

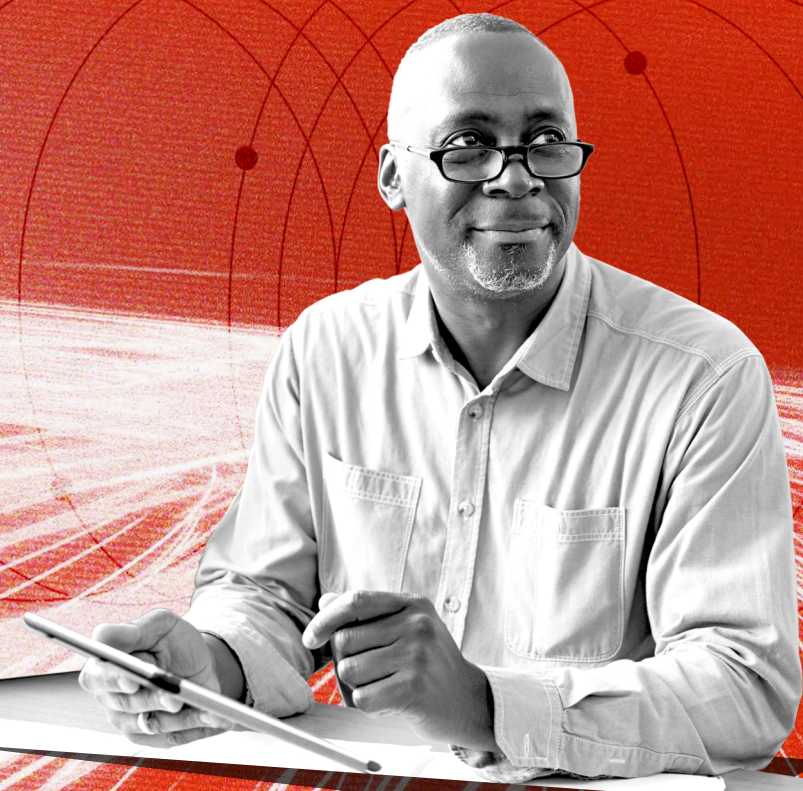
# EXPANDING DIGITAL INCLUSION FOR AGING POPULATIONS

Digital tools increasingly support critical functions, ranging from enabling access to healthcare services to facilitating everyday communication. However, while 60 percent of the global population is connected to the internet, access is unevenly distributed, especially for older adults. Aging populations often lack equal access to digital services in advanced economies, and the gap is even wider in low- and middle-income countries. While additional disparities in connectivity exist—for example, rural communities and many women also suffer from unequal access—connecting aging populations to the internet poses a unique challenge.

Closing the internet-access gap for aging populations is not only a matter of equity but also important for improving health, economic, and social outcomes as recognized in the UN Secretary General's Digital Compact, which aims to connect

every person on Earth to the internet by 2030. Expanding broadband infrastructure to encompass the 1.4 billion people who will be 60 years or older by 2030 is essential for effective inclusion of aging populations. However, it will require fostering public-private partnerships to overcome barriers such as lack of affordability, inaccessible design, and limited technical knowledge. To that end, AARP convened a series of roundtable events throughout the summer of 2022 featuring experts from governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the private sector to focus on three core issues: bolstering infrastructure, improving design, and building digital skills.

The following summary will be accompanied by forthcoming deeper analysis and recommendations on how to strengthen these three pillars of digital connectivity for older adults around the world.



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# MAKING BROADBAND INFRASTRUCTURE ACCESSIBLE TO AGING POPULATIONS

**THE CHALLENGE:** The urgency of ensuring that aging populations can access the internet was starkly highlighted during the pandemic, when many older adults were unable to access necessary remote care and faced severe social isolation. Existing approaches to expanding broadband access often lack coordination across government agencies, private companies, and NGOs, making implementation difficult. A lack of clear benchmarks and measurable goals further complicates efforts to accurately assess and learn from projects.



## PROPOSED SOLUTIONS FROM AARP ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS

**Setting clear goals and measuring against globally established benchmarks are necessary for policy success.**

- Policy progress should be publicly tracked across multiple metrics, including access, affordability, and adoption but funding and regulatory barriers often complicate these efforts.

**Broadband access needs to be paired with effective training and instructions, conducted in local languages.**

- Training seminars through communal organizations such as libraries and peer-to-peer education among older adults can promote socialization and boost adoption.

**Strengthening public-private partnerships globally is key to translating funding into results.**

- Fostering and scaling successful partnerships while connecting government agencies with community-led, local organizations can help maximize reach and impact.

**Aging individuals face significant barriers to digital access, even in advanced economies such as the U.S.**

# 22M

The number of older adults across the U.S., especially in rural areas, who lack broadband access at home. This undermines health and economic outcomes and can diminish overall quality of life.

# 2.7x

Medicaid enrollees in the U.S. are 2.7 times more likely to be offline than the general population.

# 40%

Approximately 40 percent of older U.S. adults were unable to access requisite online services at home during the pandemic.

**Effective public-private partnerships to build on and replicate for future collaboration:**

Amazon and AARP partnership on developing tech for seniors

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs digital services transformation

Administration for Community Living's support network for community organizations

Alliance for an Affordable Internet's policy reform advocacy



# INCLUSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE DIGITAL DESIGN FOR OLDER ADULTS

**THE CHALLENGE:** Exclusionary approaches are leaving older adults out of the technology design process. Currently, technology design is beginning to diverge into two distinct categories: assistive design for the disabled, and universal design for everyone else. This divergence has left aging adults lacking technology solutions adapted to their diverse range of needs and skills. Increasing dependence on digital technology throughout the pandemic highlighted its expanding and vital role in medical and financial systems. As the number of aging adults increases globally, it is crucial that digital tools such as smartphones and digital applications are designed in a manner that ensures equitable access.



## PROPOSED SOLUTIONS FROM AARP ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS:

**The needs of aging populations should be considered, and older adults should be included in the design process.**

- To help eliminate the existing barriers to digital access, expand opportunities for older adults to engage in testing, building, and designing products.

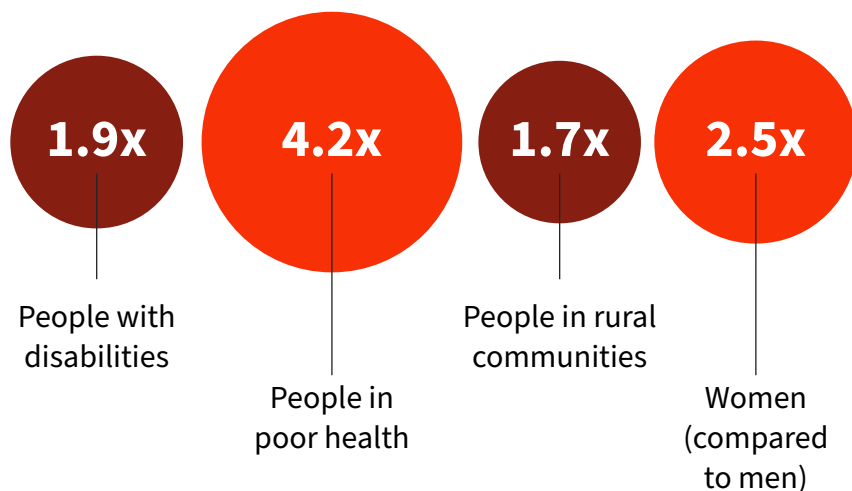
**Incentivize businesses, academia, and government to invest in design and innovation that is inclusive of aging populations.**

- Open-source design processes, global design competitions, and partnerships with targeted customer bases can help drive increased participation in inclusive design.

**Inclusivity should become a standard feature in technology design.**

- Technology design can become more inclusive through integrating environmental, social, and governance (ESG) principles, marketing inclusive design seals, and including accessibility features as standard.

**Patterns of digital discrimination persist, and integrating inclusive design elements can help close the gap. Compared to the general U.S. population, marginalized demographic groups are significantly more likely to be offline as follows:**



Source: [agingconnected.org/report/](https://agingconnected.org/report/)

## Key organizations working on bridging technological divides:

WHO Global Network for Age-friendly Cities and Communities

ITU Partner2Connect Digital Coalition

Shared Value Africa Initiative

Older Adults Technology Services (OATS)



# ADDRESSING THE DIGITAL SKILLS GAP IN EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

**THE CHALLENGE:** The rapid and accelerating pace of technological change is making it increasingly difficult for older adults to develop the necessary digital skills to effectively use new technologies. Even where internet connectivity and digital devices are available, developing the skills to remotely access healthcare, shop and bank online, and stay connected with friends and family may be exceedingly challenging. New digital devices can be expensive, require frequent software updates, and are often incompatible with pre-existing technology, which compounding the challenges that older adults face to acquire and maintain necessary digital skills.



## PROPOSED SOLUTIONS FROM AARP ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS:

**Create incentives for learning that replicate real-life needs of older adults.**

- Strive to better understand what motivates older adults to learn new tech, and make this the focal point for designing trainings.

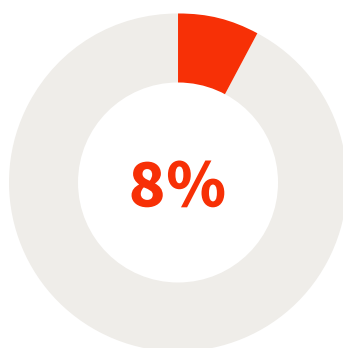
**Increase access to training in places older adults already frequent.**

- Find ways to engage the local community through non-profits, community centers, and storefronts and adapt training practices to fit these local environments.

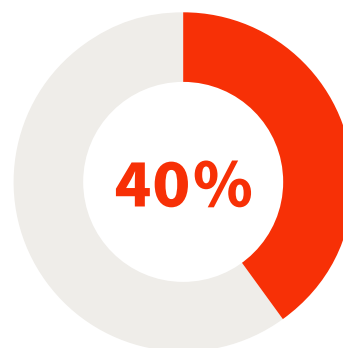
**Engage the private sector, and build the business case for increasing access.**

- Clearly communicate the market opportunity that technology products designed for older adults represent, while working to eliminate barriers such as scam calls that frequently target aging populations.

The share of Americans **with no digital skills remains steady at around 8 percent** between the ages of 16 to 34 and then begins to increase at age 35.



**By the age of 70, nearly 40 percent of American adults lack basic digital skills.**



Older Americans **living in rural areas** are 11 percent more likely to lack basic digital skills than those in urban communities.

Older adults with **access to internet and technology** are nearly 9 percent more likely to have basic digital skills than those without access to these technologies.

Source: [The Urban Institute](#)