

Telehealth Readiness: Developing Northstar's Digital Literacy Assessment



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Working in the digital literacy space during the pandemic, I saw first-hand the disadvantages those with low digital literacy skills had when it came to accessing healthcare.

Those who didn't have the skills to log into a patient portal, download an app, navigate several pages, or use a virtual meeting platform were left behind.

Given the rise in [telehealth](#), I was determined for Literacy Minnesota to bring digital literacy education and healthcare access to those who needed it most.

[Literacy Minnesota](#) has been helping adults with literacy for the last 50 years. Ten years ago, we decided that basic computer skills: how to turn on a computer, how to search the internet, and how to use email, among other topics, were essential to help individuals around the world master the digital skills needed to work, learn, and participate fully in daily life and were a necessary component of today's literacy needs.

With a powerful, widely used platform already in existence to teach and assess these skills, Northstar Digital Literacy seemed like the perfect solution.

[Northstar Digital Literacy](#), an internet-based platform teaches and assesses these skills. Northstar is used by over 2700+ organizations such as libraries, community colleges, adult education schools, and workforce centers in all 50 states and 7 countries. Together, these organizations serve hundreds of thousands of people a year, [all for free](#).

I first spoke with many professionals in the healthcare field to determine the need and understand what they were seeing on the frontlines: gaps between the digital haves and have-nots.

My conversations with nurses, insurers, patient care advocates, community health workers, health literacy instructors, and doctors helped me understand the ways in which digital literacy and digital equity are part of the [social determinants of health](#). And I met several individuals committed to helping Northstar find the funding to develop an assessment for healthcare providers to screen patients for telehealth readiness.

After 9 months of work, Northstar secured a grant from the [National Networks of Libraries of Medicine](#) to develop the standards, or skills, necessary for competency in accessing a telehealth visit, as well as to create the telehealth assessment.

The assessment can now be accessed for free at www.digitalliteracyassessment.org. Over 3,600 people have taken it since the beginning of May 2022. And an instructor-led curriculum on telehealth, funded by [Western New York Library Resources Council](#), will be available on the Northstar platform in late November 2022.

Our next step is to secure funding for the development of other assessments, instructor-led curricula, and self-directed practice lessons to address four other health-related digital skills gaps:

- using wireless medical devices
- [accessing patient care portals](#)
- searching for credible health information online
- choosing insurance plans online

Since the release of the telehealth assessment, we've seen great partnerships between libraries and healthcare providers.

Some libraries that use Northstar also offer “telehealth booths” – private rooms that people who are without a device or internet can use to participate in telehealth appointments – and assistance and instruction for those who need it.

With the completion of the Northstar instructor-led curricula on telehealth, libraries throughout the United States will be able to offer classes as well.

At the end of the day, our mission is clear: making it possible for patients to receive the digital literacy instruction they need to live healthier lives, have access to important healthcare information, and get care early and consistently to help prevent more serious complications.

About Literacy Minnesota/Northstar Digital Literacy

Literacy—the ability to read, communicate and access information—is critical for navigating the workforce, advocating for oneself, and fulfilling basic needs. Literacy Minnesota works to build a more equitable society by making quality literacy education available to all. We have built a literacy movement and have provided literacy services since 1972.

As a comprehensive literacy resource, Literacy Minnesota provides free classes for adults and children, supports literacy organizations, and creates new pathways for literacy learners to reach their full potential. Northstar Digital Literacy helps Literacy Minnesota share the power of learning and advance equity and justice by promoting foundational and digital literacy. Northstar enables individuals around the world to master the digital skills needed to work, learn, and participate fully in daily life. Northstar has proved a valuable tool in digital equity with over 6 million assessments taken and over 2700+ subscribing organizations providing free digital literacy assessments and instruction to individuals in all 50 states and seven countries.

About the Author

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Theresa Sladek, MA, is the National Partnerships and Northstar Business Specialist at Literacy Minnesota and works with organizations, cities, and statewide systems to ascertain and implement their digital literacy assessment and instructional needs. She is also involved in gathering best practices around implementing and using digital navigators and works with Literacy Minnesota's national Open Door Collective program on poverty reduction through literacy. Prior to this work, she developed statewide training on navigation-related to helping adult educational persistence and taught ESL and GED classes. Theresa has a BS in Biology from Lewis and Clark College and a MA in Counseling Psychology from the University of St. Thomas. She worked as a counselor, project manager, and corporate trainer before joining the field of education.