Best Practices Guide:
Resident Engagement

ConnectHomeUSA

1. Introduction

Robust resident engagement is a hallmark of successful digital inclusion programs. Therefore, engaging residents in the design and ongoing implementation of your program is critical to your program's success.

In this **Best Practices Guide** you will find information on the following topics related to resident engagement:

* Understanding residents' needs is the key to an effective resident engagement plan;
* Tips for meaningful resident engagement;
* Resident engagement case studies from ConnectHomeUSA Communities; and
* Various resources that could be helpful along the way.

2. Understanding Resident Needs is Key to Creating an Effective Resident Engagement Plan

Engaging your residents from the beginning and throughout your ConnectHomeUSA program will help you establish a successful program. There are many ways to do this, but there a few key points to keep in mind which will help you develop an effective **Resident Engagement Plan**.

* To improve your community's access to the Internet and digital tools, it is important to have a good understanding of what residents actually need. (See the *ConnectHomeUSA Launchpad Toolkit* for tips on Assessing Your Baseline Needs).
* Residents are your greatest asset and can be the most important ambassadors of your ConnectHomeUSA program – give them a platform (and any necessary training).
* Resident needs can change over time, so it is important to engage residents early and often.
* Your plan should strive to maximize transparency and openness so residents can easily understand how decisions are made and how the program will work Transparency will engender residents' trust – a necessary ingredient to the success of your ConnectHomeUSA program.

3. Tips for Meaningful Resident Engagement

Many seasoned ConnectHomeUSA communities have effectively engaged with their residents by building relationships and trust throughout the development and implementation of their ConnectHomeUSA programs. The tips below are garnered from some of these very communities.

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A. TIP 1: Identify Resident Leaders and Key Stakeholders

At the outset of your ConnectHomeUSA planning, make sure to bring in resident leaders. You can also consider consulting other PHA staff such as Service Coordinators who understand residents' needs and enjoy their trust. Similarly, there may be local organizations that have an understanding of residents' technology needs.

Be sure to check out the *Launchpad Toolkit* for more information on the topics below.

Key Stakeholder Ideas

- Residents/Resident Leaders
- Service Coordinators
- Property Managers
- Intake and Relocation Specialists
- Local nonprofits
- School systems
- Libraries
- Boys & Girls Clubs
- Places of Worship
- Tribal Service Providers

Residents can and should be involved in all aspects of your planning and implementation including:

1. **The Core Planning Team.** Residents should be a part of your ConnectHomeUSA Core Planning Team and be involved in decisions associated with the development of your overall ConnectHomeUSA program.

2. **Implementing Your Baseline Survey.** Including residents in survey development and deployment is a good way to ask the right questions and get buy-in from other residents.

3. **Development of Your Action Plan.** Goal-setting is crucial to the Action Plan process and communities should ensure that their goals align with resident needs and goals. Resident input is critical.

4. **Convening Planning and Implementation.** The resident voice should be included in both the planning and implementation of your ConnectHomeUSA Convening – ensure there is a slot reserved for residents or resident groups to present during your Convening.

5. **Training Development.** Residents will know better than anyone what training they need – work with them to identify training topics and delivery mechanisms. It is a good idea to offer classes that meet varying skill levels and offer the opportunity to acquire new skills. Refer to the **Digital Literacy Training Resource Guide** for guidance.

6. **Empowering Residents as ConnectHomeUSA Program Ambassadors.** Word of mouth can be a very powerful advertising tool. Residents can be the greatest ambassadors of your ConnectHomeUSA program – give them a platform (and any necessary training). Check out the case study in this toolkit for a great example of a formal Digital Ambassador program implemented by the Housing Authority of the City of Austin!

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B. TIP 2: Craft Clear and Focused Messages

The *ConnectHomeUSA Playbook* outlines tips for developing relevant and impactful communication that will resonate with your residents. A few things to consider as you communicate with residents include:

• Integrate ConnectHomeUSA messaging into existing housing authority communication vehicles such as newsletters, websites, social media, and text messages.

• Synchronize your messaging with other local stakeholders also working on digital inclusion in your community.

• Provide incentives to encourage residents to engage with your program and activities.

• Frequency of communication – How often is enough? When is follow-up necessary?

C. TIP 3: Meet Residents Where They Are

• Residents have different ways of accessing information and it is important to understand what those methods are. It is also important to consider the different communication barriers that your residents face and identify ways to address them to ensure your message reaches them. This will also facilitate wider participation.

• Keep your Resident Associations informed, attend their meetings on a regular basis and ask resident leaders for feedback.

• Mixing offline and online communication platforms to reach a wider range of residents is key.

Examples can include:

- Send mass text messages to residents with ConnectHomeUSA updates and information.

- Post important updates on your website, Facebook, Instagram or other social media platforms residents are accustomed to accessing.

- Distribute informational flyers in highly trafficked areas of properties, schools, libraries, places of worship, and other locations (such as partners' offices) frequented by residents.

- Provide Service Coordinators and property managers with materials for distribution when new residents move in.

- Develop materials in all languages spoken by residents.

Tip:
Make sure to address any access barriers when planning a resident engagement event.
Provide transportation, translation, or other services that will expand your audience.

D. TIP 4: Events are a Great Way to Engage Residents

Many ConnectHomeUSA communities organize events specifically to engage residents around digital inclusion. Use these events as an opportunity to obtain feedback from residents. Examples of what other ConnectHomeUSA communities have done in the past include:

- A Digital Inclusion Day event

- Internet enrollment events held in partnership with ConnectHomeUSA Internet Service Providers (ISP) stakeholders or local ISPs

- Share ConnectHomeUSA information at other events your organization may organize such as:
  - Health fairs
  - Job fairs
  - HUD Strong Family events
  - Back-to-School fairs

- Local Resource Fairs held by local nonprofits, or city government agencies

- Provide flyers or other marketing materials to your stakeholders or partners for distribution at their events

E. TIP 5: Measure Results Along the Way

As in all aspects of a good ConnectHomeUSA program, monitoring and evaluation is a cornerstone of success. Think about how you want to measure your results from the very beginning of your resident engagement process. Communities should tailor monitoring and evaluation efforts to their specific program and should develop their own process for tracking these efforts. Data to track should include, but is not limited to:

- Connected vs. unconnected residents - If possible, work with your ISP to develop a data sharing agreement that allows you to see which households are connected.

- Training attendance records

- Training completion rates

- Residents' device status

- Survey response rates

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📖 Resident Engagement Resources

Do your research! For an easy start – check out the resources below to help you put together your resident engagement strategy:

- **Community Planning Toolkit – Community Engagement**

- **ConnectHomeUSA Resident Engagement Webinar**

- **Resident-Centered Community Building**

- **Collective Impact Forum Community Engagement Toolkit**

- **Index of Community Engagement Techniques**

- **GroundworkUSA Best Practices for Meaningful Community Engagement**

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Case Study:
Housing Authority of the City of Austin Digital Ambassador Program

Technology adoption happens on a spectrum and few organizations understand this better than the Housing Authority of the City of Austin (HACA). In November 2014, HACA and its nonprofit subsidiary, Austin Pathways, launched a groundbreaking digital inclusion initiative, Unlocking the Connection. Working with local government, nonprofits, and tech companies the goal was to improve residents' quality of life by connecting every HACA household to digital education and workforce development opportunities. As part of this initiative, HACA implemented innovative programs such as the Digital Ambassador Program. Since 2014, HACA and Austin Pathways have worked jointly to run their program.

The Digital Ambassador Program has become central to **Unlocking the Connection's** success.

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Early Stages of the Program

The idea for the HACA Digital Ambassador program came from an early digital literacy training at HACA's Meadowbrook property where Austin Pathways (a nonprofit affiliated with HACA) staff noticed **one student** was making the learning material more accessible for the rest of the class. This student knew his classmates and the barriers to technology they were facing at home. He approached skill-building through this lens. The teachers soon began to rely on him as a leader in the class and eventually developed the idea of engaging residents through what would become the Digital Ambassador program.

Initially, HACA relied mostly on staff recommendations for volunteers for the Digital Ambassador program. However, over time, more residents expressed interest in being involved, so HACA developed an application process. Today, HACA selects ambassadors who possess different levels of technology experience (see Technology Adoption Lifecycle image below) - from innovators to late adopters. This ensures that messaging is targeted to residents with similar needs and that all levels of nonconnected residents can be reached.
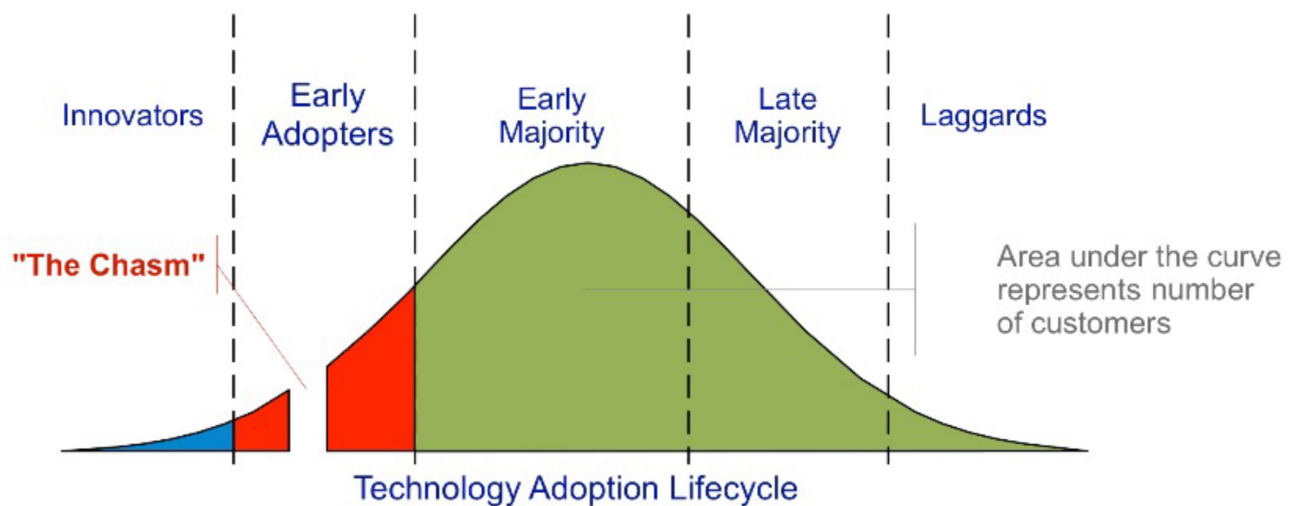

FIGURE 1: *Technology Adoption Lifecycle, " The Chasm," (Moore, 1991)*

Program Successes

As the Digital Ambassador program grew, HACA staff noticed a corresponding increase in the number of connected residents. HACA data shows that from 2015-2019, Digital Ambassadors helped 46 percent of families at 17 HACA properties register for new, free, and affordable Internet service, increasing the connectivity rate by 11 percent over a five-year period. To date, more than 150 HACA residents have served as Ambassadors.

> *Tip:*
> *Residents are your best advocates.* *Because Digital Ambassadors are residents there is an inherent trust that helps them effectively bridge the gap that keeps slow adopters from embracing new technology.*

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Digital Ambassadors are included at all levels and touchpoints of the Austin Pathways Digital Inclusion program. **In fact, the success of the program inspired the development of other ambassador programs such as Health Ambassadors, Energy Ambassadors, Mobility Ambassadors and Smarty City Ambassadors.** Ambassadors have also come to play an important role in the development of HACA's digital communication plan, providing input on the type of platforms HACA should consider using for greatest impact with residents.

At its core, the Digital Ambassador program was built to leverage the expertise of resident leaders to ensure that digital tools are more accessible for all HACA residents. HACA will support this program and its mission for years to come.

Funding for the Program

Outside organizations saw the value of the Digital Ambassadors and now the program is funded by grants and contracts from local government, philanthropic organizations, and corporations.

Training

All Digital Ambassadors receive training covering topics such as:

- Adult learning principles;

- Digital equity policies and programs;

- Outreach strategies;

- Civic engagement; and

- In-depth training on the use of digital tools for transportation, education, workforce development, energy efficiency, or social services.

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The Work of Digital Ambassadors

Over the years, the work of HACA's Digital Ambassadors has evolved. Originally, they were involved in outreach efforts to inform residents about digital literacy training available in HACA computer labs as well as teaching residents in the labs. Now, Digital Ambassadors do much more and are paid a monthly stipend based on the type of work they perform:

- **Digital Ambassador Team Leads** are HACA residents who work as contractors, receiving hourly pay to consult on special projects. They also supervise other Digital Ambassadors.

- **Community Educators** assist residents as they learn new technical skills at HACA properties and computer labs. As residents learn new tech skills, they begin to trust technology. Community Educators also gather community input regarding skills residents need and training programs of interest.

- **Community Engagement Professionals** learn to use social media to tell stories that inspire the community and educate HACA residents about digitally-powered jobs. This role also involves evaluating potential community partnerships that could benefit HACA residents. They also engage City officials and corporate technologists on pressing tech issues that affect residents, and advocate for partnerships with impact.

- **Community Engineers** research whether new digital mobility, energy, education, and "smart city" initiatives help or hurt the community, test new technologies to ensure they are built with the community in mind, and sometimes work side-by-side with technologists or local universities.

Program Structure

HACA has a structured process in place which outlines Digital Ambassadors' roles and responsibilities. This includes their participation in the design and development of programs and program evaluation.

Outreach Tips from HACA to Engage Residents in Your Digital Inclusion Program

If you don't have a Digital Ambassador program in place or are in the process of building one, you can use the following outreach methods which were developed by HACA's Digital Ambassadors to encourage residents to engage in digital training programs:

- **Promoting new classes by door knocking.** When Ambassadors go door-to-door, they also bring a laptop along and give the residents the opportunity to use it to provide feedback to the city about new online applications under development. This demonstrates to the resident that they can use technology and that they can use it to make a difference!

- **Hosting a "transit adventure"** where residents can learn to use a smartphone to visit a museum or other place of interest.

- **Providing a presentation or a testimonial** at a Resident Council meeting.

- **Providing a paper raffle ticket and a loaned device** the day before a virtual or in-person raffle event.

- **Hosting a demonstration of a digital (Internet-enabled) thermostat** and how it can save residents money on electric bills.

- **Holding a raffle at a Rental Assistance Demonstration meeting** or setting up an information table at rent week and other HACA events.

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Best Practice Tips for a Digital Ambassador Program

Resident involvement at all levels. To build capacity, Digital Ambassadors need to be involved in every part of your ConnectHomeUSA program:

- Discovering what is needed

- Designing the program

- Developing the program

- Deploying the program

Encourage creativity and innovation. Ensure residents have the training and time to experiment so they can figure out what works best for themselves as Digital Ambassadors and for the community they are serving.

Start slow... It's important to start slow and small. Starting slow and small means Digital Ambassadors can learn quickly, incorporating the best learning into their bigger plans.

Hire residents with different levels of digital skills. HACA selects ambassadors who possess different levels of technology experience (see Technology Adoption Lifecycle image above) - from innovators to late adopters. This ensures that messaging is targeted to residents with similar needs and that all levels of nonconnected residents can be reached.

Set flexible expectations. Communicate to Digital Ambassadors that their strength lies in their ability to learn, unlearn, and relearn as new technologies emerge.

Patience is key in tech training. The best Digital Ambassadors say the key to their success is patience! By providing space for new computer users to practice, to fail, and to accomplish new skills, Digital Ambassadors encourage new learners to have patience with themselves.

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