



The
Philanthropic
Initiative

Advancing Digital Equity in Essex
County Year 1 Evaluation Report
Executive Summary

August 24, 2022

Executive Summary

This report summarizes a novel approach to implementing and evaluating systems change through Advancing Digital Equity (ADE), an innovative, county-wide systems change effort and program of the Essex County Community Foundation (ECCF). In this evaluation, we examine systems change implemented in ADE through three levers: structural change, relationship change, and transformative change.

Building on key evaluation and systems change resources, including Kania et al.'s *The Waters of Systems Change*, the evaluation framework and plan for ADE addresses [six conditions of systems change](#) (outlined in Figure 3, Part IV of this report). According to ECCF's theory of change, the six conditions must be addressed together to effectively achieve systems change. The six conditions are defined as follows: Policies, practices, and resource flows are structural change; relationships, connections, and power dynamics are relational change; and change in mental models or beliefs is transformative change. A focus on the six conditions of change is critical to understanding the process of systems change occurring in ADE and is a new framework for systems evaluation, in addition to examination of programmatic inputs. This report summarizes programmatic inputs as evidence of systems change across the six conditions.

Structural systems changes observed in ADE are summarized below and in Part V of this report. These include noteworthy changes in infrastructure during Year 1 of ADE, such as significant growth in access to digital services, expansion of digital equipment ownership provided through ADE, increase in the number of people knowledgeable about digital access and use (through widespread community-based training), and growth of an ecosystem intended to foster ADE connections and support ADE's growth and sustainability over time.

Observed relationship changes in ADE include growth of a county-wide ADE Coalition and ecosystem representing 150+ organizations that – through participation in the Coalition – are now connected and working together to advance digital access and equity. Observed transformative changes over the past year included increase (change) in policymaker and stakeholder attitudes about digital equity as a right and a benefit to society. These and other systems changes and supporting programmatic impacts are summarized below and in Part V of this report. ECCF provides funding, leadership, and staff support to implement and foster the wide range of systems and programmatic changes described in this report.

Since 2018, ECCF has strived to make long-term, meaningful contributions in Essex County through systems philanthropy. Advancing Digital Equity represents ECCF's fourth major systems philanthropy area of focus. In June 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, ECCF virtually convened 65 regional leaders and community stakeholders to collectively reimagine Essex County's social systems post-COVID. Together, attendees elevated Essex County's digital divide as one of the county's greatest challenges both during and predating the COVID-19 pandemic.

ECCF began Advancing Digital Equity (ADE) by commissioning a county data study in Spring 2020, in partnership with the Center for State Policy Analysis at Tufts University, which produced a baseline analysis of how the digital divide impacts each of Essex County's 34 cities and towns. ECCF shared these findings broadly and reached out to local stakeholders to understand what digital divide initiatives were already in place, how well they were working, what outstanding needs and gaps exist, and more. Broad community feedback and county data helped shape ECCF's plans to address the digital divide through ADE. In Spring 2021, ECCF officially launched Advancing Digital Equity (ADE) with a first Digital Equity Coalition meeting, which included legislators, community organizers, non-profit organization and business leaders, educators, and residents of Essex County. The Coalition aims to identify solutions by the community, for the community, and

from the community.

Through ADE, ECCF intends to actively lead, support, and engage with stakeholders, partners, and funders to address the region's digital divide over three years with a minimum \$3 million investment. **ECCF's vision for ADE is for all residents of Essex County to have equitable access to the internet, an affordable computing device, and the digital literacy to use them effectively.**

During Year 1, ADE has fostered county-wide collaboration and strategic investments to increase digital capacity in four target areas: digital access; digital equipment; digital literacy, and coalition- building and growth of an ADE ecosystem.

Goals and objectives for ADE are summarized in Part II. **It is significant that several of ADE's original goals have been adjusted upwards during Year 1 due to significant progress and results already achieved.** In Part III of this report, ECCF's collaborative systems change model and roles in ADE are described for background on how ECCF approaches systems philanthropy and ADE activities. Part IV outlines methods and data sources of this evaluation, including a program logic model and visual framework of how systems change is happening in Essex County through ADE.

Part V summarizes progress achieved in Year 1 of ADE. By all accounts, already in Year 1, ADE is exceeding goals set forth by ECCF and partners (and, in some cases, new goals have been established based on initial success). A summary of Year 1 progress is shown in Figure 5 and described in Part V through two different lenses. The first views progress through ADE's four primary investment areas – by topic area. The second views progress through ADE's goals related to systems change (as shown in Figure 3 and described above). Lessons learned and challenges faced in each area are also addressed. Progress highlights in each area include:

- **Digital Access** – In Year 1, ECCF and partners established robust community driven digital access efforts operating now in nine Essex County communities through 11 partner organizations (key partner organizations are listed in Appendix 1: ECCF's ADE Dashboard).
So far during Year 1, 10,925 residents gained digital access and work is now in progress to add an additional 6,000 residents with access countywide. A total of 181 community access points have been added. This growth represents significant progress toward ADE's 3- year goal of 20,000 residents and businesses with new digital access: already achieving 164% of Year 1 goal, and 55% of ADE's overall goal for advancement of digital access. According to ECCF staff, dramatic progress in the Access area was jumpstarted in Year 1 in part through the state and federal post-COVID funding and policy response.
- **Digital Equipment/Devices** – In year 1, ECCF and partners incubated the TEK Collaborative - Essex County's first non-profit e-recycler. Device recycling and distribution is operating now in six Essex County communities through 14 partner organizations. In this investment area, ECCF has provided extensive technical assistance, project and fiscal management, and capacity building support to the TEK Collaborative. So far, a total of 1,810 new and refurbished devices have been delivered by the TEK Collaborative to Essex County households. This Year 1 advancement represents solid progress toward ECCF's 3- year goal of 5,000 devices delivered through ADE: already achieving 151% of Year 1 goal and 36% of ADE's overall goal for digital device distribution.
- **Digital Literacy** – In Year 1, ECCF and partners established Massachusetts' first digital literacy program in Essex County in partnership with the Boston-based non-profit, Tech

Goes Home (TGH). TGH works with community partners and a network of hundreds of instructors to provide learners with 15 hours of free digital skills instruction. Each learner receives a digital package from TGH to support literacy development: a year of free internet service, 15 hours of instruction, and a new Chromebook or iPad. Applying this TGH model, a robust digital access and learning effort is now underway in five Essex County communities. So far, 135 resident learners have completed the TGH program. ADE's Literacy goal is to have 800-1,000 trained learners over three years in Essex County, working in partnership with ten community partner organizations to locate and support digital learners. Progress to date toward this ADE goal is 108% of Year 1 goal and 17% of ADE's overall goal for digital literacy expansion and will accelerate in Year 2 through planned expansion.

- ADE Coalition and Ecosystem Development – In a very short time, ECCF was able to convene and engage a vibrant Coalition of Essex County stakeholders interested in ADE. This group is essential to coordinating, leading, and implementing a long-term regional response to ADE. ECCF has been very adept at leading this component of regional capacity building to support ADE. Quarterly Coalition meetings are attended by representatives of 150+ member organizations from more than 25 towns and communities in Essex County. Progress to date toward this ADE goal is extremely solid and will accelerate in Year 2 through planned expansion. Currently, Coalition participation levels are at 150% of Year 1 goal, and 100% of ADE's overall goal for Coalition building.

In ADE's first year, Coalition leaders worked hard to advance public and stakeholder awareness of digital equity and understanding of the rapidly changing landscape of federal and state policy and funding, as well as develop and expand advocacy and human leadership on digital equity on the ground in Essex County. ECCF and Coalition members have also been active in advocacy and information sharing with state policymakers through presentations, media, and other outlets to help inform and shape ADE funding potential from ARPA, ACP, and other public policy investments.

Other investments and innovations stemming from ADE are also addressed in Part V, including description of a new phase of demographic research now underway with Tufts University to measure digital access and equity in Essex County in 2022. Also in Part V, perspectives from staff and external stakeholders and many concrete examples of progress in all six areas of anticipated ADE systems change are explored and shared.

In Part VI, additional stakeholder reflections on ADE progress in Year 1 are shared through a summary of online stakeholder survey and interview findings. Progress in all areas of ADE activity is explored and views on progress from stakeholders are shared, including many quotes summarizing observations about impact and systems change resulting from ADE and ECCF's role in it over the past year. Stakeholder feedback examples include:

- ✓ "Already with ADE, we are seeing meaningful impacts in all four areas of ADE focus. Goal targets for the initiative are increasing."
- ✓ "ECCF has done a great job of raising the issue of digital equity, keeping it front and center for Essex County, and convening a county-wide Coalition around it."
- ✓ "The Coalition is elevating digital equity's role and importance in all sectors of the county's economy and civic life."

Reflections from a June 2022 MassINC report on digital equity and ADE, "Connecting Communities

Through Digital Equity – An Action Plan for State, Community, and Private and Institutional Partners,” are also shared in Part VI. Many best practice recommendations, guidelines, and lessons learned that are shared in the MassINC report derive from ADE’s experience in Year 1 as field leader and early adopter of regional digital equity capacity building in Massachusetts.

In Part VII, external stakeholders’ reflections on ideas for improving ADE in Year 2 are shared. Most interviewees did not have recommendations for change, noting that ADE and ECCF were on the right track to make progress on ADE in Essex County. Some interviewees shared concrete recommendations that are summarized in Part VII. For example, ideas for improving Coalition operations are shared, such as meeting suggestions, advance sharing logistics, and topics for further exploration. A few ideas for areas where progress is perceived as less robust are also shared, such as reinforcing grantmaking efforts in the digital literacy area to expand the reach and impact of that goal area in Year 2 and beyond. Ideas for how to advance ADE and support the growth of a digital equity ecosystem in Essex County are also shared, including ideas for how to scale ADE programs and share best practices from ADE broadly with organizations in the field.

Lastly, closing observations about ADE’s impact and progress in Year 1 are summarized in Part VIII, along with recommendations for next steps for ADE in Year 2, such as scaling and expanding successful pilot activities from Year 1.

By all accounts, ADE has made significant progress in its first year in all areas of planned development, exceeding goals set forth by ECCF staff and the Coalition for ADE growth in all areas. Goals for Year 2 will aim to solidify gains from Year 1 and expand pilot activities in all areas of ADE.