LIBRARIES

SECTION 8 +

TECHNOLOGY

ideas42

NYC
Department of
Housing Preservation
& Development

Bklyn
Public Library

New York
Public
Library

QUEENS
PUBLIC
LIBRARY

# CHALLENGES

IN CLOSING

THE DIGITAL

DIVIDE

In New York City, the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) finances affordable housing and operates one of the city's three Section 8 rental assistance programs. Based on a survey of our 40,000-plus Section 8 households during COVID, we learned that approximately half have struggled to gain consistent access to the internet and more than 80% do not feel confident using the internet.

Since internet skills are increasingly required to both participate in Section 8—from downloading and sharing key documents with program staff to searching for housing online—and to access greater socioeconomic opportunities, HPD is committed to empowering our Section 8 clients with these skills and the confidence to use them.

Thankfully, New York City's three public library systems—the New York Public Library, which covers Manhattan, the Bronx, and Staten Island; the Brooklyn Public Library; and Queens Public Library—already offer a comprehensive selection of technology support and training services that our Section 8 clients could benefit from.
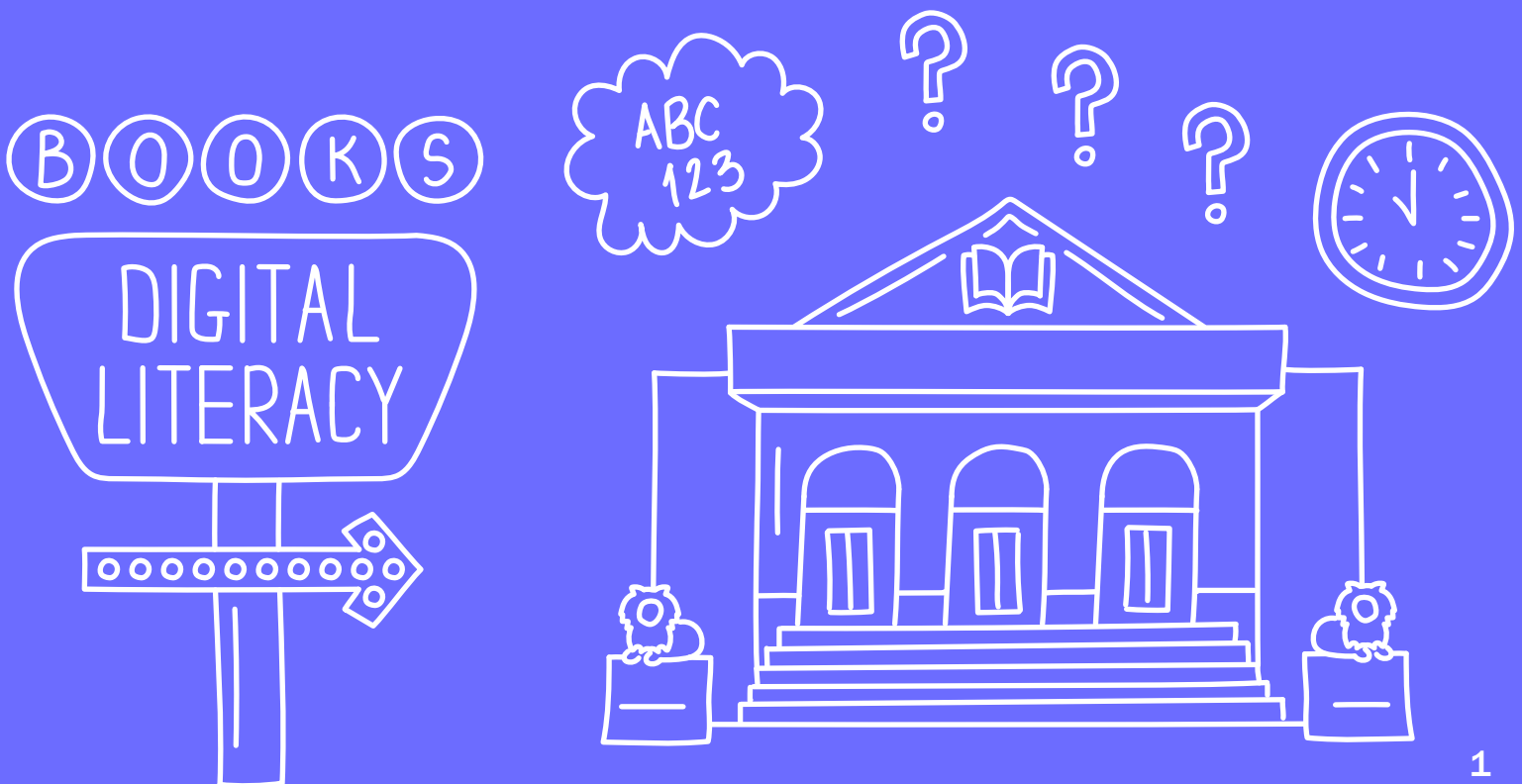
HPD recently partnered with the three libraries to engage the NYC Behavioral Design Team at the NYC Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity, run by ideas42—a behavioral science research and design non-profit—to understand whether our Section 8 clients currently take advantage of the libraries' technology services and, if not, what new service models might be needed.

The Behavioral Design Team conducted a survey, which was completed by more than 800 New Yorkers, including over 400 Section 8 participants, and spoke with a dozen respondents to learn more about their experiences.

We are excited to share key insights about the barriers low-income New Yorkers face in engaging with their local library, especially around technology, with the hope these insights spark creative ideas that help libraries across the country better serve their diverse communities.

P.S. Special thank you to the US Digital Response for supporting our user research throughout this project!
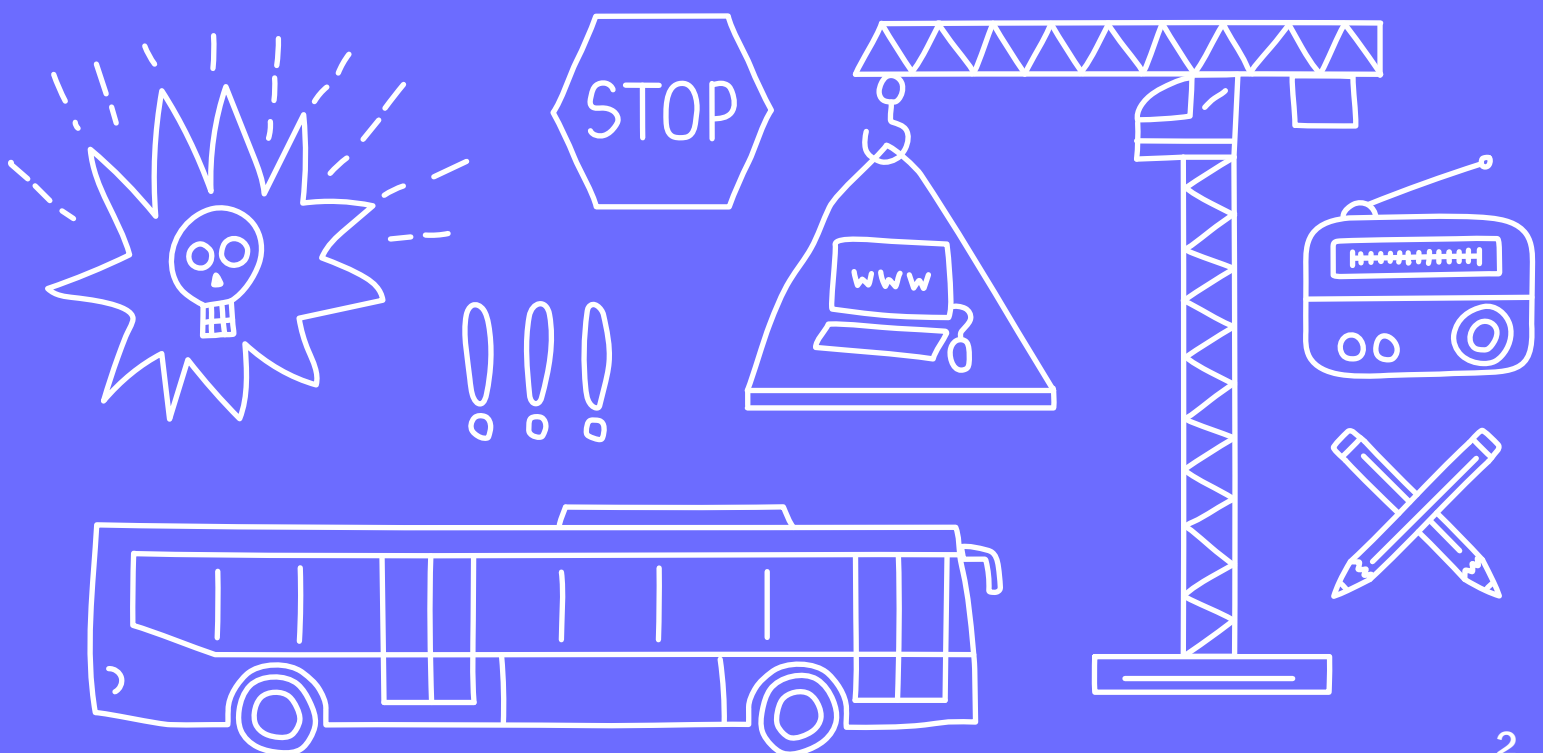
1. Residents have MISCONCEPTIONS about the services that libraries offer and who libraries are for.

Many residents associate libraries with literacy, physical books, and analog research, and some residents believe the internet is a replacement for library services. Only 10% of Section 8 clients surveyed even knew that the libraries offer classes and workshops.

Many residents also believe that their demographic is not the primary target for library services. For instance, some older adults interviewed believe that libraries primarily serve children and families, while younger adults interviewed believe that libraries primarily serve older adults. 41% of Section 8 clients surveyed believe that the library programming is not relevant to them.

2. Libraries predominantly rely on OUTREACH channels that only reach existing patrons.

Libraries primarily use flyers in library branches, posts on their websites, and email newsletters to promote programs and services. As a result, residents were only able to recall encountering their library's outreach materials in the physical library branches.

Low-income residents are much less likely to learn about programs and services from library emails. Instead, outreach channels such as local television news programs, radio shows, and tabling at community events may be worth exploring as potential opportunities for engaging new patrons.

3. Residents face many different BARRIERS in attending in-person and online library programming.

These barriers include difficulty traveling to library branches, classes only offered at inconvenient times, and lack of internet access at home. Several residents shared that attending services in person at the library is inconvenient or difficult due to medical conditions or disabilities. Almost half of HPD's Section 8 households include a head of household with a disability.

Classes are only offered when the library is open, typically between 10 am and 6 pm. Many residents find it difficult or impossible to adjust their schedules to attend programming, due to work, childcare, or other responsibilities. Several residents shared that they have been turned away from services they needed because classes were already full when they arrived.

4. Residents are DISCOURAGED by past experiences, harmful stereotypes, and high societal expectations.

Several residents shared that they had attended library technology classes in the past, but found the experience frustrating because the course moved too quickly or the instructor did not provide the individualized support they needed. Some residents feel that our society assumes all older adults are lost or hopeless when it comes to learning how to use technology.

Many residents believe that there is a high societal expectation to learn technology and their lack of digital abilities excludes them from certain activities. This perception may leave them feeling discouraged, like they missed the boat, or even ashamed.

5. Residents are not clear how they would BENEFIT personally from learning to use technology.

Although residents generally understand that using online tools makes completing many tasks more convenient, not all residents truly believe in the utility of learning to use technology. Some residents do not see an urgent need to use digital tools because they are able to complete most of their daily tasks through low-tech or offline methods.

Some residents do not perceive convenience as a true benefit and even shared that they believe using slower, more difficult analog tools is more helpful for building skills. However, access to these analog methods may diminish over time and most residents believe that they may have to eventually learn these tools out of necessity.

6. Residents are AFRAID of online scams and viruses and are not confident in their abilities to avoid these risks.

Stories of scams and fraud are commonly shared among community networks, and some come from residents' direct experience. Moreover, frequent media coverage of data breaches and personal information being exposed makes many residents hesitant to enroll in any online service that requires sharing personal information.

Many residents are interested in learning how to use the internet to conduct online banking and pay their bills. However, fears of online exploitation were frequently cited as a barrier. Only 5% of residents who are not currently library patrons feel confident in their ability to avoid online scams and viruses.

A CALL TO ACTION

As your library or organization considers innovative approaches to tackling the digital divide, we encourage you to start by asking **who is not showing up** and **where can you meet them halfway**?

In New York City, instead of trying to get Section 8 clients to visit libraries, we are now exploring ways to bring the libraries' technology services directly to our Section 8 clients.

Along the way, we will constantly be asking:

1. Are we combatting MISCONCEPTIONS about who the library is for?

2. Are we using OUTREACH channels that our clients use too?

3. Are we reducing as many BARRIERS as possible to participating?

4. Are we helping DISCOURAGED clients feel supported and heard?

5. Are we making technology feel like a BENEFIT not a hassle?

6. Are we empowering the AFRAID with the tools to protect themselves?

We hope these and other questions help inform your own organization's journey to close the digital divide for all low-income community members!

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