

Learning Brief: Making Devices and Internet Available in Help@Hand Counties/Cities

This learning brief is in the Help@Hand Statewide Evaluation: Year 4 Mid-Year Report

Background

In response to community needs for devices and internet connection, many counties/cities across the Help@Hand Collaborative developed or planned programs to distribute devices and support internet access. The Evaluation Team collected information about these activities and plans in order to synthesize information and identify common learnings or recommendations gained across counties/cities.

To start, the Evaluation Team had several conversations, including discussions on Tech Lead calls (N=2), and interviews (N=1) with cities/counties to get a sense of which counties/cities were conducting device distribution work and the types of activities and challenges that were coming up in this work. Then, a representative from each of the six Help@Hand counties/cities who worked on “device distribution” was surveyed (N=6). Surveys were designed to understand county/city planning and execution, the perceived impact of these efforts, and challenges faced. Four distinct phases of this work were identified, (1) exploring, (2) preparing, (3) acting, and (4) maintaining. Each phase is defined below and each county/city is classified into one of the four phases for synthesis.

“Device distribution” refers to any effort to make devices (e.g., smartphones and tablets) available at little-to-no cost and/or to increase access to the internet in Help@Hand counties/cities.

Phase	Definition
Exploring Phase	Help@Hand counties/cities considered device distribution work but did not yet begin planning activities.
Preparing Phase	Help@Hand counties/cities planned their device distribution work and performed activities needed to get ready to distribute to consumers.
Acting Phase	Help@Hand counties/cities actively distributed devices to consumers.
Maintaining Phase	Help@Hand counties/cities distributed devices to consumers, supported device recipients, and may have considered future device distribution work.

One county/city was identified as being in the Exploring Phase, one county/city in the Preparing Phase, one county in the Acting Phase, and three in the Maintaining Phase.

Key Findings



Most impactful activity

The activities rated as being most impactful were providing digital literacy training to device participants (4.8 out of 5 and rated by 5 of 6 counties/cities) and developing flexible funding models (5.0 out of 5 and rated by 2 of 6 counties/cities).



Greatest challenge

The greatest challenge was a lack of time, expertise, and/or budget (4.8 out of 5 and rated by 4 of 6 counties/cities). Ensuring sustainability, sustained funding, and developing user agreements were also noteworthy challenges (4.3 out of 5 by 3 of the 6 counties/cities).

Why do Help@Hand counties/cities need to distribute devices and internet connectivity?

“The majority of older adults in our pilot **did not have technology available** to engage with mental health technology. Many did not own a device and for many that did, their **device was very out of date**. Many **could not afford to purchase a device at all**.”

“Over 100,000 people in [our county] either **don’t have access to broadband internet at home** or **have basic digital literacy skills**.”

How did device distribution and internet connectivity support the community?

“Access to a device is critical to engaging with technology, especially for individuals who are geographically isolated. Many project participants in our pilot suggested that **having access to technology was invaluable** with one describing the experience as **‘life changing.’**”

“Engagement with Help@Hand showed that participation led to a **significant reduction in loneliness and isolation**. Without devices, that would not have been possible. The impact of the digital divide for older adults cannot be underestimated, especially in a pandemic. The lasting benefit of providing a device and Wi-Fi access is that **participants can see their loved ones remotely, can engage with health professionals and can do things like online shopping, which is critical for those who are not able to drive.**”

“For those who are geographically isolated and do not drive, having a device and learning how to use it is **the difference between complete isolation, and having access to people and food, even if social interactions are only remote.**”

“It is our hope that this technology distribution program will provide participants with the **ability to connect to the digital space while also creating relevant learning opportunities so that participants can be comfortable engaging in the digital space.**”

Device Distribution Activities

After Help@Hand counties/cities identified what activities they completed, the activities were organized into three broader categories (1. infrastructure/resources, 2. digital literacy, and 3. technical support). Below are activities that fall into each of these categories.

Digital Literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engaged with stakeholders to understand the different <i>digital literacy</i> needs Provided <i>digital literacy</i> training for <i>device recipients</i> Provided digital literacy training for <i>peers</i>
Technical Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contracted with <i>external groups</i> with expertise in IT support
Infrastructure and Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Involved peers in device distribution tasks Leveraged outside technology providers (e.g., LifeLine, broadband providers, phone service providers, etc.) Engaged with different stakeholders to understand the different device needs Developed flexible funding models that allowed different technologies to be purchased to meet individualized needs

These activities require considerable time and expertise. Some activities, (such as engaging with different stakeholders to understand different device needs and developing flexible funding models), only occurred for counties/cities that were actively engaged in distributing devices (acting phase) or already distributed devices (maintaining phase). Managing these multiple activities was challenging to those engaging in this work:

“There are a lot of moving parts to ensure that devices can be given to participants. What has been challenging is being able to get the timing of multiple projects to line up so that technology can be distributed...It has been rather tricky to make sure that every component is ready to go.”

Device Distribution Activities and Challenges

Figure 1. Number of Help@Hand counties/cities who experienced each activity and challenge, with different colors indicating the phase each county/city is with their device distribution work.

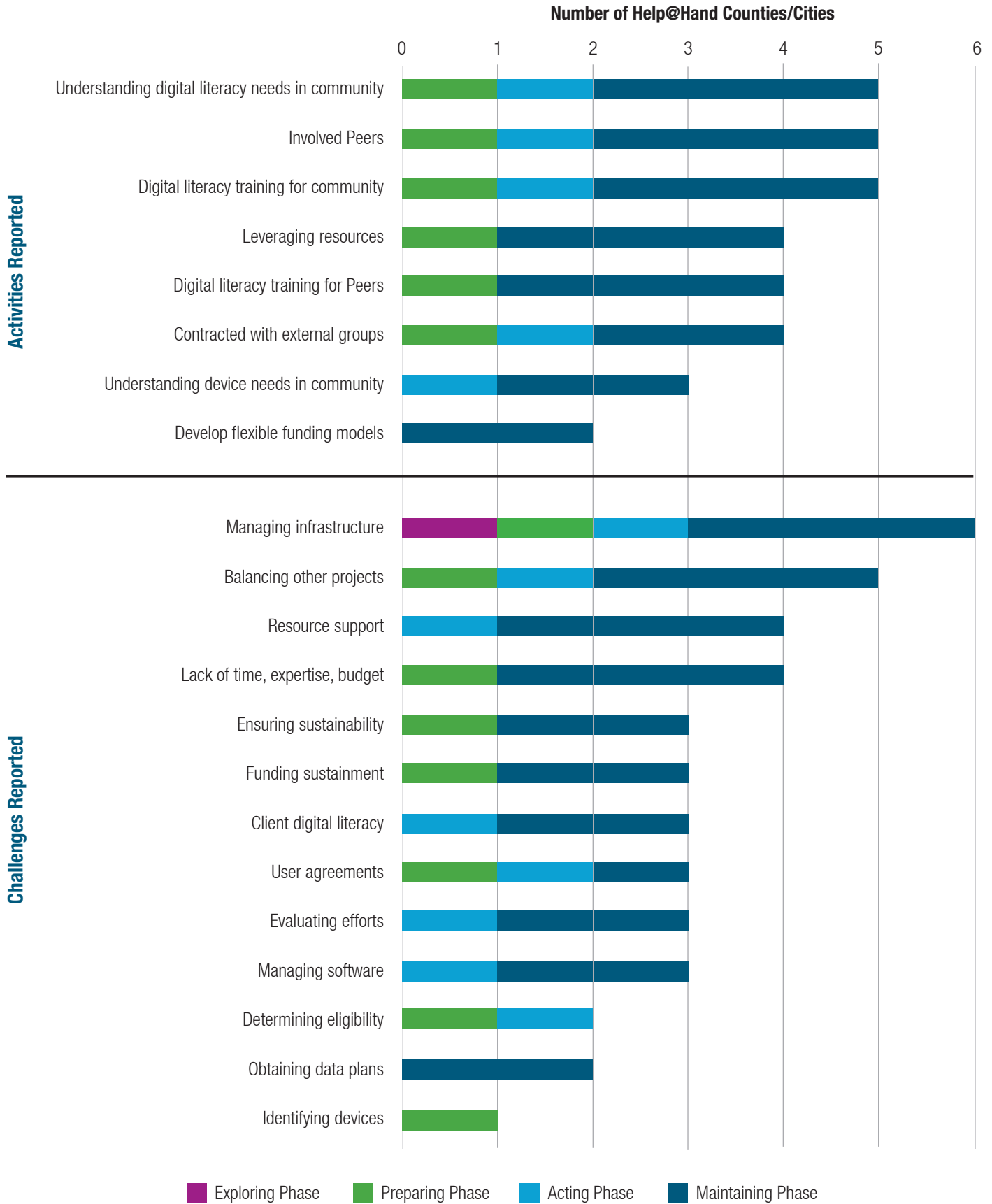


Figure 2. *Activities and Challenges defined*

	Item/Code	Description
Activities	Learned digital literacy needs in community	Engaged with stakeholders to understand the different digital literacy needs that may impact device uptake across the city/county.
	Involved Peers	Involved peers in device distribution work.
	Learned digital literacy needs in community	Engaged with stakeholders to understand the different digital literacy needs that may impact device uptake across the city/county.
	Leveraged resources	Leveraged existing resources to support device distribution (e.g., LifeLine, broadband providers, phone service providers, etc.).
	Trained Peers on digital literacy	Provided or developed digital literacy training for peers so they are empowered to carry out tasks related to device distribution and support device recipients.
	Contracted with external groups	Contracted with groups (external to our city/county) that have expertise in IT support.
	Learned device needs in community	Engaged with stakeholders to understand the different device needs across the city/county.
	Developed flexible funding models	Developed flexible funding models that allow different technologies to be purchased to meet individual needs (e.g., hotspots for geographically isolated areas, headphones when recipients have privacy concerns, etc.).
Challenges	Managing infrastructure	It was challenging to manage the many moving parts of building an infrastructure to support device distribution.
	Balancing other projects	It was challenging to balance device distribution efforts alongside multiple other projects.
	Supporting resources	It was challenging to get support for device distribution from programs such as LifeLine.
	Lacking time, expertise, budget	It was challenging to do the work with a lack of time, expertise, and budget to manage device distribution efforts.
	Ensuring sustainability	It was challenging to ensure the device distribution program is providing sustainable benefits to the city/county.
	Funding sustainment	It was challenging to do the work with a lack of funding to ensure device distribution can be sustained long term.
	Engaging clients in digital literacy efforts	It was challenging to engage clients in digital literacy resources.
	Establishing user agreements	It was challenging to set up appropriate user agreements.
	Evaluating efforts	It was challenging to measure success and evaluate if device distribution led to increased engagement with behavioral health technologies.
	Managing software	It was challenging to load and configure software on devices before they were distributed.
	Determining eligibility	It was challenging to identify the individuals who need the devices and determine eligibility.
	Obtaining data plans	It was challenging to identify appropriate internet providers and data plans that meet individual needs.
Identifying devices	It was challenging to identify appropriate, usable devices to distribute.	

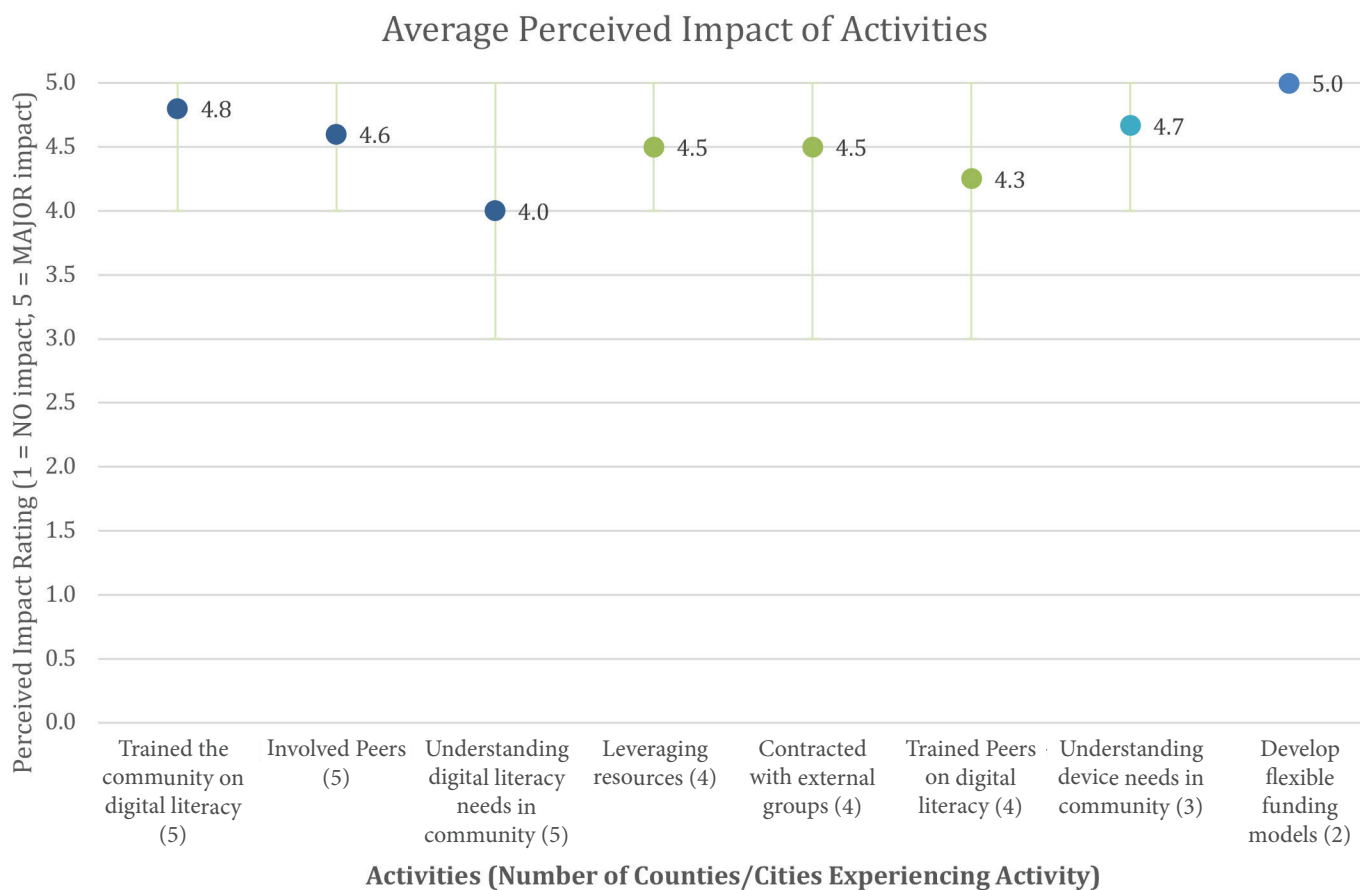
Many counties/cities reported engaging in and experiencing the same activities and the same challenges. Counties/cities who were maintaining their efforts did not face fewer challenges. Instead, they appear to have faced more challenges, but had found ways to address those through different activities. For example, counties/cities that ran into challenges with sustaining funding might have developed flexible funding models as a means of addressing the funding barrier.

Some activities appear to be early steps taken – involving Peers, understanding digital literacy needs, and conducting digital literacy training. Whereas others were steps taken by counties/cities in later phases – understanding the device needs and developing funding models. Similarly, counties/cities reported common challenges such as managing infrastructure, balancing other projects, and lack of time, expertise, and budget.

Perceived Impact of Activities and Challenges

In addition to whether they engaged in an activity or experienced a challenge, each county/city was asked to rate the **perceived impact** of the activities and challenges on a scale of 1 to 5¹.

Figure 3. Average perceived impact of activities and the standard deviation of the scores.

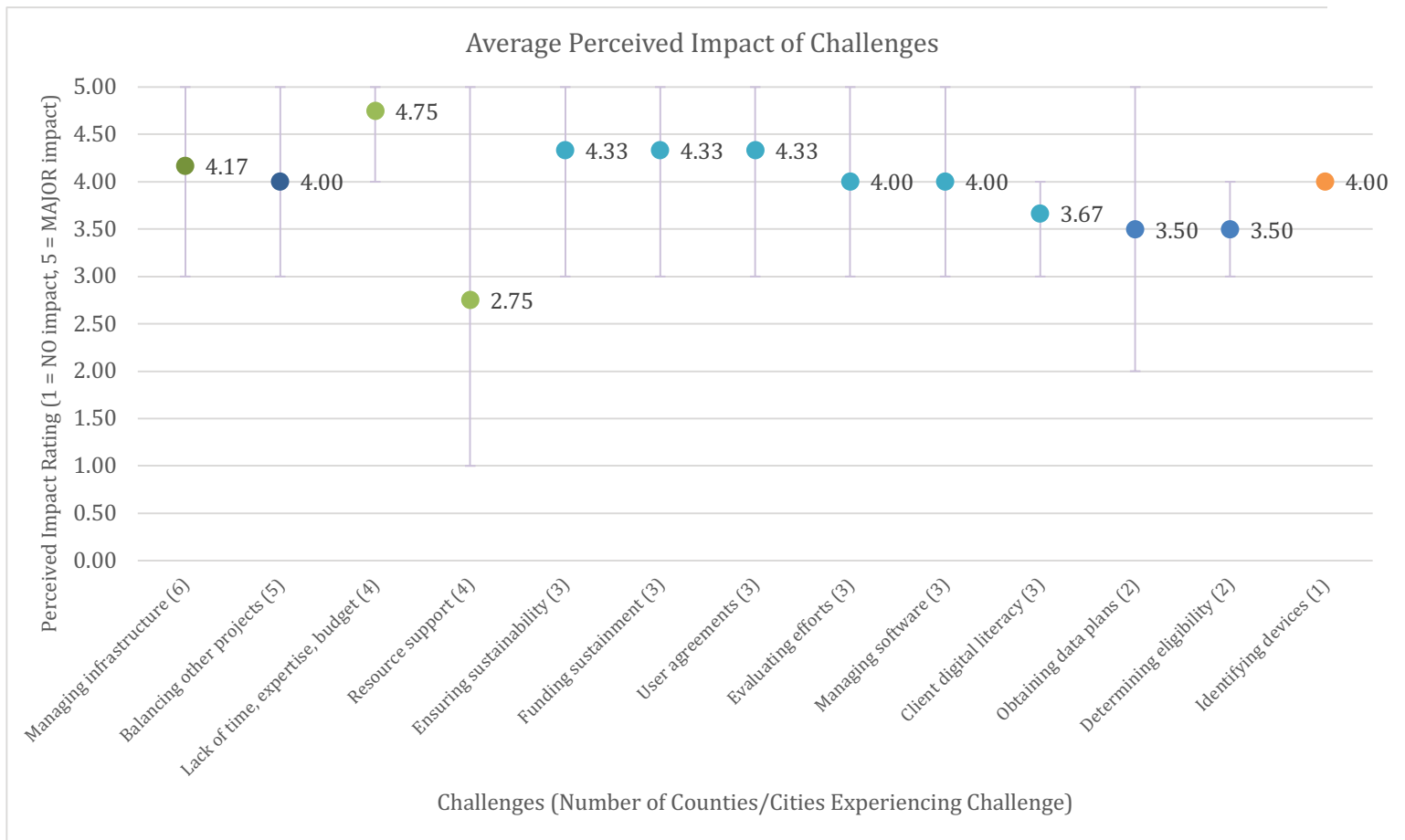


All activities had average ratings in the considerable to major impact range. The activities rated most impactful were **providing digital literacy training to device participants** (4.8 out of 5 and rated by 5 of 6 counties/cities) and **developing flexible funding models** (5.0 out of 5 and rated by 2 of 6 counties/cities). Counties/cities in the later phases of their work (acting and maintaining) generally tended to rate activities as more impactful.

¹ Levels of Perceived Impact of Activities and Challenges

- (1) This had NO impact on success
- (2) This had a SLIGHT impact on success
- (3) This had a MODERATE impact on success
- (4) This had a CONSIDERABLE impact on success
- (5) This had a MAJOR impact on success

Figure 4. Average perceived impact of challenges and the standard deviation of the scores



Challenges had average ratings in the slight to considerable impact range, but were notably more variable in their ratings. The greatest challenge was a lack of time, expertise, and/or budget (4.8 out of 5 and rated by 4 of 6 counties/cities). **Ensuring sustainability, sustained funding, and developing user agreements** were also noteworthy challenges (4.3 out of 5 by 3 of the 6 counties/cities).

Average perceived impact of challenges was also more variable across counties/cities in different phases of their work. For example, one county/city in the maintaining phase identified all the challenges they experienced as having a major impact (5 out of 5), whereas another county/city also in the maintaining phase identified the average perceived impact of challenges they experienced as being in the moderate range (3 out of 5).

“There have been many difficulties in trying to secure devices. The biggest hardship was trying to get the right number of devices that would fit within our budget. There was so much back and forth with T-Mobile and the Department of Public Health. It was really difficult to get everyone on the same line of communication”

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Lessons Learned

1. **Device Distribution Empowers Consumers:** Device distribution is not just about giving out devices but also empowering consumers with the knowledge and resources to use those devices.

"[We] will provide participants with a tablet, keyboard attachment, and internet service from T-Mobile for one year. In addition, participants will be able to access digital literacy trainings and receive peer support. It is our hope that this technology distribution program will provide participants with the ability to connect to the digital space while also creating relevant learning opportunities so that participants can be comfortable engaging in the digital space."

2. **Digital Literacy and Developing Funding Models Were Impactful Device Distribution Activities:** The activities rated most impactful were providing digital literacy training to device participants and developing flexible funding models. Challenges related to infrastructure and resourcing presented the greatest barriers.
3. **There tend to be more activities involved for counties/cities during the exploring/planning phase:** Activities for counties/cities in later stages (e.g., Acting, Maintaining) tended to be unique to counties/cities in these stages and included understanding the device needs of different groups and creating flexible models of funding.
4. **Without a plan for evaluation, it is challenging to measure the effectiveness of device distribution:** Evaluation of device distribution efforts was not identified as an activity by the counties/cities who were participating in device distribution but was identified as a challenge by several counties/cities.
5. **Device Distribution involves a lot of moving pieces and requires a lot of effort:** There are a number of activities which often require a lot of time, expertise, resources, and effort to ensure devices are distributed to the people who need it most.

[This deployment] has been a tremendous implementation effort that requires lots of time and coordination among the different entities involved (e.g. county facilities management for building code compliance and risk assessment, clinic sites supervisors, to vendor delivery schedulers, installers, bolting team, invoice team, project management, IT, Help@Hand Team, and more.)

Recommendations

1. Counties/cities interested in conducting device distribution work should plan for a variety of distinct activities from the start including infrastructure and resources, digital literacy, evaluation, and technical support.
2. Counties/cities should ensure necessary resources are available to be able to distribute device and internet connectivity successfully and appropriately.
3. Have a plan to evaluate the success of device distribution. Having an evaluation plan for device distribution can help understand the purpose of device distribution and provide lessons for future distribution efforts.

Appendix A

Methodology

The Help@Hand Evaluation team undertook work to understand the device distribution efforts that have been going on across various cities/counties participating in the Help@Hand project. To start, the Evaluation Team had a number of conversations, including conversations on Tech Lead calls, and interviews with cities/counties to get a sense of which cities/counties were conducting device distribution work and the types of activities and challenges that were coming up in this work.

Two surveys were then developed to gather more information. The first survey focused on identifying activities completed and challenges experienced during this work. The second survey focused on evaluating the impact of the identified activities and challenges to device distribution work.

One representative from each city/county that indicated they were conducting device distribution work (N = 6) completed each survey.

In Survey 1, respondents were asked about:

- Logistics of device distribution (i.e. number and type of devices, target population, etc.)
- Planned or completed activities
- Challenges experienced
- In addition to indicating whether or not activities or challenges were experienced, respondents also provided additional activities and challenges as free-text responses.

The responses to Survey 1 were reviewed and used to develop Survey 2. Activities and challenges that were frequently endorsed by counties/cities were included in Survey 2, along with any new activities or challenges that were noted in free-text responses

In Survey 2, respondents were asked about:

- Engaging in the activities that were frequently endorsed in Survey 1 (or noted in free-text responses)
- Experiencing the challenges that were frequently endorsed in Survey 1 (or noted in free-text responses)
- How much these activities or challenges impact success