

STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA DIGITAL OPPORTUNITY PLAN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In response to the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity presented by the Digital Equity Act (DEA), the N.C. Department of Information Technology's (NCDIT) Division of Broadband and Digital Opportunity (the division) developed the North Carolina Digital Opportunity Plan. This plan is a comprehensive strategy that aims to ensure all individuals and communities have access to the digital tools, resources, and skills they need to fully participate in the digital environment.

This plan would not be possible without the individuals and communities most affected by the digital divide who contributed their time and input during the planning process. Their feedback is critical to ensuring that this plan is responsive to their needs and addresses the unique challenges they face.

This plan specifically responds to the digital opportunity needs of a defined set of covered populations identified by the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA):

- Aging individuals,
- Incarcerated individuals,
- Individuals who are members of a racial or ethnic minority group,
- Individuals who live in low-income households,
- Individuals who primarily reside in a rural area,
- Individuals with a language barrier, including individuals who are English learners and those with low levels of literacy,
- Individuals with disabilities, and
- Veterans

This plan reviews, synthesizes, and combines data, resources, and dreams yet unrealized into a comprehensive strategy to connect all North Carolinians to each other, the world, education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. The division submitted it to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) in January 2024, after the solicitation and incorporation of public input.

After the plan was approved, the division applied for NTIA funding and is initiating a five-year implementation period. The division will continually document and evaluate the implementation of this plan and report periodically to the public on the impact, learnings, and refinement of the strategies.

VISION AND MISSION

The work of achieving digital opportunity is collaborative, and the division continues to learn together with partners. Informed by listening sessions in communities across the state, the division crafted a vision and mission for digital opportunity in North Carolina.

Vision: We envision a future where all North Carolinians have access to reliable, affordable high-speed internet and the digital tools, resources, and skills to fully and equitably participate in our society, democracy and economy.

Mission: The NCDIT Office of Digital Opportunity will partner and collaborate with communities, partners and advocates across the state to ensure all North Carolinians have:

- Access to affordable and reliable high-speed internet,
- Computers and digital devices that meet their evolving needs, as well as access to quality and affordable technical support,
- Opportunities for developing digital skills,
- Tools and information to protect themselves online, and
- Online resources that are inclusive for all.

PLANNING PROCESS

The division assembled a strong team of digital opportunity partners across the state to ensure the plan is data-informed and incorporates the voices of covered populations. The list below provides a snapshot of the planning, data collection, and outreach activities the division completed to create a plan that reflects and responds to the needs of residents.

Phase 1: Identifying Key Partners and Developing an Outreach Plan

Leveraging North Carolina's strong, established network of digital opportunity partners as well as engaging key organizations serving covered populations was the first priority for the planning process. This network of partners served in an advisory capacity throughout all elements of the planning process.

Phase 2: Community Outreach and Data Collection

To ensure the plan included all N.C. communities and populations' needs, the division engaged in key activities related to outreach and data collection, including:

- Engaging local digital opportunity planning teams and coalitions
- Hosting eight public regional convenings in each economic prosperity zone culminating in an in-person summit and a virtual convening.
- Engaging state agencies to align priorities.
- Developing an asset inventory of more than 1,300 resources, programs, and initiatives meeting digital needs across the state.
- Deploying a first of its kind Digital Opportunity Survey, which received more than 6,600 survey responses between May and October of 2023.
- Hosting 23 listening sessions focused on the needs and experiences of covered populations.
- Engaging with Tribal communities to solicit their input and seek ways to collaborate.
- Partnering with the N.C. Telehealth Network Association's Healthcare Broadband Coalition to conduct conversations with telehealth partners around the state.
- Partnering with Student Freedom Initiative to host two town halls and supplemental surveys to identify the digital needs of staff, students and the surrounding community at three Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

Phase 3: Plan Development and Public Comment

The significant outreach and data collection efforts outlined in Phase 2 culminated in the development of this plan. It represents the first steps to digital opportunity, and the division commits to further development through continued outreach and public engagement.

CURRENT STATE OF DIGITAL OPPORTUNITY

Assets

Central to understanding the needs of covered populations in North Carolina is identifying the programs, initiatives, and resources available assets in the state. The division worked to develop a strong network of organizations that serve the digital needs of the state.

Organizations, local governments, anchor institutions, churches, and businesses across the state address digital needs in their community; however, no formal efforts to catalog each entity and its services existed until now.

The division identified 1,480 existing digital opportunity assets in North Carolina and 965 organizations, government, or faith-based institutions providing digital opportunity resources and support, representing assets in all 100 counties. Public devices (such as public computer labs) and public internet access were the most common resources (539) available followed by digital skills training and technical support (395). Access to devices (193) and digital navigation support (159) are also available in the state.

Organizations exist focused on meeting digital needs for all covered populations. The division found most services are available for aging individuals, and fewer services are available for individuals who are incarcerated or in re-entry. While many organizations served individuals with disabilities, the division only identified a handful that focused solely on the needs of people with disabilities. More resources for these covered populations are needed.

A digital opportunity plan is an important asset and often the first formal step for a community to “reduce the digital divide and prioritize digital opportunity for their residents.” North Carolina is home to a number of local and regional coalitions that have developed robust plans. Through a partnership with the Institute for Emerging Issues at NC State University, the division identified and analyzed key themes, barriers, and recommendations from the 27 draft and adopted digital opportunity plans and interviewed representatives from each planning team and coalition. These plans represent 48 counties and the Qualla Boundary, home of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

While this initial asset inventory identified most of the digital opportunity efforts in the state, a sustained effort to identify additional organizations will continue through an ongoing outreach and engagement effort.

Digital Opportunity Barriers and Needs

North Carolina’s covered populations are not monolithic and their identities are often intertwined. The division’s community-driven planning process confirmed that many individuals identify with more than one covered population, and the barriers to digital opportunity may be multiple, overlapping, and perpetuating.

There were several barriers raised by multiple covered populations across the state. These barriers, when removed, would close most of the gaps for all covered populations.

Common needs include:

1. **Access to and affordability of high-speed internet.** North Carolina defines access to high-speed internet as 100/20 Mbps (100 Megabits per second download/20 Mbps upload).
2. **Accessibility and inclusivity of online public resources.** Web accessibility and inclusivity means that websites, tools, and technologies are designed and developed so that people with disabilities and people who speak languages other than English (language access) can use them.
3. **Digital literacy.** Digital literacy is the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills.
4. **Cybersecurity and privacy.** Ensuring that people know how to keep their data and identity safe and secure online is key to protecting people online and making sure individuals feel safe connecting to the internet and using a device.
5. **Availability and affordability of devices and technical support.** Fully participating in a digital society requires access to reliable devices that meet the needs of users, as well as repair and technical assistance services to address issues with those devices.

STRATEGIES AND IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

To address the barriers and needs of the covered populations outlined above, the division plans to implement strategies to advance digital opportunity and increase internet access, affordability, devices, repair services, digital literacy, cybersecurity and privacy, and the inclusivity of online services.

The division will implement the following strategies to meet these needs :

- **Strategy 1:** Ensure all North Carolinians have access to affordable, reliable high-speed internet.
 - Implementation Activity 1.1: Support the state's Broadband, Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) program plan objectives and implementation to ensure alignment with North Carolina Digital Opportunity Plan goals.
 - Implementation Activity 1.2: Support Community Anchor Institutions to improve and expand free, public Wi-Fi locations.
 - Implementation Activity 1.3: Increase awareness of and enrollment in low-cost and subsidized broadband internet programs like the now-ended Affordable Connectivity program.
- **Strategy 2:** Promote practices that support online accessibility and inclusivity of public resources and services.
 - Implementation Activity 2.1: Leverage partnerships within state government, local government and organizations serving covered populations to adhere to standards for online accessibility and inclusivity.
 - Implementation Activity 2.2: Leverage partnerships to train staff in all cabinet-level agencies on online accessibility standards to improve the accessibility and inclusivity of state government websites and expand training and capacity to local governments and beyond.

- **Strategy 3:** Ensure that North Carolinians can acquire the digital and information-gathering skills to meet their personal needs and the workforce needs of the state.
 - Implementation Activity 3.1: Partner with workforce and education agencies at the state and local levels to identify and adopt high quality digital skills standards, including digital privacy and cybersecurity standards and digital health literacy.
 - Implementation Activity 3.2: Build on lessons learned from existing [digital navigator](#) programs to expand services across the state.
 - Implementation Activity 3.3: Leverage digital navigator and digital literacy programs to expand partnerships with organizations serving covered populations to meet their specific digital literacy needs.
 - Implementation Activity 3.4: Leverage existing partnerships with state education agencies to engage students and families in digital literacy programs.

- **Strategy 4:** Promote practices and leverage tools to ensure online privacy and security.
 - Implementation Activity 4.1: Partner with workforce and education agencies at the state and local levels to identify and adopt digital skills standards, including digital privacy and cybersecurity standards. (Crossover from Implementation Activity 3.1)
 - Implementation Activity 4.2: Integrate cybersecurity and privacy training into curricula implemented by digital navigators and other digital literacy efforts across the state.

- **Strategy 5:** Ensure that North Carolinians have access to digital devices that meet their needs.
 - Implementation Activity 5.1: Increase public access to devices at community anchor institutions.
 - Implementation Activity 5.2: Increase the supply of no-cost and low-cost devices in North Carolina's device distribution system.
 - Implementation Activity 5.3: Develop and sustain a high-volume preparation and logistics system (of new and refurbished devices) that supports the efficient movement of devices throughout the state and matches computing devices with the unique needs of the intended Covered Populations.
 - Implementation Activity 5.4: Utilize trained and qualified partners for device deployment and technical support.

SUSTAINABILITY

The strategies and activities outlined above should work together to build and strengthen a strong digital opportunity network (an ecosystem), to meet the digital needs of all covered populations. This network will be the backbone of the work, ensuring digital needs are met and that programs are sustainable long after NTIA funding has been spent. The division commits to sustaining a healthy, robust digital opportunity network that includes 1) a community of digital opportunity practitioners, and 2) building capacity across the state to identify and meet local needs.

ALIGNMENT WITH STATE PLANS AND GOALS

This digital opportunity plan was not created in a vacuum, and it will not be implemented in one. The division's community-driven planning process confirmed the interconnectedness of both the challenges covered populations face and the solutions that will close the digital divide. Alignment with state strategic priorities, including economic and workforce development goals, plans, and outcomes, educational outcomes, health outcomes, civic and social engagement, and delivery of other essential services, is paramount to the division's success in implementing the strategies outlined in this plan.