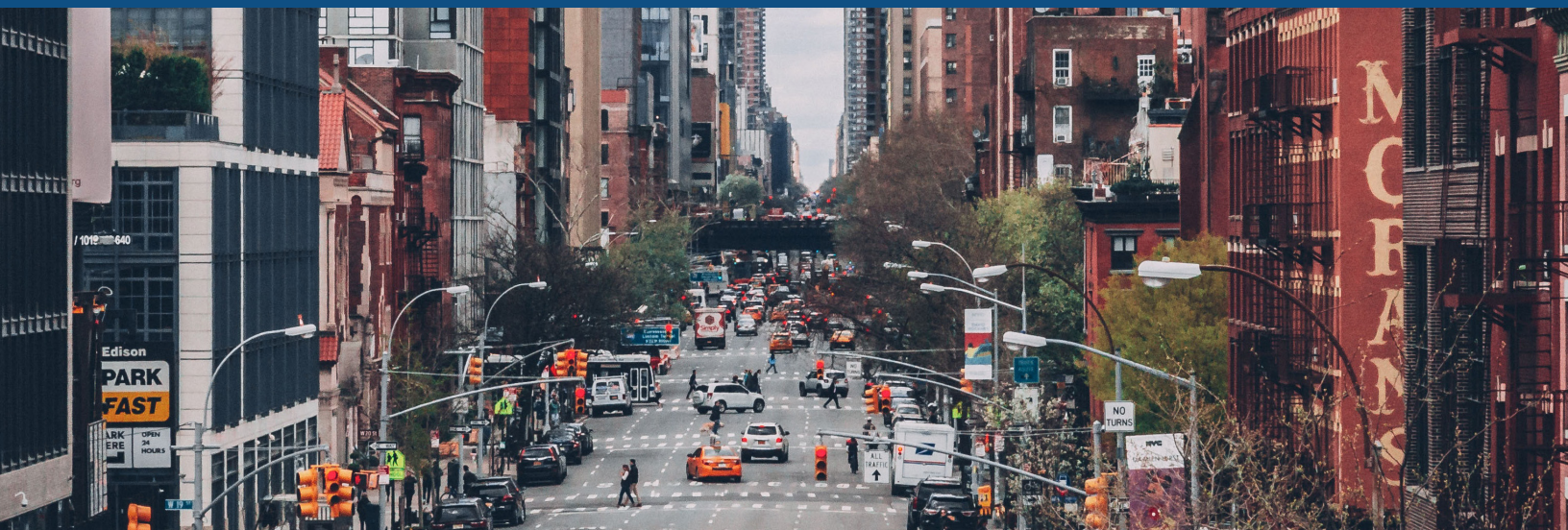




Best Practices Guide: Coalition Building



1. Introduction

Collaboration is one of the cornerstones of the ConnectHomeUSA program. Successful ConnectHomeUSA programs have found innovative ways to bring partners to the table, engage them meaningfully and as a result, build sustainable programming to benefit residents. Building a strong local coalition is the next step and sets the foundation for both a successful and sustainable ConnectHomeUSA program. Public Housing Agencies (PHAs) provide essential leadership in narrowing the digital divide and can be the catalyst for creating a coalition with their public and private partners. When PHAs and their partners join forces to create a coalition they help each other assess options, fill gaps, and ultimately implement sustainable solutions together.

In this **Best Practices Guide** you will find information on key topics related to coalition building:

- What does coalition-building mean and why is it important to your ConnectHomeUSA program?
- Tips for successful coalition building;
- A chart of digital inclusion coalitions across the country to help you get inspired; and
- Two case studies from ConnectHomeUSA communities.

2. What Is Coalition Building and Why Is it Important to Your ConnectHomeUSA Program?

- Bringing partners together to form a coalition is an effective strategy to strengthen your work and have a longer-lasting impact.
- Coalitions demonstrate that there is community-wide interest in solving a problem, which conveys to local policymakers that the issue is important.
- Coalitions represent the collective voice of a variety of groups who are all trying to solve a particular problem. Coalitions can advocate on behalf of a specific issue and encourage policymakers to pay attention and ultimately, become an ally to your cause.
- The digital inclusion space has been growing rapidly; PHAs and their partners have an opportunity to harness this momentum to build coalitions to support this work.

Photos: Courtesy of Pexels under the Pexels 'free to use' License.

3. Tips for Successful Coalition Building

ConnectHomeUSA can be a catalyst for building local digital inclusion coalitions. The ConnectHomeUSA communities that have either created or joined digital inclusion coalitions have gained partners, allies in advocacy, and additional resources to help implement successful programs. This section provides key strategies and tips for successful coalition-building that are informed by ConnectHomeUSA communities. In general, there are the three basic stages to building a coalition which are outlined below:

STAGE 1: Short-term | Getting Started

- **Do Your Homework.** Before starting something new, look at your local landscape. See if there already is a coalition for digital inclusion efforts in your area. If there is a group already formed, get involved and participate!
- **Talk to People in Your Network.** If a local coalition does not exist and you decide to start one, talk to your partners and others in your network to obtain their input and support. Framing the benefits of having a new coalition will be key to bringing people in.
- **Hold an Event or Convening.** Many of the initial steps in forming digital inclusion coalitions began at ConnectHomeUSA convenings. Bringing people together is often the best way to find partners who share the same passion for digital inclusion.
- **Identify Your Core Team.** Many coalitions start with conversations among colleagues who share the same commitment to a cause. Building a new coalition can be time intensive, so it is important to have a strong working relationship with your core team. Your core team may initially just be two people. Having a “quarterback” to champion and lead this effort is critical.
- **Research and Learn from Other Digital Inclusion Coalitions.** There are digital inclusion coalitions all across the country, and many are happy to share their experience. A few are highlighted in the chart below. No two are the same, but it could be helpful to learn about how they got started and the work they are doing. Don’t forget to check in with your local HUD ConnectHomeUSA staff to see if they know of any local coalitions. See the Action Plan Toolkit and Playbook Chapter 1 “Getting Started” for more information about assembling your Core Planning Team.

Getting Started

The National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) prepared a [Toolkit](#) on how to start a Digital Inclusion Coalition.

Check out the basics of starting a coalition with this resource from the [Community Tool Box](#)

- **Hold an Initial Meeting.** After you have conducted your research, and gauged interest, bring people together who expressed interest in joining your efforts to discuss what your coalition could accomplish. This first meeting may just be a few people and that's ok.
- **Define Goals.** Get feedback from your partners about why a digital inclusion coalition matters to them and their work. Asking these questions will help you define the goals and mission of the group. Do you want to raise money? Do you want to achieve a specific policy outcome?
- **Establish Roles and Structure.** When bringing people together to build something new, it is important to have a structure. A very effective approach to coalition-building is the [Collective Impact](#) model which relies on coordinating many actors around a common goal with one entity serving as the lead.
- **Set Expectations.** You are bringing together partners who may not normally work together. Be clear and upfront about expectations of time, effort, and resources so your partners can plan ahead. Keeping open lines of communications is also important to your coalition's success.
- **Hold Consistent Meetings.** At the outset it is important to maintain momentum, holding regular meetings will help with this. Members generally have other commitments, so having regularly scheduled meetings with an agenda, a note taker, and follow-up tasks is important. Some coalitions set up monthly calls, virtual or in-person meetings; many establish sub-committees which may meet more frequently.

STAGE 3: Long-term | Building Momentum and Launching the Coalition

- **Formalize Your Mission.** Formalize your new coalition's goals, operating structure, and mission. This may be done through a set of by-laws, a Memorandum of Understanding, or a less formal shared document.
- **Build in Flexibility.** For long-term sustainability, it is important that the coalition be able to adapt and evolve as needs and leadership change. For some coalitions, it is important to establish a legal entity such as a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) nonprofit or, in the absence of this, to identify a fiduciary agent. When crafting your coalition's mission and goals, make sure decision-making authority is clear so there is a shared understanding of who is responsible for critical decisions that could impact the coalition.
- **Announce Your Coalition.** Once your coalition has been established, you may wish to issue a press release, hold a media event, and/or inform local government officials. Check out the [ConnectHomeUSA Media Toolkit and Guide](#) for tips on engaging media.

Hear from Practitioners

Visit HUD Exchange to hear from two ConnectHomeUSA communities on strategies and best practices for [Launching a Strong Digital Inclusion Program](#). The slide deck and webinar recording are both great resources.

Check out the [NDIA 2020 Net Inclusions Webinar](#) series which includes a feature on coalition building. Learn from practitioners across the country about how they support digital inclusion coalitions.

Getting Inspired | Digital Inclusion Coalition Chart

Building a digital inclusion coalition can take time, but there are many ways to organize and structure your effort. Check out how some other communities – both from the ConnectHomeUSA world and outside – have built and maintained digital inclusion coalitions.

Community	Type	Coalition Name	About
Jersey City, NJ	2018 CHUSA Community	Digital Inclusion Practitioners of New Jersey	The objective of the group is to bring together digital inclusion practitioners to workshop digital inclusion issues, network with other practitioners and stakeholders, share informational resources across organizations and build a culture of digital inclusion in New Jersey. Check out our in-depth case study below for more information about this coalition.
San Antonio, TX	2015 Pilot CH Community	San Antonio Digital Inclusion Coalition	This coalition, made up of public and private organizations, is dedicated to advancing digital inclusion to foster educational attainment, competitive employment, financial prosperity, and greater community engagement for all residents. Membership includes over 30 organizations and 60+ people from non-profits, governmental entities, businesses, public education systems, higher education systems, internet service providers, and media outlets. Check out our in-depth case study below for more information about this coalition.
Baltimore, MD	2015 Pilot CH Community	Baltimore Digital Equity Coalition	The coalition is composed of 50+ local organizations. The coalition uses the Collective Impact Model and is organized around a common agenda, shared metrics, mutually reinforcing activities, and continuous communication. The coalition serves as a backbone organization focused on helping the city maximize resources.
Kansas City, MO	2015 Pilot CH Community	Kansas City Coalition for Digital Inclusion	This coalition is governed by a steering council and includes 200+ members who represent dozens of entities across several industries including nonprofits, independent community members, neighborhood associations, government agencies, and private businesses.

Community	Type	Coalition Name	About
Philadelphia, PA	2015 Pilot CH Community	<u>Technology Learning Collaborative</u>	This collaborative promotes professional collaboration, training, and networking among organizations and institutions that have a dedicated interest in digital inclusion. It has over 300 members, hosts an annual conference and offers members professional development workshops.
Charlotte, NC	2017 CHUSA Community	<u>Charlotte Digital Inclusion Alliance</u>	The ongoing work of the alliance is guided by their <u>2017 Playbook</u> . The goal of the Alliance is to reduce the digital divide in the county from 19% to 9% by 2026. The Alliance is comprised of community stakeholders and organizations, including 12 entities that provide social services to residents to address inequality, poverty, and digital access across the county.
Portland, OR	2017 CHUSA Community	<u>Portland/Multnomah County Digital Inclusion Network</u>	This network is a coalition of 60+ community organizations interested in raising awareness about digital equity barriers and developing solutions to bridging the digital divide. The network is guided by their <u>2016 Digital Equity Action Plan</u> framework. The network is the place for public agencies, businesses, and community nonprofits to work together to achieve the plan's goals.
Franklin County, OH	Best Practice	<u>Franklin County Digital Equity Coalition</u>	The coalition started as an informal gathering of organizations, and grew into a formal group of business, government, education, nonprofit and social sector representatives. The steering committee of 10 entities guides the 20+ member group to implement the 2021 Franklin County Digital Equity Coalition Framework.
Austin, TX	Mentor Community	<u>Digital Empowerment Community of Austin</u>	This coalition is a network of non-profits, educational institutions, and other stakeholders working to improve the community's low-income residents' ability to participate in digital society. The work of the 80+ community stakeholders is guided by the city's <u>2014 Digital Inclusion Strategic Plan</u> .



Learning More

How are digital inclusion coalitions across the country responding to the triple challenges of the pandemic, growing economic inequality, and racial injustice facing poor communities and communities of color across the country without access to broadband internet at home?

In a November 2020 study, researchers share findings from a survey of individuals representing a diverse group of organizations across the United States that have self-identified as being part of either a formal, informal, or emerging digital inclusion coalition.

Read the research [report](#) from the Benton Institute for Broadband and Society.



Case Study One: Jersey City Housing Authority and the Digital Inclusion Practitioners of New Jersey (DIPNJ)

In Jersey City, a combination of fortunate timing, passionate partners, and a ConnectHomeUSA designation led to the creation of the Digital Inclusion Practitioners of New Jersey (DIPNJ) coalition. In October 2018, HUD announced that the Jersey City Housing Authority (JCHA) was accepted as part of the 2018 cohort of ConnectHomeUSA communities. A few months earlier, the authority established a new department called “Resident Empowerment and Community Engagement,” or RECE, which became the natural home for ConnectHomeUSA activities. JCHA held its first [ConnectHomeUSA convening](#) in November 2018, where JCHA brought together a broad group of organizations including city leadership, local government agencies, the school district, public library and local digital inclusion organizations.



A Digital Inclusion Quarterback Emerges

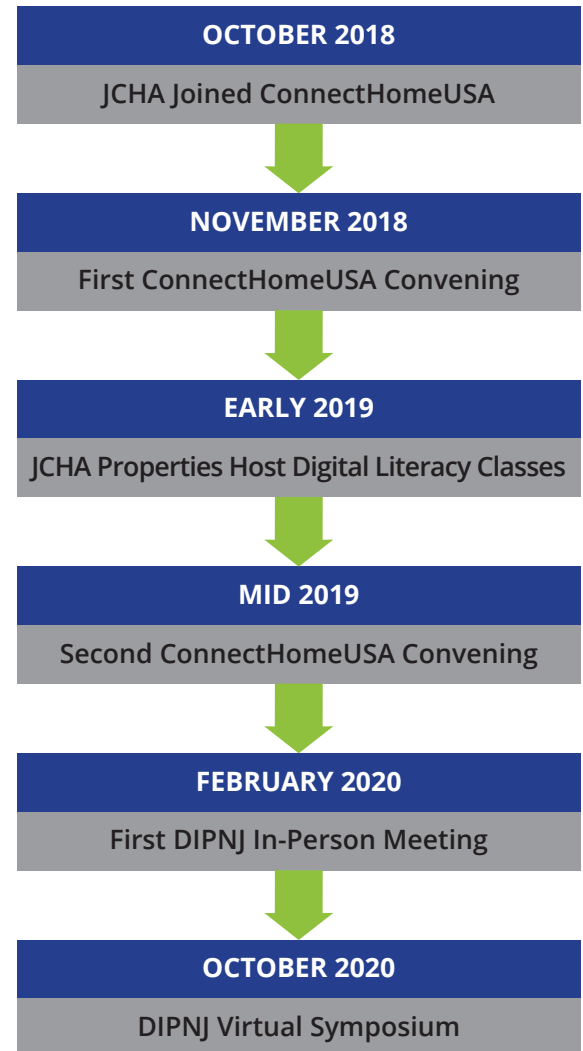
Key to building JCHA's ConnectHomeUSA program was having a dedicated staff member who served as the initiative's champion, or quarterback, from the beginning. JCHA brought on board a Public Policy Fellow from the Leadership for Educational Equity (LEE) program. This staff person quickly became the internal "quarterback" for JCHA's ConnectHomeUSA program, collaborating with RECE leadership to develop a strategic approach for the work which eventually led to bringing the coalition to life.

Building Resident-Centered Programming

During the first half of 2019, JCHA established a partnership with the [Electronic Access Foundation](#) and accepted computer donations from them. The devices were used to set up computer labs at four public housing developments. In turn, the labs became the natural meeting location for digital literacy classes. JCHA partners hosted a dozen digital literacy classes with residents. One partner, [Rising Tide Capital](#), a business academy for entrepreneurs, taught foundational digital literacy skills as part of the class series. It was through this work that JCHA's ConnectHomeUSA lead and Rising Tide Capital's digital literacy trainer connected and developed the idea for a coalition.

Bringing Partners Together

After a year of growing and building a network of partners, JCHA hosted a second convening in mid-2019. This gathering offered a chance to report on survey data JCHA had collected, highlight accomplishments from year one and outline plans for the following year. It was also a chance to obtain stakeholder input and inspire partners to recommit themselves. This gathering also served as a catalyst for launching the coalition. JCHA's ConnectHomeUSA lead and the Rising Tide Capital lead harnessed the momentum garnered from this convening by reaching out to attendees and partners to gauge interest in building a coalition.





Launching a New Coalition

After many conversations, this “labor of love” formally became the [Digital Inclusion Practitioners of New Jersey \(DIPNJ\)](#). By February 2020, the group had held its first in-person meeting. In October 2020, DIPNJ hosted a virtual symposium, similar to the two prior ConnectHomeUSA convenings, which brought together speakers and stakeholders from across the state of New Jersey. As the pandemic restricted in-person gatherings, the young coalition found itself at the center of a new flurry of interest in digital inclusion. DIPNJ quickly became the hub for questions about digital inclusion programs, partners, best practices, and networking. DIPNJ came on the scene at the right time and is now poised to support state-wide digital inclusion efforts.

DIPNJ Coalition’s Framework

- **Leadership Structure:** DIPNJ has several members who serve as Executive Officers who have explicit authority to make key organizational and strategic decisions for the coalition. DIPNJ members nominate candidates during the first two weeks each December, and then vote during the third or fourth week of the following January. The Executive Officers include a Chair, Vice Chair, and General Secretary, along with five Committee Heads: Advocacy/Policy, Digital Inclusion Toolkits and Resources, Events, Communications and Treasury/Incorporation. Executive Officers serve in their roles for one calendar year. For planning and business meetings, DIPNJ uses Robert’s Rules of Order to structure debate and voting.
- **Membership:** There are three criteria necessary in order to be able to join DIPNJ. Members must: 1) live or work in the state of New Jersey, 2) sign a Google Form to affirm the DIPNJ mission and vision, and 3) either attend 50% of meetings/events in the previous calendar year or contribute the equivalent of two hours of volunteer work for DIPNJ per calendar year. Members vote for and nominate Executive Officers. Membership is free.
- **Communication:** DIPNJ members stay connected via a Google group listserv, MailChimp emails from the group’s executive officers, Zoom meetings and the DIPNJ [website](#).



Tips for Building a New Coalition from DIPNJ:

- ❑ **Use Existing Resources:** Tap into your existing network and gauge interest in establishing a coalition. Use the tip checklist above to help you get started. DIPNJ founders relied on the [NDIA Digital Inclusion Coalition Handbook](#) to learn how to start a coalition.
- ❑ **Get Connected:** DIPNJ founders conducted research and emailed the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) listserv to see if a digital inclusion coalition already existed in New Jersey. When it was determined that one did not exist, the founders followed up by asking if NJ-based NDIA members would be interested in joining a new coalition.
- ❑ **Accept Assistance:** In response to this request, other cities and groups reached out to offer advice and input about how to get started. DIPNJ founders spoke with members from the Philadelphia [Technology Learning Collaborative](#) to learn more about how they had set up their coalition. They received key tips about how funding could work, suggestions for how to structure the coalition, and how to balance leading a coalition with other professional responsibilities.
- ❑ **Lean on HUD and Other Housing Authority Networks:** HUD field staff in the Newark, NJ office provided early support by helping the organizers brainstorm, strategize, and connect to other potential coalition members. Networking and finding the right people to talk to was easier due to strong connections between JCHA and HUD field staff. The HUD field office staff was invaluable when going from concept to implementation. Make sure to tap your HUD field office ConnectHomeUSA staff for help!
- ❑ **Establish Decision-Making Authority:** DIPNJ set up an Executive Committee to establish the coalition's mission, maintain momentum, and grow an organization with clear lines of responsibility and communication. Documenting the new organization's structure was also important to establish transparency.
- ❑ **Have an Early Win:** Building momentum is key and having an early win helps solidify commitment. When planning for your early win, it's important to keep projects within scope of current ability, time and financial constraints. This strategy will also make future wins more likely!





Case Study Two: San Antonio Housing Authority and the Digital Inclusion Alliance

The story of the San Antonio Housing Authority's (SAHA) ConnectHome initiative is also the story of the successful creation of a city-wide digital inclusion coalition. The [Digital Inclusion Alliance](#) ("Alliance") is a standalone entity and after six years, plays an integral role in advancing not just SAHA's digital inclusion efforts, but those of the city as well. SAHA leadership's strong commitment to ConnectHome was critical to the success of both their ConnectHome pilot and establishing the coalition. Soon after SAHA launched its ConnectHome initiative in 2015, it became clear that SAHA and the City could benefit from a structured, organized, and coordinated group focused on digital inclusion. SAHA hosted its initial ConnectHome convening in 2015 and asked the invited stakeholders to see where they could help. The partnerships and connections that grew out of the first convening also laid the groundwork for what would become San Antonio's Digital Inclusion Alliance.

Photo: Nan Palmero, 2013 - Attribution 2.0 Generic (CC BY 2.0)



Bringing Partners Together

From the beginning, SAHA's ConnectHome program received critical support from the Mayor's office and other organizations. There was natural synergy between early ConnectHome partners and the initial members of the Alliance. The core team that helped found the Alliance included the City, Goodwill, Google Fiber, T-Mobile, the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, the public library and several smaller organizations. The impetus for building the coalition was twofold. First, since the ConnectHome program was not funded by HUD, it meant they needed to innovate from the start. Second, there was a general understanding that residents across the city needed digital skills and access, but at the time there was no centralized effort underway. The coalition created a common language around digital inclusion, raised awareness, and elevated the issues that needed broad support.

A Digital Inclusion Quarterback Emerges

A key ingredient to both SAHA's ConnectHome success and the success of the coalition was having a full-time staff person manage both projects. In 2016, SAHA hosted a Nonprofit Technology Enterprise Network (NTEN) Google Fiber Digital Inclusion Fellow who was brought on to build the ConnectHome program. A year later, SAHA hired the Fellow as the ConnectHome Program Manager. It was this person who became the digital inclusion quarterback and devoted time to establishing the coalition. SAHA leadership and City staff were very supportive of the early effort to build the coalition. Having their backing, gave the "quarterback" both the credibility and the authority to build the new coalition.

The Program Manager spent about half of her time on coalition building and the other portion on SAHA's ConnectHome initiative. In 2017, SAHA hired a VISTA volunteer, funded by a small HUD grant to support the coalition-building efforts. SAHA asked HUD for permission to use their VISTA specifically for the coalition and to house the position in their partner Goodwill's offices. The VISTA provided the needed staff time to help with nurturing relationships, hosting meetings, setting agendas, and serving as the hub for communication among the partners.





Photo: Nan Palmero, 2013 - Attribution 2.0 Generic (CC BY 2.0)

Starting a New Coalition

A summit framing digital inclusion as a city-wide priority was one of the first major events SAHA and its coalition partners organized. In March 2017, the San Antonio Public Library, with support and participation from coalition members, hosted the first **Digital Inclusion Summit**. In addition to founding members, over 150 people from dozens of organizations participated in the summit. This helped the coalition raise awareness about the city's digital divide across a wider swath of community members. The summit was used to also formally launch the Alliance. Two months later, the Alliance held its first membership meeting with over 30 organizations in attendance. The Alliance was growing! In its early days, it was a group of just six organizations, but after the summit, it onboarded dozens of new members.

In August 2018, the Alliance was chartered and became an official organization. The group had operated for a while without a charter, but after working closely with other coalitions, Alliance members realized it was important to operate under a charter. In 2019, the City announced its Smart City initiative and hired two of the Alliance members to support the work. This marked an important milestone in the Alliance's history as it meant that the advocacy work of the Alliance became formally enshrined in city-wide efforts to advance digital inclusion.

Building for the Future

The Alliance has grown since its early days and has evolved to respond to changing needs. It now has a formal structure in place (see Framework section below) and is in the process of obtaining its 501(c)(3) non-profit designation so that it can qualify for more funding opportunities. Possessing 501(c)(3) non-profit status opens up many more funding opportunities since many funders only make awards to organizations that have this tax-exempt status.



The Digital Inclusion Alliance's Framework

- **Leadership Structure:** The leadership structure consists of:
 - An Executive Team made of three members: Chair, Vice Chair and Treasurer. The Executive Team also runs the group's Steering Committee which includes holding elections for Steering Committee membership.
 - The Steering Committee, made up of 12 to 14 members, is structured to have a portion of slots (generally 2 to 4) reserved for organizations that fall under the following categories: funders; internet service providers; education providers; housing providers; and community activists. The primary responsibility of the Steering Committee is to manage the day-to-day work of the coalition.
 - The Steering Committee is made up for four active subcommittees which include Connectivity, Devices, Sustainability, and Training.
- **Membership:** Alliance membership consists of over 30 organizations representing community non-profits, governmental entities, businesses, public education systems, higher education systems, internet service providers, and media outlets who are all working through the coalition to create a more inclusive and digitally equitable San Antonio. Membership is free.

Tips for Building a New Coalition from SAHA:

- ❑ **Define Staff Responsibilities and Priorities.** If your ConnectHomeUSA staff is participating in a coalition while also responsible for administering the ConnectHomeUSA program, it is important to set priorities for the staff person. Should coalition duties take priority, and if so, under what circumstances?
- ❑ **Learn from Others:** Housing authority staff may not have the expertise to implement a comprehensive digital inclusion program. By being a member of the Alliance, SAHA benefited from the expertise of coalition members.
- ❑ **Share Your Challenges:** Membership in the coalition facilitated the exchange of information across city and local partners. When SAHA staff shared their programmatic challenges, they learned that other members were experiencing similar challenges. This created an opportunity to develop broader, city-wide solutions.
- ❑ **Benefits of Membership:** As a member of a coalition, you will inevitably benefit from the networking that occurs at coalition meetings. For SAHA, Alliance membership led to invaluable referrals and other types of partnership opportunities. It also allowed SAHA to launch new programs in less time.
- ❑ **Join Other Coalitions and Expand Your Network:** To further expand your network, consider joining other coalitions that are complementary to your own. You could be rendering a service to other coalitions while at the same time expanding your own network. For example, the SAHA quarterback joined coalitions for STEM educational programming as well as a network of local community colleges to provide the perspective of housing authority residents and clients – something that these groups had been missing.



ConnectHomeUSA