



Increasing Newcomers' Digital Access for Effective Virtual and Information Services (VIS) Programming

For newcomers to fully benefit from virtual and information services (VIS), they must be able to navigate technology with confidence. Many newcomers, however, face barriers that limit their ability to engage online, access information, and participate in virtual services. This guide presents five core challenges to digital access, along with steps you can take to address them in the short, medium, and long term.¹ Each section includes guidance on incorporating essential elements into your VIS program—such as connectivity, devices, technical support, and security—to help clients successfully progress toward digital independence.

What Is Digital Access?

Digital access is the ability of individuals to connect to and effectively use the Internet and digital technologies. Supporting digital access for newcomers requires a comprehensive approach. Service providers should confirm that newcomers have Internet connectivity, access to affordable devices, and the tools, knowledge, and assistance needed to navigate essential online services safely and effectively.

Virtual and information services (VIS) include all forms of technology-facilitated support, from human-led virtual assistance—such as caseworkers supporting clients via phone, email, text, or video call—to emerging tools like AI chatbots. VIS also encompasses information services such as websites, digital flyers, videos, and other self-guided resources.

¹ To structure this guide, Switchboard drew on a framework established by the [National Digital Inclusion Alliance \(NDIA\)](#), a nationally recognized leader in digital access.

How Digital Access Impacts Clients and Caseworkers

[Research](#) suggests that communities with comprehensive digital access programs see measurable improvements in economic opportunity, educational outcomes, and civic participation. Programs that build online tutorials, multilingual guidance, and consistent communication protocols are positioned to see clients reach self-sufficiency more quickly, and they also reduce staff burnout.

Increasing newcomers' digital access and skills alleviates the burden on caseworkers. When clients have connectivity, devices, and digital skills, caseworkers will spend less time on simple tasks like printing applications or making calls on behalf of clients, and clients will be empowered to use their digital skills in reaching self-sufficiency.

Tip: Offer all action steps in this guide in clients' preferred languages whenever possible. This includes printed materials, verbal instructions, and digital resources.

Five Core Challenges

The following five challenges represent some of the most common digital access barriers caseworkers encounter.

Challenge 1: Connectivity

Clients may have inconsistent Internet access, limited mobile data, unreliable public Wi-Fi, or no home broadband, making it difficult for them to consistently complete forms, attend virtual appointments, or access online resources. Without stable connectivity, even the most motivated clients cannot engage with virtual services.

When to take action: Assess clients' connectivity during intake and before scheduling any virtual appointments or online tasks. Return to the

strategies below whenever clients report connection issues or miss virtual meetings.

Start here:

- Share the [EveryoneOn](#) tool to help clients find affordable Internet plans in their area
- Create and share a list of nearby locations with free Wi-Fi (e.g., libraries, community centers) with their operating hours

Build from there:

- Teach clients to download PDFs and forms when connected, then complete offline using free apps like Adobe Acrobat Reader
- Provide prepaid mobile hotspot cards for clients with critical deadlines. Explore partnerships with local Internet service providers (ISPs) for discounted rates.

Challenge 2: Devices

Clients may lack personal smartphones, tablets, or computers and rely on shared or borrowed devices that limit privacy and consistent access to their accounts and documents. Without a personal device, clients cannot independently manage appointments, save important documents, or build digital skills, creating long-term dependence on caseworker support.

When to take action: Assess clients' device access during intake. Revisit when clients report difficulty accessing accounts between appointments or when privacy concerns arise with shared devices.

Start here:

- Connect clients to device loan programs like [PCs for People](#) (income-qualified devices starting at \$0)
- Test all resources on smartphones first; design your forms and resources to work on small screens

Build from there:

- Teach clients [shared-device safety](#): logging out after each use, creating separate user profiles, storing documents in password-protected cloud folders (e.g., on Google

Drive, Dropbox, etc.). Note: Switchboard does not endorse any individual product, service, or for-profit corporation, but we mention certain options in this guide for your own consideration.

- Show clients how to use their smartphone camera to scan and save documents using built-in phone features or free apps like Adobe Scan

Advanced:

- Explore the possibility of establishing organizational loaner device programs at your local office
- Develop relationships with local libraries for training newcomers on using library resources

Tip: Volunteers and interns can be helpful in supporting the steps in this guide.

Consider:

- Asking interns to create and maintain visual guides and checklists
- Working with volunteer coordinators or program managers to identify volunteers who can provide one-on-one coaching to clients

Challenge 3: Digital Literacy

Some clients struggle with basic digital tasks like typing URLs, creating passwords, distinguishing legitimate emails from scams, navigating dropdown menus, uploading documents, or understanding terms like “cookies” and “data.”

When to take action: Begin building digital literacy skills during early case management, after initial crisis needs are stabilized. Integrate skill-building into every interaction rather than treating it as a one-time training.

Start here:

- Provide hands-on “[digital basics](#)” training: how to create a secure password, set up email, attach files, and bookmark important websites. See [GCFGlobal curriculum resources](#) for more.
- Create a brief multilingual [glossary](#) to define key terms like “username,” “browser,” “download,” “upload,” “URL,” and “security question”

Build from there:

- Use visual step-by-step guides with screenshots for common tasks (e.g., navigating the USCIS website)
- Teach translation tool skills: show clients how to use [Google Translate](#) or [Microsoft Translator](#) and verify translations across platforms before submitting important documents.

Advanced:

- Offer practice exercises with sample forms where clients can make mistakes safely before submitting real applications

Challenge 4: Technical Support

Some clients get locked out of accounts due to forgotten passwords, can’t navigate automated phone systems to reach live support, don’t answer calls from unknown numbers, or feel overwhelmed by complex government portals not designed for mobile use.

When to take action: Provide technical support resources proactively before clients encounter these problems. Help troubleshoot when clients report access issues or communication breakdowns.

Start here:

- Find or create a password recovery flowchart showing step-by-step instructions for major platforms (e.g., [Gmail](#), USCIS, benefits portals) with links to official help web pages

- Provide annotated screenshots of government portal navigation for specific tasks (e.g., [filing USCIS address change](#))
- Have clients save your office phone number with a photo or label; text clients before calling (e.g., “I’ll call from [number] at 2pm”); and teach them to verify legitimacy by asking callers for their name, title, and callback number

Build from there:

- Help clients understand phone trees, practice saying “representative” and “operator” to escape automated menus, and create call note templates (date, agent name, reference number, next steps)
- Direct clients to [Settle In’s two-way messaging support](#) for personalized real-time guidance on a variety of resettlement questions (available Monday through Friday, 9 AM – 5 PM ET in five languages)

Advanced:

- Offer live screen-share coaching via a video call for complex tasks, and walk clients through portal logins and form submissions while they practice on their device

Challenge 5: Security, Safety, and Accuracy

Clients often receive phishing texts and emails, scam calls impersonating government agencies, fake job offers, or fraudulent requests for personal information, but they may lack the skills to identify and report these threats. Scams disproportionately target newcomers and can result in identity theft, financial loss, and loss of trust in legitimate services.

In addition, clients may make errors on time-sensitive applications due to misunderstanding deadlines, requirements, or complex instructions. Application errors create cascading delays, missed benefits, and potential legal complications that require time to resolve.

When to take action: Introduce security awareness early, as scammers often target newly arrived individuals. Address accuracy before any deadline-

driven task and when clients report confusion about forms or requirements.

“Digital technologies can be a vehicle for refugees’ self-reliance—but only if communities are empowered to use them safely and effectively.”

— UNHCR

Start here:

- Teach [scam recognition](#) through real examples: show phishing emails, fake websites, and scam call scripts. Highlight red flags like misspelled URLs, requests for Social Security numbers, urgent or threatening language, and generic greetings.
- Share [Settle In resources on identity theft](#) and [social media protection](#)
- Create visual deadline checklists for common applications (e.g., [I-131 travel document checklist](#)) showing required documents and common mistakes
- Set up reminder systems: teach clients to create calendar alerts (see tutorials for [iPhone](#) and [Android](#)) or pinned WhatsApp messages for submission deadlines

Build from there:

- Give each client a unique code to use when you contact them via text, email, or phone, and teach them never to share personal information unless they have confirmed the identity of the caller
- Show clients how to screenshot suspicious messages, record caller details, and report via [official channels](#)
- Use read-aloud tools (built into smartphones) to help clients understand confusing instructions before submission
- Review completed applications with clients before submission, focusing on commonly missed fields or misunderstood questions

Which Digital Access Challenges Are Your Clients Facing?

Do any of the following sound familiar? Reflect on how these potential concerns match with the five challenges outlined in this guide:

- Clients frequently miss virtual appointments or can't log in
- Clients ask you to complete online tasks for them
- Clients share that they're using library computers or borrowed devices with time limits
- Clients call you multiple times about the same technical problem
- Clients report scam calls/texts or express distrust of legitimate virtual outreach
- Clients submit incomplete applications or miss deadlines

See NDIA's [digital skills checklist](#) for more.

Conclusion

A proactive digital access strategy is foundational to delivering high-quality, successful virtual and information services (VIS) to newcomers. When clients have reliable devices, stable connectivity, and the basic digital skills to navigate online systems, every other part of the resettlement process becomes more efficient. By addressing common challenges early, from scam protection to portal navigation, programs create a more stable environment where every newcomer has the tools they need to engage fully in virtual services.

Resources

Apps: [Settle In iPhone](#) or [Settle In Android](#)

Blogs: [Innovative Ways Newcomers Are Using Technology](#) and [Insights from the Field: AI in Resettlement Work](#)

Guide: [A La Carte Digital Literacy Resources](#)

Initiatives and Info: [American Library Association Digital Initiatives](#) and [U.S. Government Digital Literacy Info](#)

Research Articles:

- [Pew Research on benefits and harms from digital life](#)
- [Pew's summaries on Internet and Technology](#)
- [Digital Divide; Technology Adoption](#)

Toolkits: [Using AI in Service Delivery: A Framework to Evaluate Organizational Readiness](#) and [Digital Navigator Toolkit](#)

Video Series: [Supporting Afghan Newcomers' Mental Health through Digital Literacy](#)



To learn more about Switchboard, visit [SwitchboardTA.org](#).

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