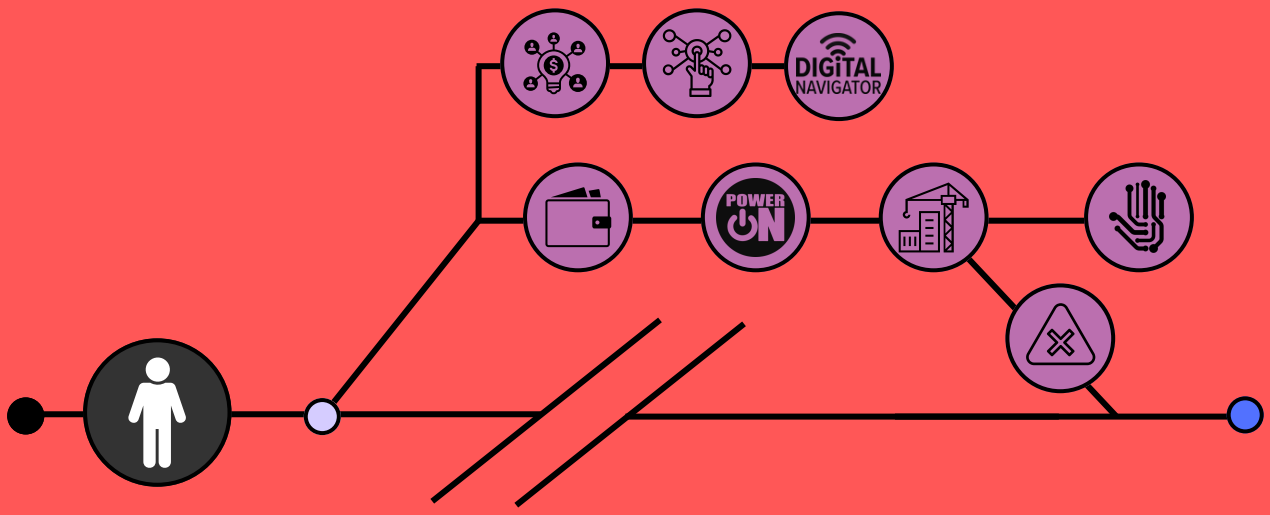
2.9-3.8 MILLION LGBTQ+ INDIVIDUALS LIVE IN RURAL AREAS ACROSS THE UNITED STATES[50]

ONLY 11% OF RURAL LGBTQ+ ADULTS AGED 45+ HAVE ACCESS TO AN LGBTQ+ HEALTH CENTER[51]

Targeted strategies and inclusive policies are necessary to ensure that all LGBTQ+ individuals, regardless of their socioeconomic status, racial background, or geographic location, have equitable access to the digital resources necessary for their empowerment and well-being. Addressing the digital divide for LGBTQ+ individuals requires a multifaceted approach that considers the unique challenges faced by our intersectional community.

CLOSING THE DIVIDE

Achieving digital equity for LGBTQ+ individuals is both necessary and possible. The digital divide has long been a barrier to full participation in society for many within the LGBTQ+ community, but closing this divide is within our reach. This section underscores the importance of targeted efforts to bridge the gap.



At the community level, initiatives like those offered by LGBT Tech are making significant strides in addressing the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals. These programs are tailored to the specific needs of diverse LGBTQ+ populations, providing essential resources, digital literacy training, and access to technology that might otherwise be out of reach.

However, community-based efforts alone cannot close the divide. Policymakers and industry leaders hold the power to create systemic change by implementing strategies that prioritize inclusivity and accessibility on a larger scale.

LGBT TECH

HIGHLIGHTING LGBT TECH PROGRAMS

LGBT Tech is at the forefront of efforts to bridge the digital divide for the LGBTQ+ community through a variety of impactful programs designed to provide equitable access to technology, enhance digital literacy, and foster a more inclusive digital environment.

POWERON PROGRAM

LGBT Tech's flagship program, **PowerOn**, is built on the foundation that digital rights are human rights, with a mission to bridge the digital gap in the LGBTQ+ community by providing technology and resources for internet access to both LGBTQ+ organizations and individual community members. This network - and the partners that support it - allows LGBT Tech to distribute life-saving technology at the most impactful grassroots level.

Through PowerOn's partner network of 140 LGBTQ+ centers across 40 U.S. states and territories, PowerOn has granted over half a million dollars worth of devices, reaching over 622,395 LGBTQ+ community members. PowerOn centers have used granted technology to provide vital services, build community computer labs, and conduct outreach. LGBTQ+ community members have used PowerOn devices to secure stable housing, search for jobs, access life-saving resources, and connect with community online.[52]

IN 2023 ALONE:

- **2037** SOCIAL EVENTS/SUPPORT GROUPS WERE HELD USING POWERON GRANTED TECHNOLOGY.
- **669** COMMUNITY MEMBERS FOUND EMPLOYMENT AFTER USING THE GRANTED TECHNOLOGY.
- **3008** CLIENTS USED POWERON TECHNOLOGY TO ACCESS MENTAL HEALTHCARE SERVICES.
- **3029** CLIENTS USED THE GRANTED TECHNOLOGY TO ACCESS FOOD BANK RESOURCES.
- **1083** CLIENTS USED POWERON TECHNOLOGY TO ACCESS PRIMARY/CLINICAL HEALTHCARE.
- **887** PEOPLE ATTENDED TECHNOLOGY CLASSES USING POWERON DEVICES.
- **889** INDIVIDUALS USED POWERON DEVICES TO ACCESS EMERGENCY SERVICES.
- **2448** INDIVIDUALS ENGAGED IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT USING THE GRANTED TECHNOLOGY.

PATHS PROGRAM

PATHS aims to inspire and empower LGBTQ+ youth and young adults interested in careers in STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics) through grants, mentorship opportunities, and a web series featuring interviews with LGBTQ+ STEAM professionals. In encouraging the pursuit of STEAM careers, PATHS not only helps bridge the digital divide for LGBTQ+ youth, but nurtures technology professionals' ability to create and impact with inclusivity and community in mind.

To date, PATHS has provided $171,322 in education grants to 40 LGBTQ+ students in STEAM fields; had 65 mentee participants in the PATHS Mentorship Program; and received over 61,400 views of PATHS interview content. Representation of LGBTQ+ workers and equitable and empowering workplaces in the tech industry and STEAM fields at large is an essential piece of bridging the digital divide for the LGBTQ+ community.[53]

DURING 2023:

53% OF GRANTEES REPORTED THAT WITHOUT THE PATHS STEAM EDUCATIONAL GRANT THEY WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN ABLE TO PARTICIPATE IN THEIR EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM.

94% OF GRANTEES REPORTED THAT THE PATHS STEAM EDUCATIONAL GRANT RELIEVED FINANCIAL STRESS FOR THEM.

88% OF MENTEES REPORTED THAT THE PATHS MENTORSHIP PROGRAM ENABLED THEM TO GROW THEIR PROFESSIONAL NETWORK.

89% OF GRANTEES REPORTED THAT THEY GAINED NEW SKILLS AND/OR KNOWLEDGE THROUGH THE PATHS MENTORSHIP PROGRAM

78% OF GRANTEES REPORTED THAT AFTER 12 MONTHS OF PARTICIPATION IN THE PATHS PROGRAM THEY FELT INCREASED LEVELS OF CONFIDENCE IN THEIR STEAM SUBJECT MATTER.

95% OF PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS REPORTED THAT PATHS PROVIDED THEM WITH COMMUNITY AND SAFE SPACE TO NAVIGATE THEIR STEAM EDUCATION AND CAREER GOALS.

80% OF PARTICIPANTS WERE EMPLOYED UPON GRADUATION FROM THE PROGRAM, 83% OF WHICH WERE EMPLOYED WITHIN STEAM FIELDS.

DIGITAL NAVIGATOR PROGRAM

In 2023, LGBT Tech introduced our trailblazing **Digital Navigator Program**. The program was designed from our years of experience working closely with LGBTQ+ organizations and community members to understand their needs, and takes our approach to bridging the digital divide for the LGBTQ+ community to the next level. In addition to providing crucial access to devices through PowerOn, our Digital Navigator program provides the education and resources necessary to ensure community members stay connected and engage in digital safety best practices.[54]

AFFORDABLE CONNECTIVITY

Recognizing the urgency of providing the LGBTQ+ community with affordable, consistent internet service, we initially launched our new Digital Navigator Program focused on providing resources and training about the FCC's Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) to the LGBTQ+ community. Through our research we found that over 8 million LGBTQ+ households in the US may be struggling to access affordable internet.

To support LGBTQ+ community enrollment in the ACP, through our Digital Navigator program we trained 12 LGBTQ+ organizations, spanning across 12 states and territories, and held a series of training events about the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), with an identified total potential reach of 513,113 LGBTQ+ individuals.

DIGITAL LITERACY AND ONLINE SAFETY

Cyber Safety Guidebook: A free cyber safety guidebook designed for LGBTQ+ centers and organizations to safeguard their organizations, clients, and communities online. The guidebook includes templates and worksheets to help LGBTQ+ centers of all sizes and budgets develop basic cybersecurity related policies and procedures.

Digital Skills Online Resource Hub: An online resource library with tools, information, and activities related to digital skills development for LGBTQ+ individuals of all ages, including pre-made curriculum and activities that LGBTQ+ organizations can use to promote digital literacy skills for their clients.

By working to increase equitable access to technology, ensuring that community members are equipped with knowledge of how to stay safe online, and empowering LGBTQ+ professionals in STEAM fields, LGBT Tech's programmatic work takes a holistic approach to bridging the digital divide for the LGBTQ+ community. As the reliance on technology to participate in everyday life grows, we see a corresponding increase in the demand for our community resources. At LGBT Tech, we are committed to scaling our programs to meet the ever-growing needs of our community when it comes to the digital divide. Support for our programmatic work contributes to providing educational grants, educational resources, safe community spaces, and putting technology directly into the hands of the LGBTQ+ community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

LGBT Tech cannot close the digital divide alone, and we invite policymakers and industry leaders to join us in our work to create equitable access for all. The following are a series of recommendations designed to bridge the digital divide for LGBTQ+ individuals and other marginalized communities. Each recommendation aims to tackle a specific barrier that hinders access to technology, whether it be lack of connectivity, devices, skills, or affordability, and provides actionable steps to close these gaps. By addressing these components, policymakers and industry leaders can work together to create a more equitable digital landscape, ensuring that LGBTQ+ individuals have the tools, resources, and opportunities to thrive in today's digital world.

FUNDING DIGITAL INCLUSION PROGRAMS

To bridge the digital divide and promote digital equity, **funding digital inclusion programs is essential.** One recent critical funding stream for such initiatives is the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) program, established under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act to help expand broadband access across underserved areas, particularly rural and low-income communities where connectivity is most lacking.[55] It ensures that necessary infrastructure is put in place to bring high-speed internet to those who need it most, including LGBTQ+ individuals in isolated regions.

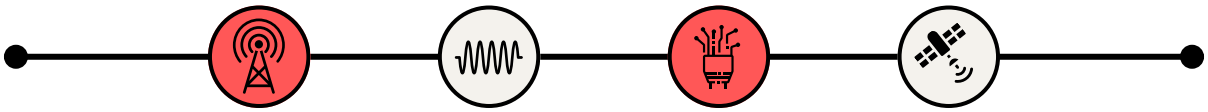
The Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), which recently lapsed, played a vital role in helping low-income households stay connected.[56] The statistics speak for themselves: 50% of participants used ACP to apply for jobs or complete work at their jobs, 72% relied on it for telehealth, and 75% of those aged 18-24 used it for schoolwork. Alarmingly, without ACP, 77% of participants reported they would either lose the internet they gained through the program or be forced to cut other essential parts of their budget to maintain access. Before ACP, 68% of these individuals had no or limited connectivity, with 80% citing cost as the main barrier.[57] It is imperative that policymakers **re-fund ACP** to prevent a reversal of the gains made in digital inclusion.

The Universal Service Fund (USF) is another cornerstone of digital equity efforts, providing essential support for telecommunications services in low-income and rural areas.[58] **Ensuring the continued strength and reach of the USF** is vital for maintaining and expanding access to affordable, reliable internet for all, including marginalized LGBTQ+ communities. Additionally, **comprehensive and accurate broadband mapping** is necessary to identify and target areas most in need of support, ensuring that resources are deployed effectively and equitably.[59]

IMPROVING BROADBAND INFRASTRUCTURE

Improving broadband infrastructure and removing unnecessary barriers to rapid deployment is crucial for providing reliable internet access to all, especially in rural and underserved areas. A robust and modern infrastructure ensures that everyone, including LGBTQ+ individuals, can benefit from high-speed internet. Policymakers must **ensure the FCC has the authority to efficiently allocate spectrum through regular auctions**, a key factor in enhancing wireless connectivity.[60] Additionally, policymakers should **continue and expand funding for infrastructure projects**, such as those supported by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, to accelerate broadband deployment in rural and underserved areas.

Industry plays a vital role in expanding and upgrading broadband infrastructure and should **prioritize investments** not only in networks and technologies that offer more reliable internet service but particularly those benefiting underserved areas where connectivity is currently inadequate. **Partnering with local governments** to identify areas in need and streamline the deployment of new infrastructure ensures that projects are completed efficiently and effectively, and developing plans to maintain and upgrade existing infrastructure to meet increasing demand ensures long-term reliability.



ENSURING AFFORDABLE ACCESS

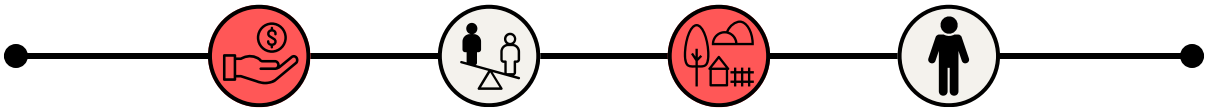
Affordable access to high-speed internet is a cornerstone of digital equity. For many low-income households, including LGBTQ+ individuals, the cost of internet service can be a significant barrier. Ensuring that high-speed internet is affordable for everyone is essential for bridging the digital divide and promoting inclusive growth. Policymakers should implement policies that ensure high-speed internet is affordable and accessible to all, primarily by **supporting and expanding subsidy programs** like the ACP.[61] **Providing additional funding for community initiatives** that help low-income individuals access affordable internet services and digital devices can further enhance affordability.

Industry should develop strategies to make high-speed internet more affordable for low-income customers. **Implementing tiered pricing models** can offer a range of service plans at different price points, and **collaborating with community organizations** for the provision of services and to provide awareness of subsidy programs can help more individuals benefit from affordable internet access.

AVOIDING DISPARATE IMPACT

Ensuring that efforts to improve digital access do not inadvertently disadvantage certain groups is crucial for achieving digital equity. Policymakers and industry leaders must work together to design and implement policies and programs that are inclusive and equitable, considering the unique needs of different communities, including LGBTQ+ individuals. Policymakers should **conduct impact assessments before rolling out new initiatives** that can help identify and address potential disparities proactively. In addition, they should **create and maintain programs specifically targeting low-income individuals**, ensuring that they have affordable access to essential digital services. Engaging with community leaders from marginalized groups can provide insights into their specific needs and challenges.

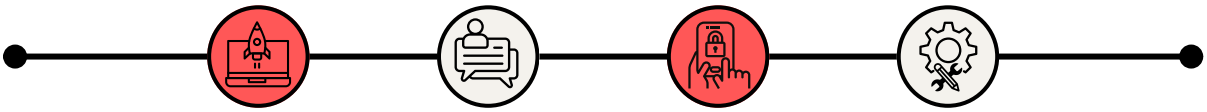
Industry leaders should adopt inclusive practices to avoid creating or perpetuating disparities in digital access. **Implementing diversity and inclusion training for employees** can foster a culture that prioritizes respect, and **regularly monitoring and evaluating the impact of business practices** on different communities can help identify and address inequities, ensuring equitable outcomes for all.



PROMOTING DIGITAL LITERACY

Promoting digital literacy is essential for empowering LGBTQ+ individuals and other marginalized groups to fully leverage the opportunities provided by digital access. Policymakers should invest in comprehensive digital literacy programs that provide training and resources tailored to the needs of different communities. **Funding educational institutions and community centers** to develop and implement digital literacy curricula can address the specific needs of their communities. **Encouraging public-private partnerships** with tech companies to provide access to the latest tools and technologies ensures that training programs are both relevant and up-to-date.

Industry leaders should support digital literacy initiatives by providing resources, training, and support to underserved communities. **Developing mentoring and support networks** that connect experienced mentors with individuals seeking to improve their digital skills can offer guidance and encouragement. **Collaborating with community leaders and educational institutions** to integrate digital literacy training into their outreach or curricula ensures their networks can be better equipped for our digital world.



CONCLUSION

Access to digital resources is not just a convenience in today's interconnected world—it is a fundamental necessity, especially for LGBTQ+ individuals seeking to overcome barriers and achieve full inclusion in society. Digital equity is critical for enabling LGBTQ+ individuals to access education, healthcare, employment, and social support networks that are essential for their well-being and empowerment.

While significant progress has been made through increased investments in broadband infrastructure, innovative digital inclusion programs, and more inclusive policies, the journey toward true digital equity is far from complete. Many LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly those in rural, low-income, and marginalized communities, still face significant obstacles. The high cost of devices, limited internet connectivity, and a lack of comprehensive digital literacy programs continue to perpetuate these disparities.

Achieving digital equity demands a sustained and multifaceted approach that directly addresses the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals. Ensuring affordable access to high-speed internet, expanding digital literacy initiatives, and enacting inclusive policies are not just recommended steps—they are essential. It is also crucial to design and implement programs that prevent digital discrimination and thoughtfully consider the intersectional challenges faced by LGBTQ+ communities.

LGBT Tech remains a committed partner in this ongoing effort, but the task requires collaboration across all sectors. By working together—policymakers, industry leaders, and organizations like LGBT Tech—we can ensure and enshrine opportunities for LGBTQ+ individuals to fully participate in and benefit from our increasingly digital world.

The path forward is clear: through targeted action and inclusive practices, we can bridge the digital divide and ensure that no one is left behind.

LGBT TECH

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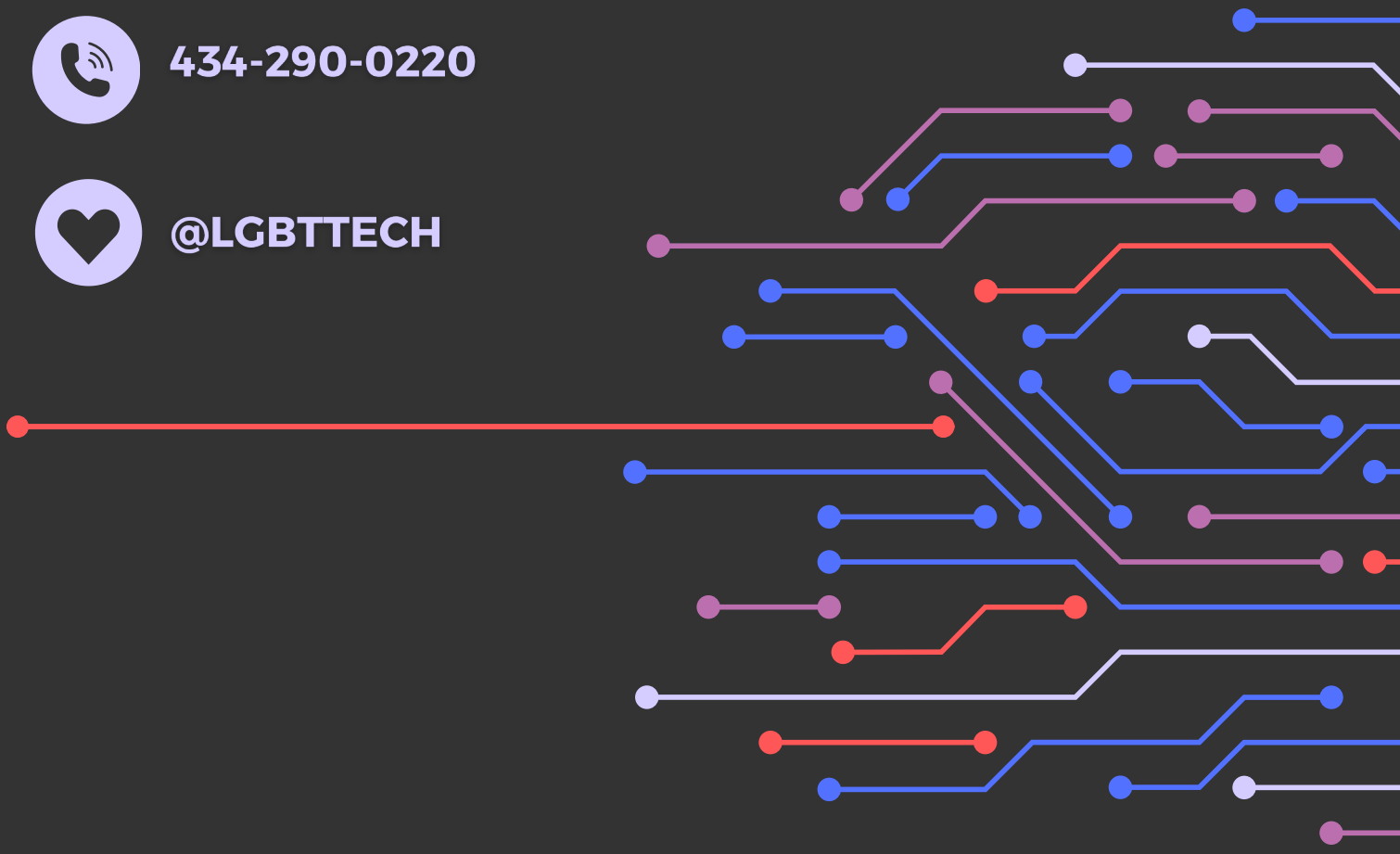

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