

Focus Groups with Low-Income Residents

Technology & Digital Services Needs

In June and July 2022, Wilder Research conducted three focus groups in Anoka, Dakota, and Hennepin counties with low-income residents about their experience with and interest in technology and digital services at the library. The research was funded by Metropolitan Library Service Agency (MELSA), and will be used by its eight member library systems to improve technology and digital services provided by the library. While the intent was to conduct eight focus groups across the metropolitan region, we were unable to recruit participants for the other five groups. Feedback from focus groups does not represent the technology needs of other residents. Participants were asked to complete a brief demographic survey following the focus group; a description of participants is provided with the summary of each groups' themes. The focus group questions and demographic survey are included in the Appendix.

Key findings

Common themes across the three groups include:

- **Participants most need reliable, stable, and fast internet for the many activities they conduct online.** Many have internet access at home or access the internet via their smartphones. The library is a key resource for many others, who either do not have internet access at home, want to work on a bigger screen, or appreciate the high-speed internet that is available at the library. Some participants said they use library computers because they perceive them to be more secure than working at home or via their smartphones.
- **Participants want physical spaces to use technology at the library.** More computers or dedicated computer labs may be warranted to increase services, especially in areas with a higher proportion of low-income residents. Participants noted that computers are often being used at capacity, so that having more computers available would be helpful. Others noted that dedicated computer labs staffed with IT experts would be helpful so they have someone on hand to address technology questions immediately. Parents also expressed a desire for enclosed workspaces where they can work on computers with their children present without disrupting others, and others seek spaces to conduct work and fill out forms privately.
- **Participants appreciate and want technology training and support from the library.** Some participants expressed interest in training and tips for protecting their data and data privacy and security. Others are interested in more in-depth, niche training around audio visual creation. There was a smaller group of focus group participants that expressed interest in more technical training around music and videos, including editing.
- **The library has a vast amount of technology and digital services that many participants were not aware of, including hot spots, tablets, and staff support.** Not all participants were aware of existing resources, so some increased promotion of existing resources would help ensure patrons are aware of what's available.

Anoka County virtual focus group

Participants were recruited in partnership with the Anoka County Community Action Partnership (CAP). Eight Anoka County residents and one Anoka County CAP staff member attended a virtual session. Eight attendees were women identifying as African American or White, and one identified as a Black man. Eight participants reported annual incomes between \$30,000 and \$65,000, with one participant noting a higher income. Based on their reported household income and household size, Wilder estimates that four of the attendees are between 150-250% of the Federal Poverty Guideline (FPG) and one is between 200-300% FPG. [Note: not all participants shared their income information.] These attendees primarily use the Anoka, Coon Rapids, Northtown, and Rum River libraries.

General technology use. Those in attendance primarily access the internet from work, home, or from their phone. While some use the library, others have not been to the library since the start of the pandemic. They also reported doing “everything” online, including banking, appointments, and shopping. As one person noted, “You can do anything online,” even buy a car. Participants in this focus group largely agreed they most need stable internet access, primarily for doing school work, and were interested in the library’s hotspot lending so they could access the internet from anywhere (e.g., car, park). One parent, though, needs help monitoring their kids’ devices.

Making sure we have stable internet at all times – my kids do school work from home so having that stable internet is really important.

Library technology use. Participants primarily reported using the library printers. A few mentioned using the computers at the library for their children to research and draft written assignments or borrowing tablets to use the learning apps. The main barriers participants reported to accessing library technology were not having their library card with them or getting timed out of the computers. In these cases, participants acknowledged that library staff does support patrons in using the available technology. A few people felt there are not enough computers or tablets.

There are times where I have gone to do homework or research [and] they give you an hour to use it. You can always renew the time but it’s a little short, especially when you are focused in what you are doing. It needs to be extended longer than the initial time they give you.

Additional needs. Participants gave a variety of responses to how the library can improve technology and digital services, including having a separate parents’ area where children can play while they use the internet, providing internet safety workshops or resources and more information about existing resources (e.g., quiet workspaces and hotspots), and offering extended library hours.

A lot of people don’t know about library resources – they should send more flyers out to parents with the kids so they will know what the library can provide for families and the community.

Dakota County in-person focus group

Dakota County Library staff recruited individuals from within the library. Ten Dakota County residents attended an in-person session at the Wentworth Library in West Saint Paul. Nine attendees were racially diverse women and one identified as a White man. All participants speak English at home. They reported annual household incomes of less than \$50,000. Wilder estimates six are living at or below 175% FPG. These participants reported using the Wentworth, South Saint Paul, Inver Glen, West Saint Paul, Eagan, and Inver Grove Heights libraries.

General technology use. Those in attendance primarily access the internet from their smartphones or at the library, though a few reported having computers and Internet access at home. Comfort with technology varied greatly, with some participants saying they are “100% comfortable doing just about anything” to others saying they “don’t know how to do none of that stuff.”

I typically use my phone. I have a smart phone, but if I’m doing a lot of files, I’ll come [to the library] and jump on library Wi-Fi. I have 5G but it’s slow for files. I’ll also come here to update my phone because [the update file is] large.

Library technology use. Participants reported coming to the library in order to access the high speed internet that is available. They also use library scanners, printers, and copiers. A few people noted the library staff’s welcoming and friendly attitudes, and that encourages them to use the library over other resources. A parent reported the online library resources are great for their children. The occasional technology issue or all the computers being in use prevents patrons from accessing library technology resources.

The one thing I wanted to come here to make sure [to share that] I like about the library that is a really excellent feature is that you feel welcome.

We utilize the online [resources] being able to check out books and audio books without having to set foot in the library. I mean I love coming here, but this season of my life I’m very, very busy and so that’s a wonderful thing.

Additional needs. Participants expressed that they may not know about all the resources available, so some additional communication would be helpful. Others would like more training or resources on protecting your virtual data, or “how to” manuals for using computers, email, [Microsoft] Word and Excel software, and cell phones for older adults. A few expressed interest in multi-media creation and editing, including movies and music. A few felt easier access into the building for people with canes or wheelchairs are needed. Another person mentioned the desire for more cubicles or semi-private spaces to conduct online activities (e.g., filling out government forms with personal information).

They need to do more PR work to inform the residents of what they can take advantage of at the library. What we have here is a failure to communicate.

Minneapolis in-person focus group

Ten Minneapolis residents attended a focus group at the Central Library. Hennepin County's broadband and digital inclusion office recruited participants. Eight attendees were men identifying as African American, White or American Indian, and two identified as White women. Five participants were very low income (less than \$10,000 per year); three reported annual incomes of up to \$15,000 to \$65,000. Wilder estimates seven are living at or below 150% FPG. Nine of the participants primarily use the Minneapolis Central Library and one person reported using the North Regional Library.

General technology use. Focus group participants reported having internet at home and accessing the internet from their phones or laptops. In addition to their personal devices, about half reported using the library to access the internet. Participants access the internet for a variety of reasons: school work and learning new skills, downloading music, online banking, job searching, day trading and stock research, searching for housing, watching videos, and social media. A few people also noted that, especially during the pandemic, they have been able to attend recovery or anger management classes online. While many felt comfortable doing a variety of activities online, a few people expressed security concerns, especially around online banking. Residents noted a need for training on both basic internet use and specialized computer workshops (e.g., budgeting or music production).

Library technology use. Some participants reported using the libraries for printing and faxes, while others noted that access to computers was critical when they were unhoused. A few had checked out laptops. Many said that the content restrictions was a barrier to using library computers. Others noted the lack of kid-oriented spaces prevented them or their families from accessing the library technology more.

I was homeless and I used the internet here a lot and I was able to get some resumes printed out and get connected with some jobs. Having those resources and not having any money was a life saver and it helped me get back on my feet and get some traction.

Additional needs. Participants suggested a media floor or technology lab where patrons can come to get training on technology, such as basic internet use or specialized skills like music production. Some noted a lack of computers, so more computers or computers dedicated for specific tasks (e.g., job searching/work-related tasks, entertainment) would be appreciated. Parents also noted wanting a dedicated space to work on computers with toys available for their children to stay occupied. Private spaces where people could participate in telehealth sessions would be appreciated by some.

Appendix

A. Focus group protocol

Focus group questions for MELSA Library Technology and Digital Services Assessment

Welcome! Thank you for joining us today. My name is _____ and I work for Wilder Research. We are a mission-driven, nonprofit research organization located in St. Paul. I will lead today's conversation and _____ is here to take notes.

The purpose of today's conversation is to learn about your experience with and interest in technology and digital services at the library. Libraries in the Twin Cities are working with Wilder Research to host the listening sessions. We are specifically interested in talking to Twin Cities residents who may not have access to technology at home, including internet or WiFi, or computers and laptops.

The libraries are committed to learning from people that use or could benefit from their services and will use what they learn from these discussions to improve their technology and digital services to better meet people's needs.

Before we get started, I'd like to propose a few guidelines to follow for this discussion:

- This is meant to be a discussion. I have a set of questions to guide the conversation, but please feel free to listen and comment on what people are saying. For the sake of time and because we want to ask you about a variety of things, I may have to respectfully interrupt you to move on to another topic.
- There are no right or wrong answers. You are the experts of your own experience and that is what we're interested in hearing about today. We encourage you to talk to each other. This is not a group interview. We also ask that you be respectful of the thoughts and opinions of others. Our intent is to get different perspectives and points of view. Please take turns so everyone gets a chance to talk. You also do not have to answer all of the questions.
- Refrain from repeating what you hear in this conversation outside of this group. To maintain confidentiality, when we report what we learned in from this conversation, we will do so by summarizing what was shared without including names or identifying anyone.
- Finally, we want this to be a safe space for you to share your experience to the extent you feel comfortable, and we encourage you to do whatever you need to take of yourself, whether that's taking a break or getting a glass of water, whatever you need. It is also okay to not answer any questions you would prefer not to answer.

Your participation in this focus group will in no way affect current or future services that you receive from the library or any other agencies. We will be putting together a summary of what we hear in these discussions for the library. We may use some direct quotes from this conversation, but will not include your name or anything that would identify you personally.

We would like to record today's discussion in case we miss anything in the notes. The recording will be deleted after the notes are finalized. Is that okay with everyone? [Click the "recording" button if consent is obtained]

Are there any questions before we begin? Okay, let's get started. (* are highest priority)

Opening:

1. To get started, let's go around, please share your first name, and what city you live in.

[NOTETAKER SHOULD CHECK THE ATTENDANCE LIST AND MARK THE NAMES OF PEOPLE WHO ATTENDED TO ENSURE THOSE PEOPLE GET THEIR COMPENSATION]

General technology questions:

2. *(make this a round robin question for everyone) Where do you most frequently access the internet and technology? [Probe: if not at home or on a smartphone, where?]
3. Now I have a few questions about how comfortable you feel about using technology. Some examples include: banking, job searching, accessing information about your child's education, socializing with others.
 - a. What tasks do you feel most comfortable completing on a computer?
 - b. What do you wish you could do on a computer that you can't do now?
4. *What do you see as the 2-3 biggest technology needs for you or your family?

Library technology questions:

[DEFINE WHAT WE MEAN BY LIBRARY TECHNOLOGY AND DIGITAL SERVICES]

5. * What technology or digital services have you or others in your household used at the library that have been really helpful to you or family?
6. *What prevents you from using the technology or digital services that are available at the library?
7. *How can the library make these more accessible? What would make you want to use them?
8. What other technology or digital services would you like to see available at the library that would help make your life easier?
9. Does anyone have anything they want to add that we did not talk about today?

[FOLLOWUP WITH BRIEF DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY SO WE KNOW WHO PARTICIPATED]

Those are all of the questions I have for today. We will pass out \$50 checks now as a thank you for your time today.

B. MELSA Demographic Survey for Focus Groups

Thank you participating in this focus group! The following is a short survey to learn more about you. Filling out this survey is optional. Your responses to these questions will be kept anonymous and will be grouped together with those of other people who participated in the focus group. Information from this survey will be used to better understand who participated in the focus group.

1. What is your age?

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> ¹ 12-17 | <input type="checkbox"/> ⁶ 55-64 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ² 18-24 | <input type="checkbox"/> ⁷ 65-74 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ³ 25-34 | <input type="checkbox"/> ⁸ 75 and over |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ⁴ 35-44 | <input type="checkbox"/> ⁹ I don't want to answer this question |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ⁵ 45-54 | |

2. What is your gender identity?

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> ¹ Female | <input type="checkbox"/> ⁴ Self-identify (note if you wish _____) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ² Male | <input type="checkbox"/> ⁵ I don't want to answer this question |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ³ Non-binary | |

3. Which of the following describes you? (**Check all that apply.**)

- ¹ Black or African American
- ² African native, including Oromo, Somali, Ethiopian, etc.
- ³ Asian, including Southeast Asian
- ⁴ Hispanic or Latino
- ⁵ American Indian
- ⁶ White or Caucasian
- ⁷ Another race or ethnic group (note if you wish _____)
- ⁸ I don't want to answer this question

4. What language(s) do you speak most at home? (**Check all that apply.**)

- ¹ English
- ² Hmong
- ³ Karen
- ⁴ Spanish
- ⁵ Somali
- ⁶ Another language (note if you wish _____)
- ⁷ I don't want to answer this question

5. What was your annual household income in 2021?

- ¹ Less than \$10,000
- ² \$10,000 to under \$15,000
- ³ \$15,000 to under \$25,000
- ⁴ \$25,000 to under \$35,000
- ⁵ \$35,000 to under \$50,000
- ⁶ \$50,000 to under \$65,000
- ⁷ \$65,000 to under \$80,000
- ⁸ \$80,000 to under \$100,000
- ⁹ \$100,000 and over
- ¹⁰ I'm not sure
- ¹¹ I don't want to answer this question

6. How many people does this income support? (including yourself) _____

7. Which public library or libraries do you use most often?

8. Please complete the information below so we can mail you your \$50 check.

Name (First and Last)	
Street address	
City	
Zip code	

The mailing information you provide will not be connected to your survey responses and will only be used to mail you your check. If you do not receive a check or have questions about it, please contact Anna Granias at anna.granias@wilder.org or 651-208-7598.

Thank you for your responses!

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