impact

Digital tools help refugees navigate their new life in Boise

AT A GLANCE

We may take for granted everyday technology, like debit cards and email, but it's all very new to some refugees who are arriving in Idaho.

The Situation

Refugee groups resettling in Idaho are incredibly diverse, but the essential resettlement experience has remained constant. Navigating in a digital world is imperative for refugee families. Starting a life in a new country and most likely doing so surrounded by people speaking an unknown language is only part of the challenges faced. Some have very little experience in common practices here, such as paying for housing or utilities through an online portal rather than in person with cash or goods. Many do not know how to log in to their email or listen to voicemails, which can cause missed appointments, messages from their child's school and even contribute to transportation issues due to a lack of knowledge about how to navigate ride-hailing apps.

Our Response

To help empower Idahoans to build confidence in using technology, University of Idaho Extension's Digital Economy Program (DEP) began exploring ways to provide resources that support rural and underserved communities. Through a partnership with the American Connection Corps (ACC), engaging AmeriCorps members as local digital navigators with the DEP became a viable solution. Funding, resources and local

Refugees learn digital skills in the first 30 days after arrival. Photo by S. Rojas Zaragoza.

host sites were identified across Idaho to facilitate the onboarding of individuals willing to serve a term in AmeriCorps.

An ACC AmeriCorps member was recruited to serve in the Treasure Valley as a digital navigator and was placed with the International Rescue Committee (IRC), a nonprofit organization that helps people whose lives and livelihoods are shattered by conflict and disaster to survive, recover and gain control over their future.

A listening tour was conducted to gather feedback from organizations and community members, such as advocacy agencies, schools, childcare centers, medical facilities, resettlement agencies in other Idaho cities and former refugees. While learning from different

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perspectives, it was clear that a missing link was digital literacy. As data was collected, acquired information helped bridge challenges and connect people to solutions. The listening tour also helped identify champions and partners willing to contribute to the next steps. Engaging the digital navigator, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) formulated a 30-day education plan to help newly arrived clients gain independence. Class topics include Navigating Google Maps, Identifying Online Scams and Creating Strong Passwords. A smartphone is the most common device for refugees, and many have little to no experience with using laptops, desktops or tablets. For IRC clients that have beginner to intermediate English language proficiency, there is an added complexity to the learning curve within digital culture. Everyday American technology and verbiage are new to some. An example is using a debit card for the first time online or by phone. Navigating the process, such as locating the security pin, can be confusing, especially with a language barrier.

A small women's group from the region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo had the opportunity to learn digital navigation of desktop computers. This fun class curriculum was created by the navigator specifically with the participants' interests in mind. After practicing with components of desktop computer hardware, they were guided with the steps to connect to the internet and YouTube. Cooking videos in their home language were the most popular. Other choices were videos of the latest braiding techniques and make-up tutorials.

Program Outcomes

The placement of a digital navigator expanded previous efforts to include digital skills training for refugees. The women's group indicated they felt more confident in their capabilities and to continue using a desktop computer at a local library. The ability to access information is a key component in pursuing employment and achieving success.

Refugees also learned how to pay rent and utilities, building creditworthiness and preventing harmful service interruptions. Setting up home internet was a popular request. Home internet allows students to access their online homework portal. Before the Affordable Connectivity Program ended in May 2024, many homes benefitted from free to low-cost internet plans.

Digital skills help people maintain a connection to their heritage and inspire new beginnings. Many IRC clients have a desire to become business owners, share their culture with others and contribute to their community. More than 175 clients received digital skills education from the digital navigator between September 2023 to July 2024, the highest number Boise IRC had ever served.

The Future

In an increasingly digital society and economy, infusing digital skills training and addressing access is vital to developing digitally resilient Idahoans and communities. UI Extension's Digital Economy Program supports Idahoans by offering digital skills training, remote work retraining and guidance for small businesses to grow online. Learn more at https://www.uidaho.edu/digital-economy.

Cooperators and Co-Sponsors

AmeriCorps members were deployed through a partnership with the American Connection Corps, a program of Lead for America. Local support and office space for the digital navigator was provided by the International Rescue Committee.