POLICY BRIEF

Attention: State and County Legislators, Community Board Members

Executive Summary:

The lack of digital literacy, or the ability to use digital devices, communicate digitally, and navigate the internet, among socioeconomically challenged and limited English proficiency (LEP) communities in the United States significantly hinders telehealth use, worsens health outcomes and perpetuates inequity. (AHIMA, 2021).

This policy brief explores two policy options to address this issue: community-based digital literacy training programs and integrating digital literacy education into existing healthcare services. Integrating digital literacy education into existing healthcare services is recommended due to its direct impact on improving digital skills and access. Implementing this policy can bridge the digital divide, promote health equity, and improve health outcomes for vulnerable populations.

Background:

Digital literacy is essential for accessing telehealth services, which have become increasingly important for healthcare delivery, especially in socioeconomically challenged and LEP communities. These populations face significant barriers in digital literacy, which

Digital literacy: The ability to use digital devices, communicate digitally, and navigate the internet effectively and safely.

restricts their access to telehealth and exacerbate healthcare disparities. Studies have shown that improving digital literacy can enhance telehealth utilization, promote health equity, and improve overall health outcomes (Chidambaram et al., 2024; Sieck et al., 2021). The unprecedented pace of technological progress threatens to leave those lacking digital skills behind.

Facts
• *Digital literacy was first named as a social determinant of health in 2021*
• *Technological progress in healthcare only benefits those who can access it*
• *Digital literacy aids in employment, housing, and many other ways*
• *Digital literacy improves all literacy*
• *The internet is the most common place to gather info, yet 8% of the USA can't or don't know how to use it.*
• *Over 12% of health and social workers are digitally illiterate*

(Rodriguez 2024, Kemp 2023, Tan-McGrory 2022, Bergson-Shilcock 2020)

Lengthy waits for PCP visits drive many to emergency rooms. Telehealth availability led to a nearly 20% reduction is such visits. This promises considerable savings. The ability to access and navigate smart devices and computers is key.

Cost of an ER visit:	**$1,389** (Kaiser 2023)
Cost of a telehealth visit:	**$69** (Minemyer 2022)

Two Policy Options:

1. *Community-Based Digital Literacy Training Programs*	2. *Healthcare Based Digital Literacy Training Programs*
Develop and implement training programs in community centers, places of worship, and libraries to educate individuals on using digital devices and accessing telehealth services.	Incorporates digital literacy training into routine healthcare services, such as during hospital stays or outpatient appointments. This may include written content and a appointed guide at each visit.
Pros: Directly addresses the skills gap; can be customized to meet the specific needs of different communities.	**Pros:** Utilizes existing healthcare infrastructure; ensures consistent, ongoing education; directly links digital literacy with healthcare services. Relies on existing relationships between patients and providers.
Cons: Requires sustained funding and resources; effectiveness depends on participant engagement and program quality.	**Cons:** Requires training for healthcare providers; adds to the workload of healthcare facilities.
Projected Impact: Increased digital literacy, higher telehealth utilization rates, and improved health outcomes among participants. May foster stronger bonds within communities.	**Projected Impact:** Consistent improvement in digital literacy, increased use of telehealth, internet access, and smart devices. Improved health outcomes. Marked savings.

Recommendation:

The integration of Digital Literacy Education into existing healthcare services. The benefits of this approach include:

1. **Directly addresses the digital skills gap** by providing practical, hands-on training within healthcare settings. Health related goals are best addressed by health care workers.
2. **Leverages existing resources** without the need for new infrastructure. Uses existing relationships, leverages trust in healthcare team. Reduces cost and need for buy-in among participants. Can be modified to suit individual clinic/center resources.
3. **Promotes health equity** by ensuring that socioeconomically challenged and LEP populations have the skills needed to access telehealth services. Focus is specific and tailored.
4. **Has the potential for immediate and significant impact** on digital literacy and telehealth utilization rates. No lengthy planning stage.

References:

1. Chidambaram, S., Jain, B., Jain, U., Mwavu, R., Baru, R., Thomas, B., et al. (2024). An introduction to digital determinants of health. *PLOS Digital Health, 3*(1), e0000346. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pdig.0000346
2. Sieck, C. J., Sheon, A., Ancker, J. S., Castek, J., Callahan, B., & Siefer, A. (2021). Digital inclusion as a social determinant of health. *npj Digital Medicine, 4*, 52. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41746-021-00413-8
3. AHIMA Foundation. (2021). Digital health literacy as a SDOH. Retrieved from https://ahimafoundation.org/Digital-Health-Literacy-as-a-SDOH
4. Crawford, A., & Serhal, E. (2020). Digital health equity and COVID-19: The innovation curve cannot reinforce the social gradient of health. JMIR. Journal of Medical Internet Research/Journal of Medical Internet Research, 22(6), e19361. https://doi.org/10.2196/19361
5. Rodriguez, J. A., Khoong, E. C., Lipsitz, S. R., Lyles, C. R., Bates, D. W., & Samal, L. (2024). Telehealth experience among patients with limited English proficiency. *JAMA Network Open, 7*(5), e2410691. https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.10691
6. Kemp, S. (2023, February 9). Digital 2023: The United States of America. DataReportal – Global Digital Insights. Retrieved from https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-united-states-of-america
7. Tan-McGrory, A., Schwamm, L. H., Kirwan, C., Betancourt, J. R., & Barreto, E. A. (2022). Addressing virtual care disparities for patients with limited English proficiency. *The American Journal of Managed Care, 28*(1), 36-40. Retrieved from https://www.ajmc.com/view/addressing-virtual-care-disparities-for-patients-with-limited-english-proficiency
8. Bergson-Shilcock, A. (2020). *The new landscape of digital literacy*. National Skills Coalition. Retrieved from https://nationalskillscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/05-20-2020-NSC-New-Landscape-of-Digital-Literacy.pdf
9. Kemp, S. (2023, February 9). Digital 2023: The United States of America. DataReportal – Global Digital Insights. Retrieved from https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-united-states-of-america
10. Minemyer, P. (2022, January 21). Cigna study: Virtual care can reduce unnecessary ER, urgent care visits by 19%. Fierce Healthcare. https://www.fiercehealthcare.com/payer/cigna-study-virtual-care-can-reduce-unnecessary-er-urgent-care-visits-by-19