

Central Ohio Region **Community & Stakeholder Engagement**

Insights & Findings Report | June 2023

Prepared for Broadband Ohio
Digital Equity Planning



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Regional Engagement Overview

Regional Engagement Approach

Smart Columbus with support from Paul Werth Associates conducted outreach and convened a diverse group of community stakeholders throughout the 11 county Central Region as part of Broadband Ohio's Digital Equity Planning Process.

- Local & Regional Government
- Agriculture
- Social Services
- Community Based Organizations
- Residents
- Libraries
- Internet Service Providers
- Schools / K-12
- Transportation Authority
- Employers

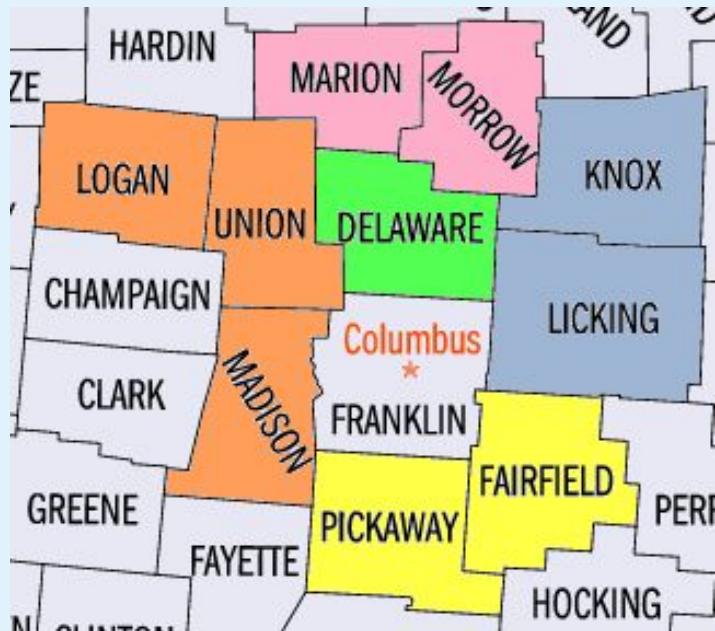
Through virtual and in-person engagement sessions participants contributed stories and examples of digital exclusion barriers, provided their input on digital inclusion priorities, and prioritized digital inclusion strategies through a series of interactive workshop activities.



▼Werth



10 Listening Sessions Across the Central Region



** Franklin County engagement was done comprehensively through the development of the Franklin County Digital Equity Action Agenda. We incorporated these insights throughout.

117 Community Stakeholders Engaged

Virtual Engagement Sessions | Industry Focused

1. (20) May 11 - Internet Service Providers; 9:00-10:30 am
2. (11) May 31 - Healthcare & Banking Industries; 9:00-10:30 am

In Person Engagement Sessions | Geography Driven

3. (13) May 10 – Delaware County; 9:30-11:30am
Willis Building, 2079 U.S. Highway 23 n, Delaware, Ohio 43015
4. (9) May 22 – Licking-Knox Counties; 9:30-11:30am
John Gilbert Reese Center, 1209 University Drive, Newark, Ohio 43055
5. (11) May 23 – Marion-Morrow Counties; 9:30-11:30am
Marion Technical College, 1467 Mt Vernon Ave, Marion, Ohio 43302
6. (13) May 25 – Pickaway-Fairfield Counties; 9:30-11:30am
Pickaway County Library, 1160 North Court Street, Circleville, Ohio 43113
7. (14) May 30 – Logan-Union-Madison Counties; 9:30-11:30am
Transportation Research Center, 10820 OH-347, East Liberty, Ohio 43319

Resident Engagement | Community Listening Sessions

8. (13) June 7 - Seniors / Older Adults: Pickaway Senior Center; 12:00 pm
9. (8) June 13 - Rural: Morrow County Farm Bureau; 7 pm
10. (5) June 22 - Low Income: People In Need, Inc. of Delaware County; 12:00 pm

Engagement Session Representation

Delaware County

- People In Need of Delaware County (Non-profit serving low-Income residents)
- Delaware-Morrow Mental Health and Recovery Board (Non-profit serving mental Health & Justice Involved)
- Delaware County Transit (Public service serving low-Income residents)
- Delaware Area Chamber of Commerce (Business)
- Sourcepoint (Public service serving Seniors/Older Adults/Local Government)
- Consolidated Cooperative (Local Government)
- Delaware County Economic Development (Local Government, Econ Dev)
- Delaware County (Local Government)

Licking-Knox Counties

- Knox Area Development Foundation (Business/Econ Dev)
- Central Ohio Technical College (Students/Education)
- Licking County Chamber of Commerce (Business/Econ Dev)
- Food Pantry Network of Licking County (Low Income, New Americans, Immigrants)

- Intel Corp. (Business)
- Licking County Aging Partners (Seniors/Older Adults)
- United Way of Licking County (Low Income, New Americans, Justice Involved)
- City of Heath (Elected)
- Grow Licking County (Business/Econ Dev)

Marion-Morrow Counties

- Marion Can do (Business/Econ Dev)
- Ohio Farm Bureau Federation (Rural/Agriculture)
- Marion County Developmental Disabilities (Disabilities)
- Marion Library (Library)
- MORPC (Econ Dev, Regional Planning)
- Delaware-Morrow Mental Health and Recovery Board (Mental Health, Justice Involved)
- Jobs & Family Services (Social Services)
- Star Turbine (Media)
- Ridgedale Schools (Students)
- Mount Gilead Public Library (Library)
- Marion General Hospital, OhioHealth (Healthcare, Business)

Engagement Session Representation

Pickaway-Fairfield County

- Fairfield County Economic Development (Business/Econ Dev)
- South-Central Power (Business)
- Pickaway County Park District (Local Government)
- Pickaway County Community Action Organization (Low Income, Migrant Families)
- Fairfield County Community Action Agency Organization (Low Income, Migrant Families)
- Pickaway County Chamber of Commerce (Business/Econ Dev)
- Pickaway County Commissioner (Elected, Local Government)
- Pickaway Senior Center (Seniors/Older Adults)
- FreedomLinx Technologies (Business)
- The Ohio State University Extension (Students, Agriculture)

Union-Logan-Madison Counties

- Logan County Chamber of Commerce (Business/Econ Dev)
- Union County Economic Development & Chamber (Business/Econ Dev)

- Ohio Farm Bureau Federation (Agriculture)
- Union County (Local Government)
- IT Director, City of Marysville, Ohio (Local Government)
- Ohio Association of Community Action Agencies (Low Income, Migrant Families)
- United Way of Logan County (Low Income, New Americans, Justice Involved)
- Transportation Research Center (Business)
- Logan County Libraries (Library)
- Marysville Public Library (Library)
- City of Bellefontaine (Elected, Local Government)
- Ann Aquillo Consulting (Business)
- ODJFS Logan County Office (Low Income, Migrant Families)

Engagement Session Representation

Internet Service Providers (Virtual Session)

- Verizon - 3
- AT&T
- Cologix
- Henkels
- Breezelne
- Midwest OSP
- Graybar - 2
- Clearfield
- CTS Construction
- Geotech
- Brightspeed
- Cooperative Network Services
- OCTA - 2
- Consortia Consulting
- Ayersville Telephone Company
- Triple D Communications
- Spectrum

Banking and Healthcare Industries (Virtual Session)

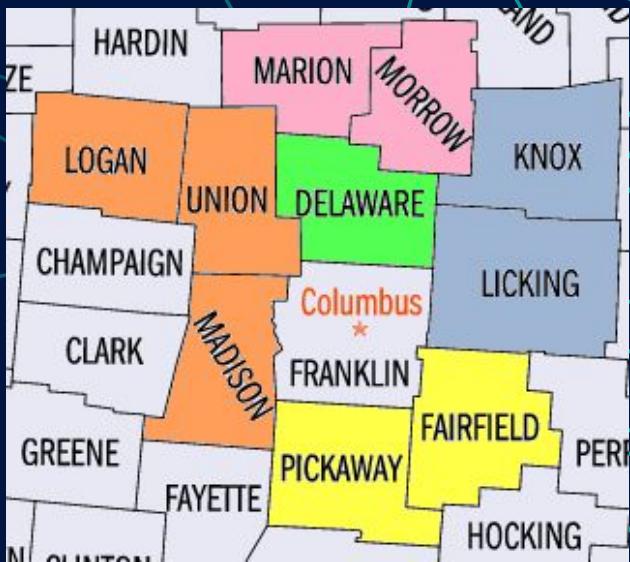
- Ohio Health
- Memorial Health System
- OSU Wexner Total Health and Wellness
- Lower Lights Christian Health Center
- Ohio Association of Community Health Centers
- Knox County Community Health Center
- Ohio Health Wexner Medical Center
- LSS Health Center
- Nationwide Children's Hospital - 2
- Citizens Federal Savings - 3

Community Stakeholder Engagement



Current State of Digital Equity in the Central Region

Digital Inclusion Assets by County



Asset Mapping

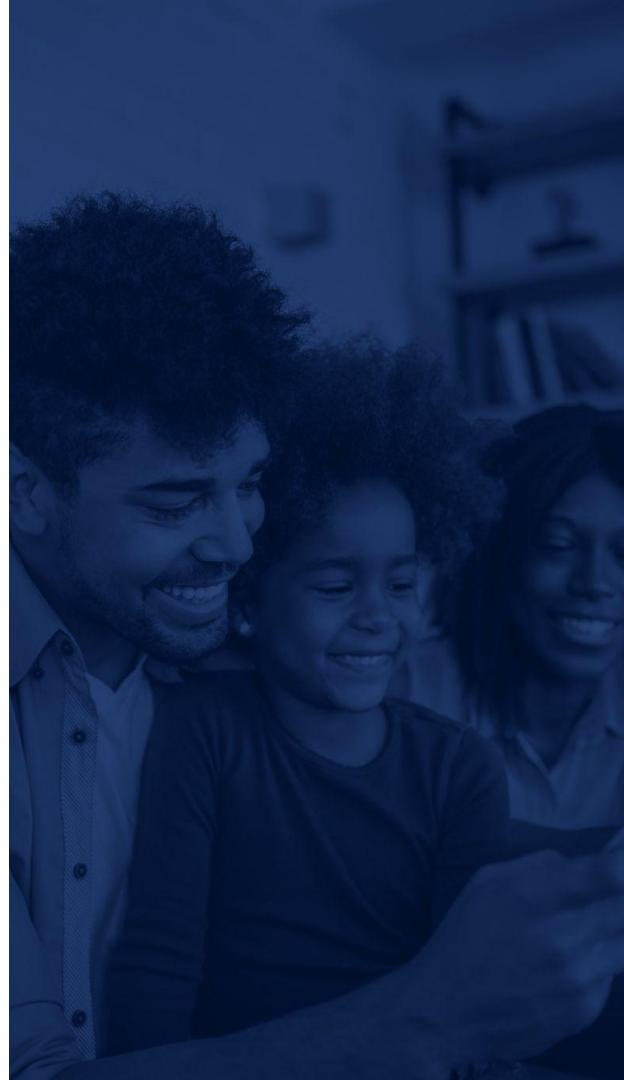


Asset mapping is an ever-evolving process, and we present the following assets as a sample of our current understanding. We recognize that there are many gaps, and there is much more to uncover and document.

Building upon and continuing to map the digital inclusion assets across the community will be a perpetual work in progress, requiring ongoing effort, collaboration, and adaptation throughout the state.

Regional Assets

- **AT&T Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP):** Offers subsidized broadband plans to eligible households, providing discounts on high-speed internet with no data caps (\$30/mo subsidies)
- **Human-I-T:** creates equitable access to opportunity by providing devices, internet access, digital skills training and tech support. Also empowers organizations to divert technology from landfills to protect our planet
- **PCs for People:** equips low-income individuals and nonprofits with computers and mobile internet
- **Federal Communications Commission:** grants subscribers a discount on qualifying monthly telephone service, broadband Internet, or bundled broadband packages



Franklin County Assets

- **Breaking Barriers:** Bridge climate, gender, and digital divide through pre-delinquency programs for those who are at high risk. Created an online classroom for women in incarceration. Provides remote mentoring for justice involved.
- **Catholic Social Services:** Help latino families and immigrants apply for jobs online and advocate for simplified job applications. Provide Family Engagement and Community Liaisons: 17 bilingual liaisons to engage families in the school system. Serve 3,000 families with connectivity issues in the CSS system.
- **Central Community House:** supplies chromebooks to qualified residents through digital skills training
- **Columbus Metropolitan Housing Authority:** provides computer centers at certain locations and is in partnership with the Library to offer digital navigation support.
- **Columbus Metropolitan Library:** provides a wireless hub for WiFi enabled devices, and chromebooks to check out for up to three weeks
- **Community Shelter Board:** provides Internet Connectivity and computer rooms in shelters
- **Franklin County Digital Equity Coalition:** A dedicated group of over 30 Franklin County and regional organizations, representing government, education, healthcare, social service, private sectors and institutions in a collective action effort to close the digital divide.
- **Franklin County Workforce Development Board:** provides a computer lab where people can look for work and receive basic technical skills instruction
- **Goodwill & Columbus Metropolitan Library:** offers various workshops to residents (computer skills, LinkedIn 101, Career Development, etc.)



Franklin County Assets

- **Jewish Family Services:** Offers digital navigation support and online job application support for New Americans. JFS delivered Chromebooks door to door during the pandemic, trained each house how to connect a hotspot, connect a computer, and connect to a school system's online platform. Collaborating with the Library system to combine devices with skills training. Opened 5 learning centers for working families.
- **Opportunity Port:** Start-up tech platform for court record sealing and expungement. Provide remote legal help and created a tool for legal aid to plug into their platform.
- **OhioMeansJobs Center Computer Lab:** provides a lab where people can look for work
- **Sage Sustainable Electronics:** extend the life of technology devices to decrease the carbon footprint and reduce total cost of device ownership. Refurbishes used tech for new users with recycling as a last resort and facilitates donation into the community.
- **UNIK Foundation:** Support justice involved adults and youth with re-education, recovery and reentry. Provides digital skills training within institutions.
- **Branch Insurance:** a start-up insurance company that wanted to avoid the typical cycle of hiring a lot of senior developers because it excludes many talented developers from underrepresented groups in the software industry. To break out of that constrained hiring market, Branch decided to focus on hiring junior developers and upskilling them through an in-house boot camp program based on its specific technology stack—a curriculum focused on AWS services and serverless architecture—in the South Linden neighborhood of Columbus, OH.



Delaware County Assets

→ ***People in Need, Inc. of Delaware County Ohio***

- ◆ Help connect residents they serve to other emergency assistance programs by supporting them with completing online applications through their website and in coordination with the local library system. Their service is free to qualifying residents, and individuals can receive one-on-one support from volunteer-led instructors through in-person or on-the-phone interactions.

→ ***VoiceCorps***

- ◆ Supplies nursing homes with Amazon Alexa devices, allowing individuals with visual impairments or disabilities to access a diverse range of programs via read-aloud technology, ranging from news to entertainment.



Licking County Assets

→ **Central Ohio Technical College**

- ◆ Provides digital skills training and technical support to residents through a combination of in-person and online courses. Residents can access their services either through scheduled hours for in-person courses or on-demand availability for online courses. These courses are instructor-led and have a cost associated.

→ **City of Mount Vernon**

- ◆ Provides free, public WiFi in Mount Vernon's downtown district, allowing visitors to spend more time downtown while having the ability to freely work and connect with others.



Marion County Assets

→ Marion County Job & Family Services

- ◆ Offers digital skills training and technical support to residents, focusing on assisting them with online job searching and application processes. This one-on-one service is provided free of charge and offers on-demand access to in-person interactions and online curriculum. Eligibility for training support is determined through Universal Services or income eligibility criteria. The tech support services they offer focus on computer operations, such as: turning on the device, logging in, and connecting to WiFi.



Morrow County Assets

→ *Cardington-Lincoln Public Library*

- ◆ Offers residents free access to public computers and WiFi. Additionally, residents over 18 years old have the option to borrow devices for home use.
- ◆ Provides a comprehensive range of digital life skills and technical support to residents through free, one-on-one courses. They offer access to online training tools such as Northstar and LinkedIn Learning, and have a dedicated Digital Literacy Trainer who can assist with various technology assistance.

→ *Mount Gilead Public Library*

- ◆ Provides computer, WiFi, and rentable mobile hotspot access to all residents, along with tech support for any technology-related needs. Borrowing the hotspots is free of charge upon signing an agreement form.
- ◆ Staffed with a team of tech-savvy employees who are available during library hours to assist residents with digital skills and technical support.

→ *Perry Cook Memorial Public Library*

- ◆ Offers free WiFi access to anyone inside or near the building, along with computers for use within the library.
- ◆ Provides one-on-one digital skills training and technical support to residents, which is available both in person and over the phone.



Barriers & Needs

By Objective

Central Region

Digital Inclusion Objectives

Internet Accessibility

Expand reliable, high-quality residential, commercial, and public internet options that meet national standards through equitable cost structures in underserved areas and increase options in all areas of the Central Region.

Internet Affordability

Establish equitable cost structures paired with service options that meet national quality standards, and support a coordinated outreach approach that effectively provides residents with information to adopt and maintain affordable internet service.

Device Access

Create a sustainable stream of appropriate high-quality digital devices paired with wrap-around support that are available at low to no-cost to benefit residents who need them.

Digital Life Skills

Expand and increase access to digital skills training with the addition of lifelong learning opportunities across provider organizations that support residents' individualized needs on a continuum from survival to career.

Financial Sustainment

Establish long-term funding for digital inclusion beyond the federal investment.

Trust & Digital Transformation

Support community wide Behavior Change by exposing the benefits and value of technology for digital empowerment.



Internet Accessibility

OBJECTIVE:

Expand **reliable, high-quality residential, commercial, and public internet options** that meet national standards through equitable cost structures in underserved areas and **increase options** in all areas of the Central Region.

Internet Accessibility

Barriers:

→ Access and Infrastructure

- ◆ Geography creates economic barriers and leads to dead zones based on geography.
- ◆ The last mile infrastructure is lacking, making it difficult for people in certain regions to get online.
- ◆ The supply chain issues and cost of construction for smaller ISPs can further slow down infrastructure expansion.
- ◆ Resistance from residents who don't want construction crews in their front yards is another barrier to infrastructure expansion.
- ◆ Historical disinvestment in certain urban communities due to redlining that resulted in a lack of digital infrastructure investment by internet service providers driven by economic forces.

→ Residential Access is not Enough

- ◆ The focus is primarily on residential access, but commercial/public access is also important. Lack of commercial/public access can hinder small business growth and the ability to bridge the accessibility gap for those who cannot access or choose not to access internet at home.

“Without access to internet we miss out on economic advances in the community, such as home values, investment in the community and the loss of career opportunities.

Ultimately, it makes it difficult to keep people in the community.”

- Licking-Knox

Internet Accessibility

Barriers:

→ Lack of Understanding

- ◆ Poor understanding of what internet access entails and how it can be utilized effectively. This includes understanding the difference between a cell phone plan and the internet.

→ Trust & Perceptions of Need

- ◆ There's a mistrust of ISPs which can deter individuals from subscribing or fully utilizing the service. Information on internet plan options, service quality, pricing, and affordability programs like ACP is hard to find, misleading, or not available at all.
- ◆ Even when access is available, some may choose not to subscribe because they don't see the value or need.

→ Poor Service Quality

- ◆ Issues with internet speed, spotty connections, and poor bandwidth. Low cost plans often don't offer the upload and download speeds needed by all. Some pay for a more expensive plan but don't see improvement in service quality.
- ◆ The availability and speed of the internet is especially an issue in many rural regions who largely rely on mobile cellular data for internet access which can be over-trafficked and unreliable.

“With internet access businesses are able to grow and improve their operations.”

- Marion-Morrow

“There is an increased cost to businesses who have to deliver services to people who are digitally disconnected.”

- Pickaway-Fairfield

Internet Accessibility

Needs & Desires:

- **Connectivity & Accessibility**
 - ◆ Residents value the ability to connect rural areas and provide resources to agricultural communities.
 - ◆ Everyone should have the ability to access the internet if they desire, using various devices (phone, TV, laptop/tablet) at home or at work.
- **Online Learning**
 - ◆ Online-based education, schoolwork, and online homework are vital needs and use cases.
 - ◆ Residents expressed the desire to learn new skills online.
- **Healthcare & Telehealth**
 - ◆ Telehealth, doctor appointments, remote patient monitoring, and healthcare portals are crucial.
- **Public & Government Services**
 - ◆ Residents want to access government services, apply for assistance or benefits, and access public WiFi.

“Farming requires technology and access to the internet. Most modern equipment requires software and an internet connection to work properly. Without internet, people choose not to go into the industry because they can't innovate.”

- Marion-Morrow

Internet Accessibility

Needs & Desires:

→ Professional & Business Needs

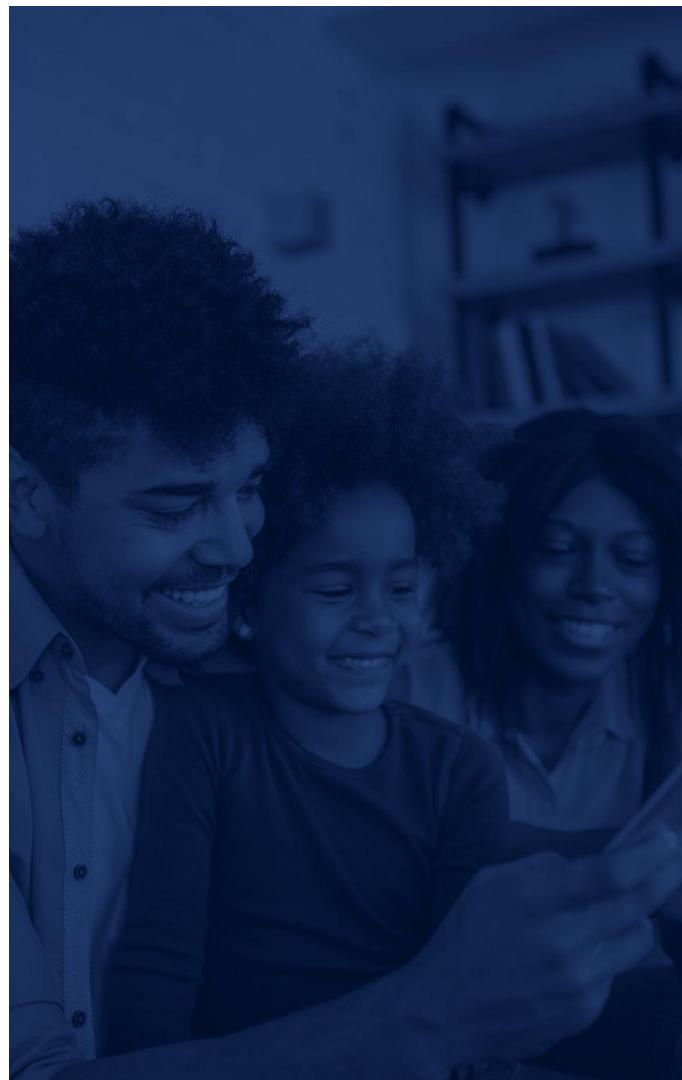
- ◆ Residents need internet access for work, work from home, running a business, or applying for jobs.
- ◆ They also want to increase productivity and efficiencies, access business software, and conduct transactions online.

→ Social & Personal Wellbeing

- ◆ Residents want to use the internet for social interactions, connecting with remote family/friends, and entertainment.
- ◆ They also desire access to hobbies and cultural connections, and to reduce feelings of isolation.

→ Financial Services & eCommerce

- ◆ Residents want to manage finances online, including paying bills, banking, taxes, and shopping.
- ◆ They also want to be able to sell or buy equipment/products online.



Internet Accessibility

Needs & Desires:

→ Access to Information & Resources

- ◆ Residents want access to information and resources online, including news, updates, community events, and online resources.
- ◆ They also want to be empowered with knowledge and information at their fingertips.

→ Convenience & Customer Experience

- ◆ Residents want internet access to be as convenient and easy as possible, including easy billing, tech support, and seamless customer support.

→ Equality & Fair Treatment

- ◆ Residents express a desire for equal treatment and access to the internet as a basic utility, with low barriers and affordable, reliable service available to all.



Internet Affordability

OBJECTIVE:

Establish equitable cost structures paired with service options that meet national quality standards, and support a **coordinated outreach** approach that effectively provides residents with information to adopt and maintain affordable internet service.

Internet Affordability

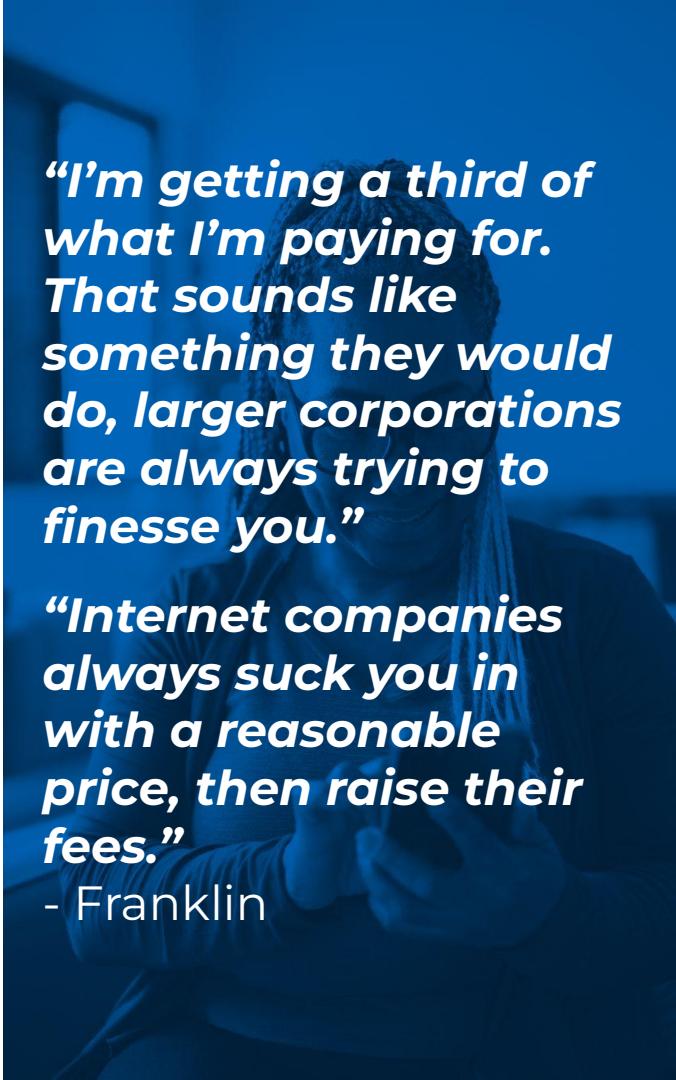
Barriers:

→ Tier Flattening, Lack of Transparency, & Confusion

- ◆ Large ISPs created pricing models that result in a greater difference between low-speed and middle to high speed plans. This has priced out many low-income families from quality plans that they need.
- ◆ Consumers noted that they feel like ISPs often use "bait and switch" tactics and raise introductory rates without warning or make it hard to change subscriptions once they sign up.
- ◆ There is no standard price point for internet and no guarantee of speed per dollar. Assessing value and comparing internet plans is complex and misleading. Additional customer confusion stems from bundled plans, exclusive marketing deals with multi-tenant buildings, and separate channels for purchasing market rate plans vs. low-income plans.

→ Cost and Financial Constraints

- ◆ Many residents find internet access cost-prohibitive. This includes installation, having to prioritize other needs over internet connectivity, and the rising cost of living.



"I'm getting a third of what I'm paying for. That sounds like something they would do, larger corporations are always trying to finesse you."

"Internet companies always suck you in with a reasonable price, then raise their fees."

- Franklin

Internet Affordability

Barriers:

→ Cost vs. Quality and Perceptions of Value

- ◆ The most affordable or basic plans often offer poorer quality, with consumers having to deal with pressure to upgrade. This poor quality relative to cost exacerbates the perception of poor value.
- ◆ Many residents struggle to see the value of internet connectivity, particularly if they feel their usage doesn't justify the cost.

→ Temporary Solutions

- ◆ There is concern with affordable internet programs such as ACP being temporary or suddenly going away, leaving consumers with unexpected costs creating instability and unpredictability.

→ Rural Divide

- ◆ There is a lack of affordable internet options in rural areas due to low density, which reduces the return on investment for internet service providers and puts the burden of infrastructure buildout costs on residents.

"I'm retired and on a fixed income. The cost of living has gone up a lot. I used to use computers, but now my hands shake so much I can't type, so I don't see the point in paying for something I can't use."

- Pickaway Senior Center

Internet Affordability

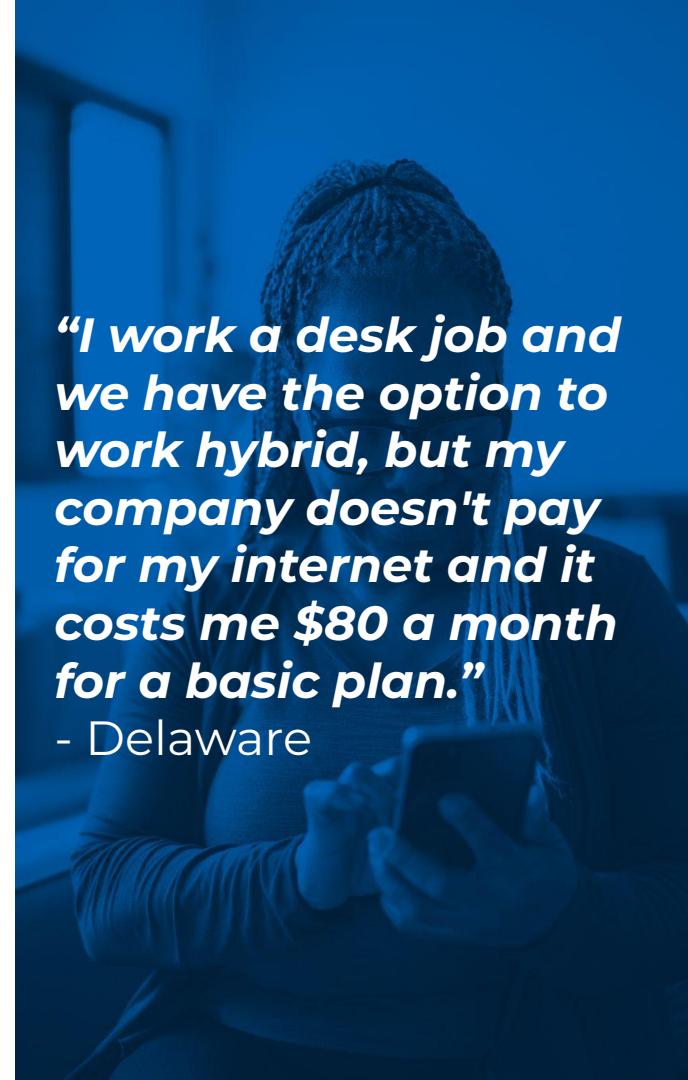
Barriers:

→ Digital Redlining

- ◆ Digital Redlining prevents the *ability* for some households to receive quality, reliable internet no matter how much they pay.
- ◆ “Redlining” patterns of Depression Era real estate practices reveals itself still today in digital infrastructure investments. ‘Digital Redlining’ is the “discrimination by internet service providers in the deployment, maintenance, or upgrade of infrastructure or delivery of services. The denial of services has disparate impacts on people in certain areas of cities or regions, most frequently on the basis of income, race, and ethnicity.”

→ Employee Cost Burden

- ◆ In situations where employees are asked to work from home without company support for internet costs, it can put a financial burden on the individual, especially when combined with other life expenses.



“I work a desk job and we have the option to work hybrid, but my company doesn't pay for my internet and it costs me \$80 a month for a basic plan.”

- Delaware

Internet Affordability

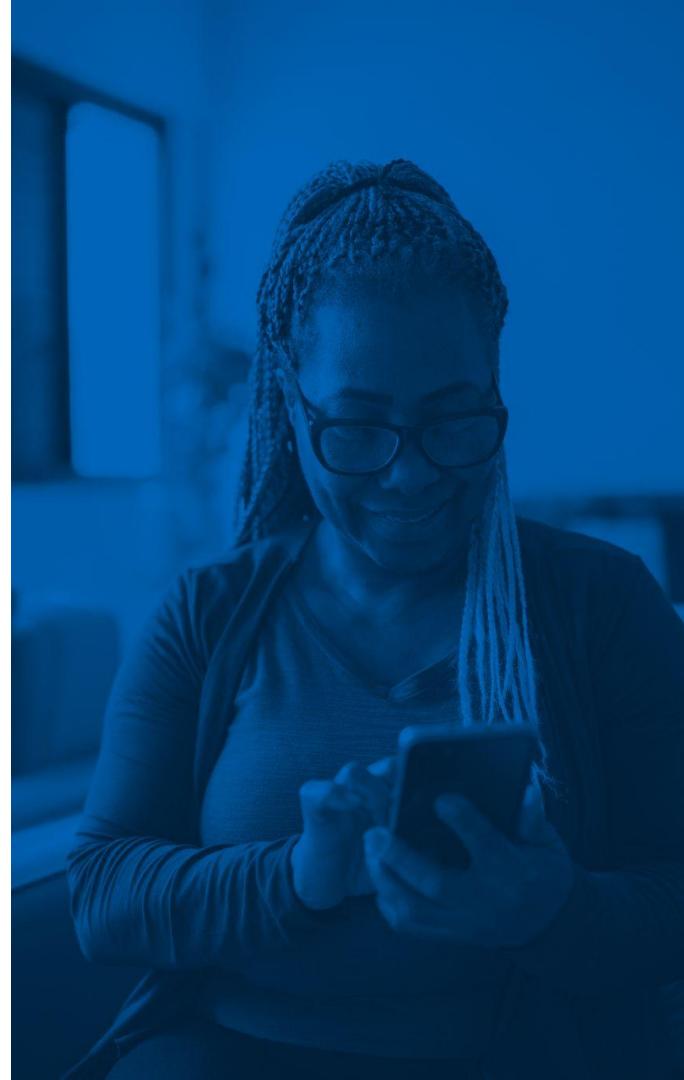
Needs & Desires:

→ Affordable, Reliable Access for All

- ◆ Residents call for reliable internet access that is affordable, especially for those below the poverty line. Internet should be accessible to all and seen as a basic need, not a luxury.
- ◆ Internet access shouldn't necessitate the sacrifice of other household needs. The cost of internet services should not be a burden that forces individuals and families to choose between internet and other necessities.
- ◆ High-speed, reliable internet service at a reasonable and stable fee is desired. Prices should not fluctuate significantly over time, providing predictability and consistency for budgeting.

→ Transparency, Clarity, & Consistency

- ◆ Clear explanations of what different price points provide, and rebuilding trust in service providers is required.



Internet Affordability

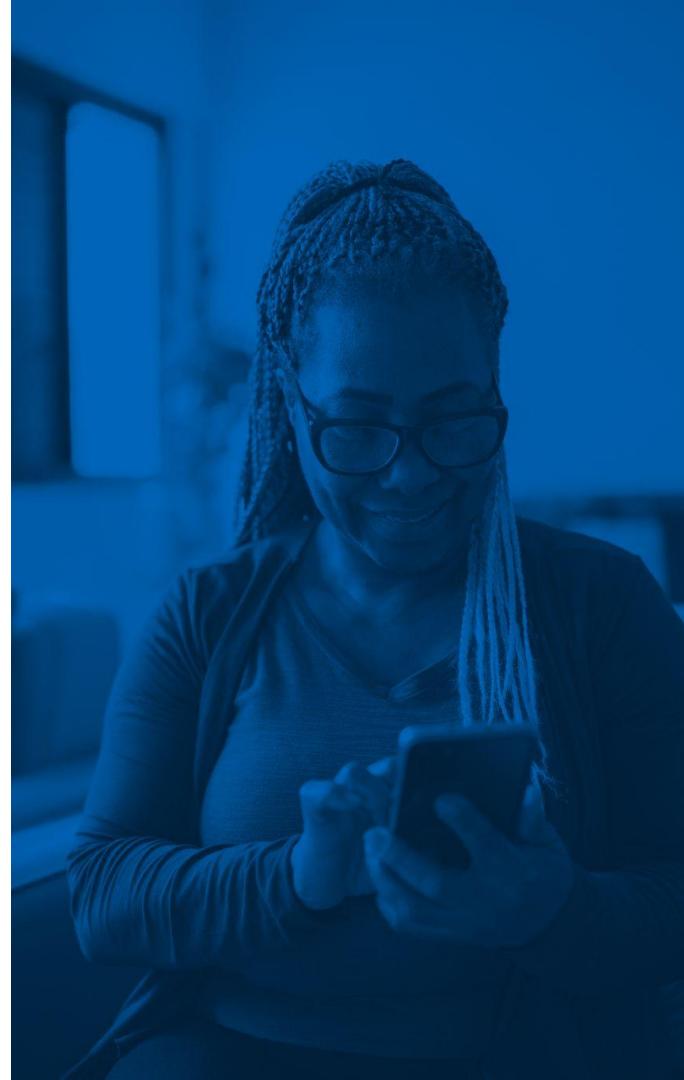
Needs & Desires:

→ Expanded Service Plans and Models

- ◆ A model where internet cost is proportional to income. This can especially help those on fixed or minimum wages, and ensure that lack of income does not prohibit access to connectivity. Residents do not want the quality of service to be compromised due to affordability issues.
- ◆ Funding and support for co-ops and non-traditional internet providers is a desired approach to diversify the market and possibly lower costs.

→ Plan for Post ACP

- ◆ Ohio is one of the highest adoption states for ACP, but ACP is not a guaranteed long-term affordable internet solution and therefore presents concern about what will happen to residents if this incentive expires. There is concern in sharing information for hesitancy that it will go away in the near future. Residents would like to be able to have certainty that their plan will stay the same rate longer term.



Device Access

OBJECTIVE:

Create a sustainable stream of appropriate **high-quality digital devices** paired with wrap-around support that are available at **low to no-cost** to benefit residents who need them.

Device Access

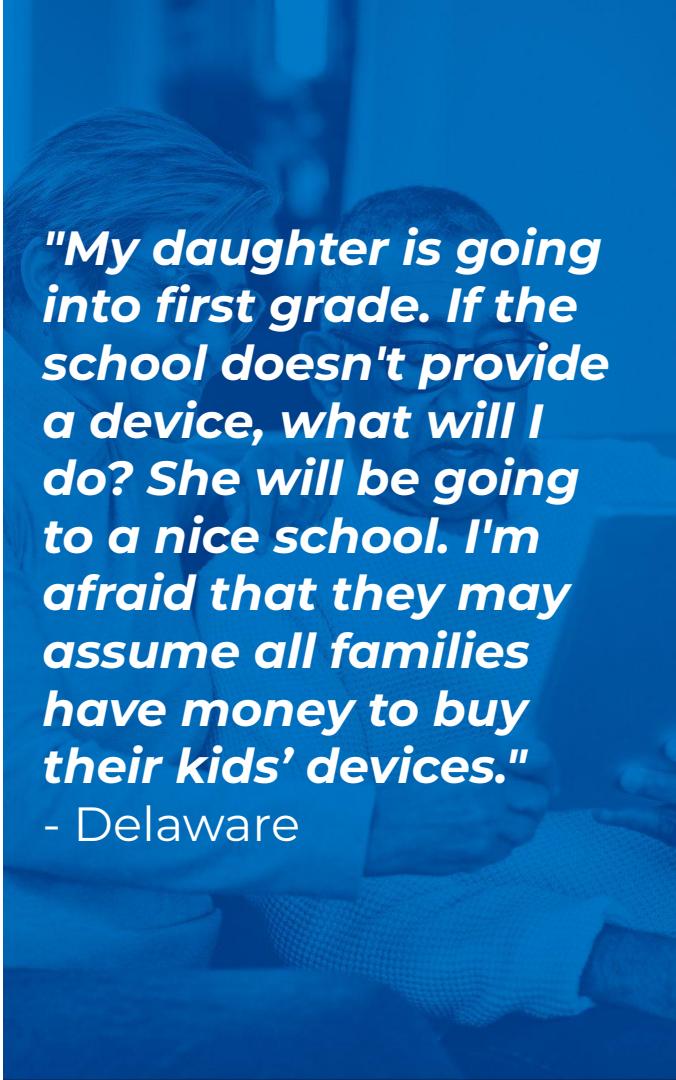
Barriers:

→ Financial Constraints

- ◆ Many people lack the financial means to afford high quality, modern devices like PCs, tablets, or smartphones making access to reliable devices a significant challenge.

→ Device Appropriateness

- ◆ Having any device is not enough. People need devices combined with capabilities and functionality appropriate to what they want and need to do. For instance, a device may not have an operating system compatible with the kind of software someone wants to use, or someone may have a smartphone but they need to write a resume.
- ◆ Certain groups, particularly seniors and people with disabilities, may have physical or cognitive limitations that make using some digital devices difficult.
- ◆ There's a lack of knowledge about different types of devices, operating systems, and how to transition between different devices.



"My daughter is going into first grade. If the school doesn't provide a device, what will I do? She will be going to a nice school. I'm afraid that they may assume all families have money to buy their kids' devices."

- Delaware

Device Access

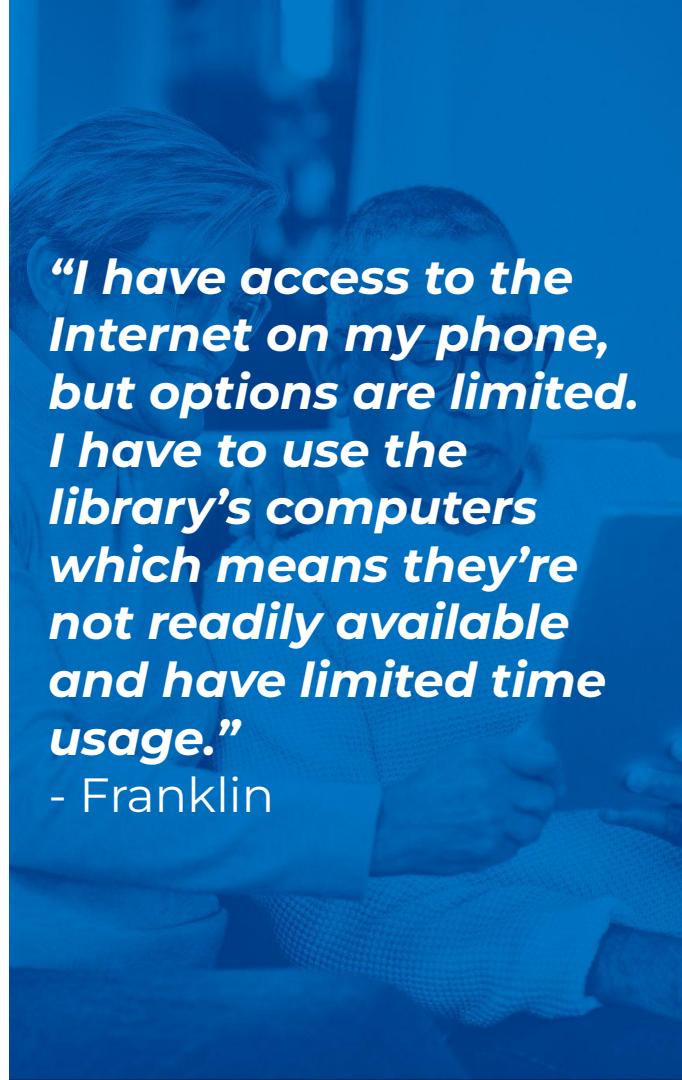
Barriers:

→ Lack of Device Life Cycle Support

- ◆ Many residents struggle with device maintenance and troubleshooting when issues arise. They feel like there is little to no support for this.
- ◆ There are gaps with end of life device logistics including the collection, repair, refurbishment, recycling, and proper disposal of non-functional devices and the provision of IT support. Non-local support services can lead to delays in device repair, further exacerbating the problem.

→ Over Reliance on Smartphones

- ◆ Either due to the cost of other devices, the cost of home internet access, or perception of need, many residents rely solely on smartphones as their only computing device. In central Ohio, rural, low income, New American, and senior populations in particular tend to be smartphone-only users. For some, mobile connectivity is the only option due to lack of internet availability or financial barriers. While mobile devices offer convenience and are useful for intermittent Internet access, they generally do not meet the needs of remote work or school, and relying on them as the sole source of access can significantly limit a person's economic mobility.



"I have access to the Internet on my phone, but options are limited. I have to use the library's computers which means they're not readily available and have limited time usage."

- Franklin

Device Access

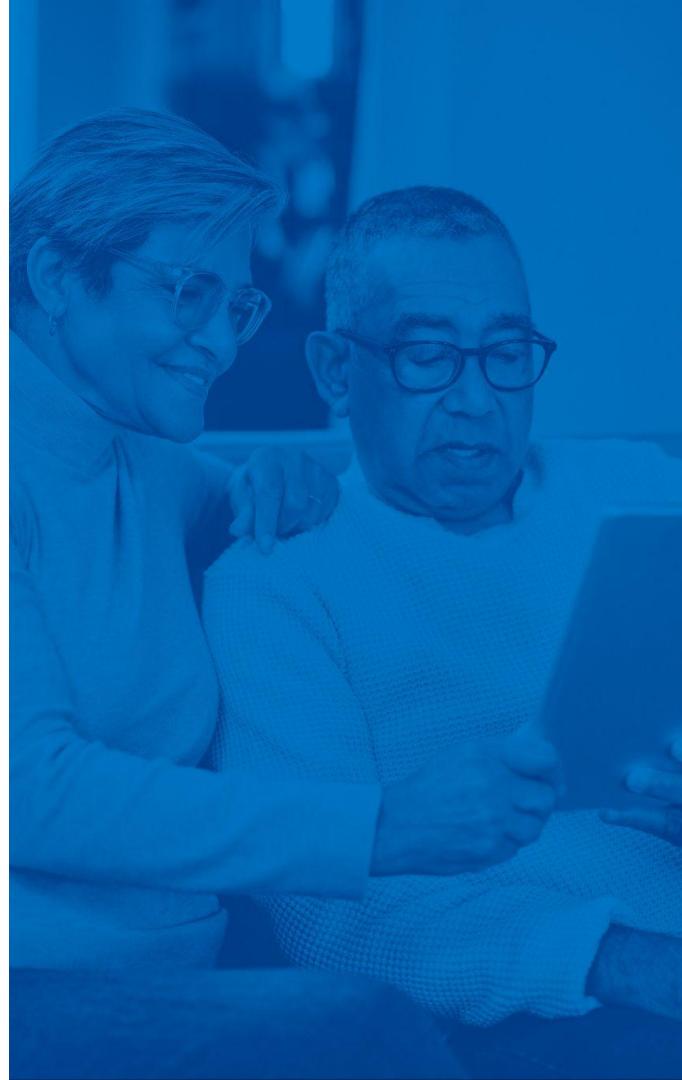
Needs & Desires:

→ Universal Access

- ◆ Access to devices is as important as internet access. Residents believe that everyone should have at least one device that allows them to fully utilize internet services.
- ◆ A critical component of access is affordability. Residents must also have appropriate device options that are within their financial means.

→ Appropriate, Use Case Driven Devices

- ◆ The lack of adequate devices that are appropriate for the types of use cases residents need impedes one's ability to advance educationally, obtain public services, engage in online commerce, compete on a level playing field for employment, or take advantage of digital healthcare services. New, modern devices that are equipped with the right features, functions, and interfaces to most effectively accomplish a person's goals are essential.
- ◆ Furthermore, residents need to be equipped with the knowledge, resources, and tools to better understand which devices best meet their needs and goals.



Device Access

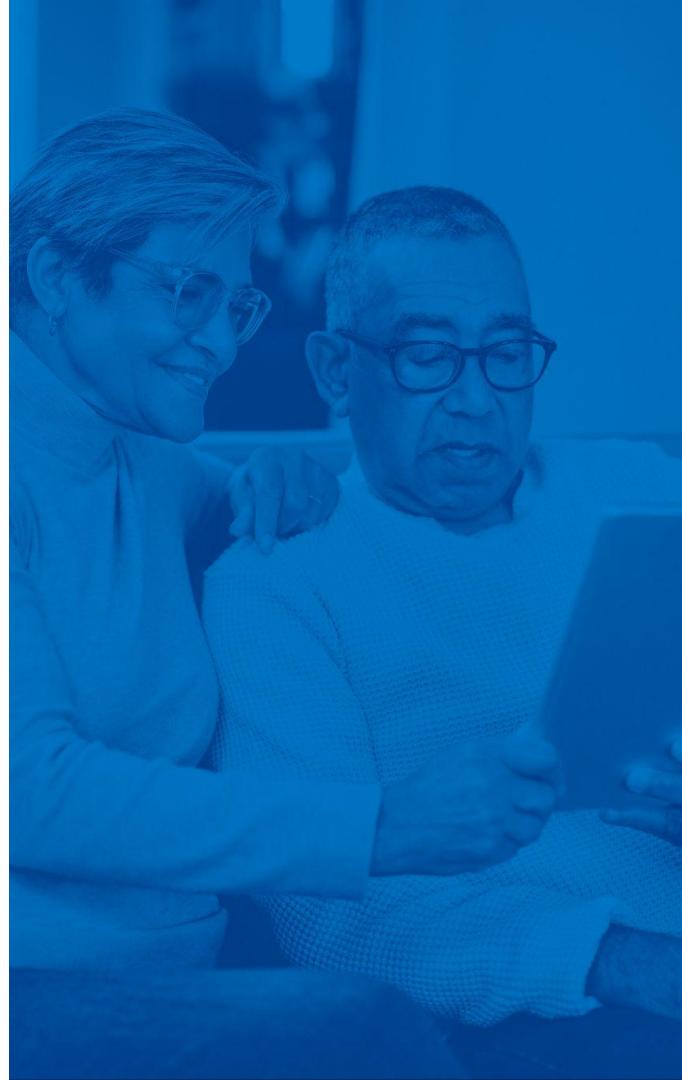
Needs & Desires:

→ Device Reliability, Quality, & Maintenance

- ◆ Residents desire devices that can accomplish what they need. This includes having up-to-date devices, hardware and software capabilities needed to access the internet and applications. Along these lines, the ability to maintain devices, update them when needed, and troubleshoot and repair them are essential to keeping devices functioning properly for as long as possible.

→ Connectivity & Digital Empowerment

- ◆ Overall, residents expressed the important role digital devices play in fostering connectivity with friends, family, and the community. Additionally, devices should enable people to do daily tasks like pay bills, work, and entertainment. Devices are seen as essential for economic development, education, business efficiency, and even play, which is how people explore and gain exposure to technology.



Digital Life Skills

OBJECTIVE:

Expand and increase **access to digital skills training** with the addition of lifelong learning opportunities across provider organizations that **support residents'** individualized needs on a continuum from survival to career.

Digital Life Skills

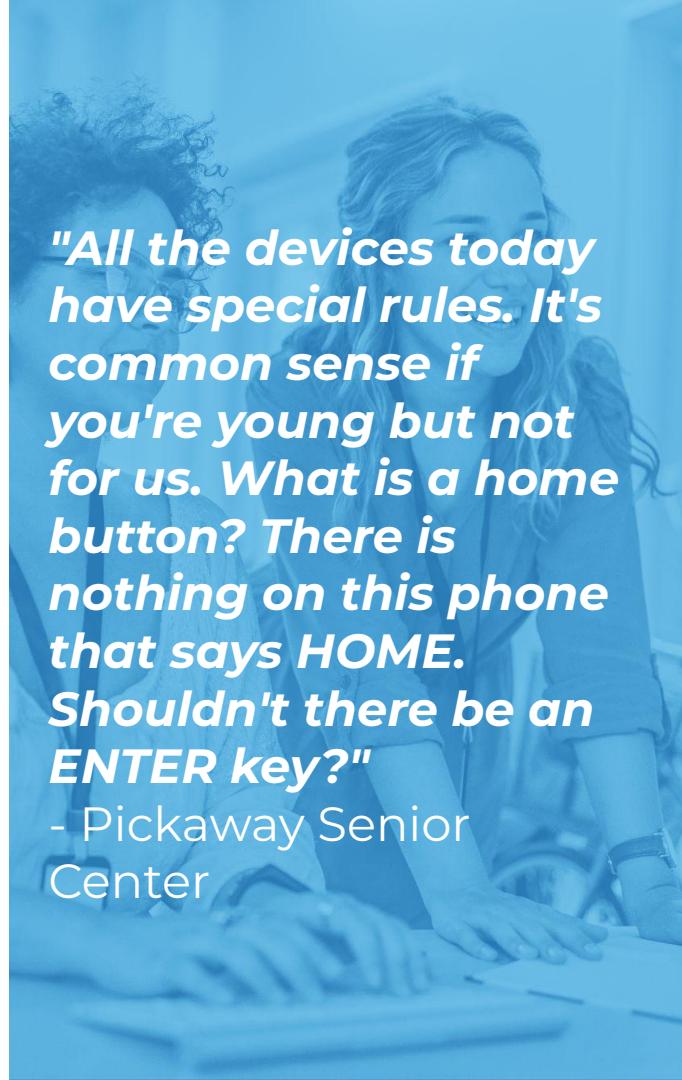
Barriers:

→ Limited Exposure & Lack of Lifelong Learning

- ◆ Many people, particularly seniors, immigrants, and justice involved populations lack the necessary digital skills and understanding to navigate digital devices and the internet due to a lack of exposure. This can be due to growing up during a time when technology was different than it is today and not keeping up with changes, moving from a country or culture where modern technology was not available, or being isolated from technology due to long term incarceration.

→ Continuous, Rapid Change

- ◆ Further exacerbating lifelong learning gaps is the rate of technological change. The rapid pace of technological advancement has left many behind who lack the foundational digital skills upon which to build. Often, adequate training and learning resources are not available when new devices or software are deployed, leaving individuals to quickly learn and adapt on their own. Many struggle to keep up.



"All the devices today have special rules. It's common sense if you're young but not for us. What is a home button? There is nothing on this phone that says HOME. Shouldn't there be an ENTER key?"

- Pickaway Senior Center

Digital Life Skills

Barriers:

→ Emotional & Psychological Barriers to Learning

- ◆ When people lack the skills to effectively utilize the internet and digital technologies it can result in negative emotional responses that further inhibit their ability to learn. Feelings of anger, frustration, embarrassment, fear, and intimidation often arise when people struggle with digital tools, leading to avoidance behaviors.
- ◆ For some, past traumatic experiences or existing psychological challenges may serve as significant impediments to learning new digital skills. Trauma can result in comfort with the status quo and poor self confidence.

→ Sociocultural & Language Factors

- ◆ Non-native English speakers or those from different cultural backgrounds can be unaccustomed to digital technology due to language complexity and differing cultural norms when it comes to communicating, transacting, and organizing information digitally.
- ◆ There is a lack of immediate, personalized help. Many people are heavily dependent on others (often younger family members) for assistance who can be impatient or make them feel ashamed.

"Trauma becomes a barrier to learning because I have become comfortable in that dysfunction."

"Imagine explaining how to file something in a computer to someone who has never seen a computer before. In my culture, there is a community elder that holds all of the community's stories and information." - Franklin

Digital Life Skills

Barriers:

→ Trust & Online Security

- ◆ Fear is a major barrier to learning new digital skills. A common fear, especially among seniors and immigrants, is falling prey to online scams. For others, it's a fear of making mistakes that may expose them to unknown trouble. For example, the fear that their private information will be misused online prevents someone from taking advantage of online bill pay platforms. This confusion and intimidation prevents people from giving new technology a try and self-learning.
- ◆ Distrust in technology and technology companies stems from a history of negative experiences and broken promises that make people feel misled and taken advantage of. This kind of distrust leads many people to avoid or disengage from the digital world.



"In tech, everything you hear is through marketing. Do you know the definition of marketing? It's lies."

- Morrow

Digital Life Skills

Needs & Desires:

→ Authentic Learning Opportunities

- ◆ It's important to note that many people do not exclusively develop digital skills in discrete, isolated, or artificial environments. Usually, such skills are frequently developed in authentic contexts where use of a particular skill or set of skills is intertwined with personal tasks or vocational work requirements. Occasionally, skills also involve the use of new hardware or software tools.
- ◆ The need for digital life skills spans across all digital inclusion priority areas from building trust and bridging cultural differences to internet and device utilization. Digital skills and abilities are essential to promoting online safety and security, gaining objective information, making social connections, advancing education, engaging in the modern economy, increasing workforce competitiveness, and accessing healthcare services. Strategies to build and expand digital life skill throughout the community will need to take into account these complex intersecting factors.



“Learning happens in many different forms and for many different reasons. Be inclusive in the ways we’re designing these learning experiences.”

- Franklin

Digital Life Skills

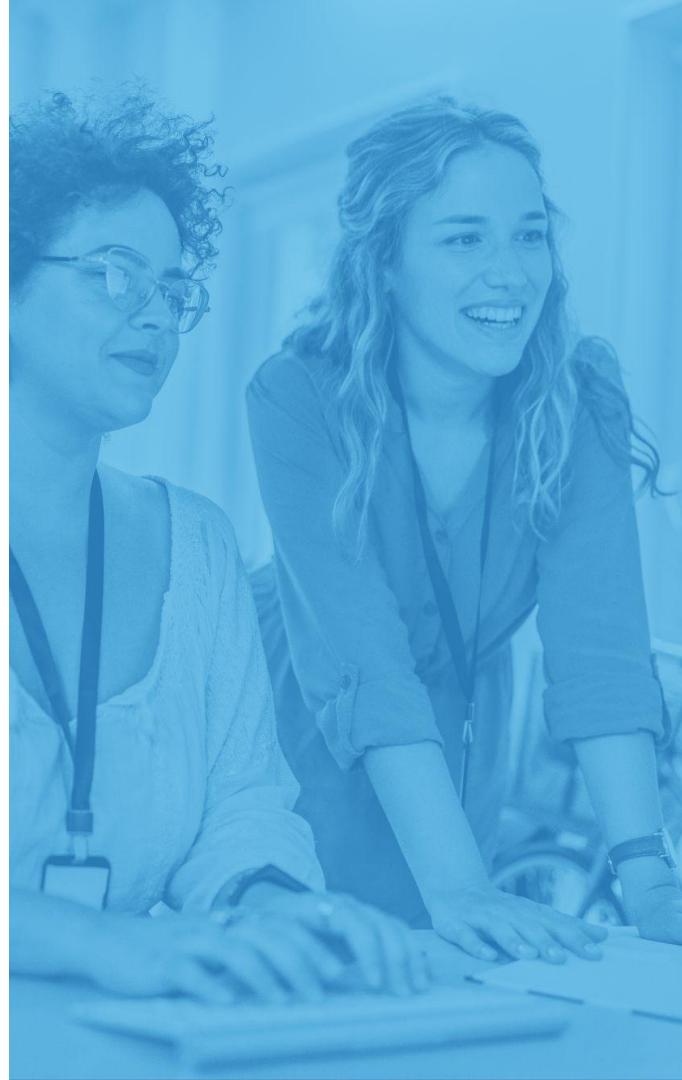
Needs & Desires:

→ Intersectional, Holistic, Individualized Training

- ◆ There is a need and desire for comprehensive learning opportunities that intersect internet access, appropriate digital devices, and various applications. This includes social services, banking, healthcare, entertainment, video conferencing, etc. Training needs to be accessible for all ages, with a focus on understanding concepts specific to meaningful use cases.
- ◆ Different priority populations, like seniors, have distinct needs and preferences when it comes to learning. They require patient educators, familiar terminology, and assurance about online safety. Others want specialized classes, like return-to-workforce training, or mentorship models for dedicated one-on-one support.

→ Community Support & Collaboration

- ◆ A strong support network is needed throughout the community for continuous learning and adaptation to the ever-evolving digital landscape. Collaboration and networking among organizations can amplify the reach and effectiveness of digital literacy initiatives. Small organizations need more support and partnerships to scale their work.

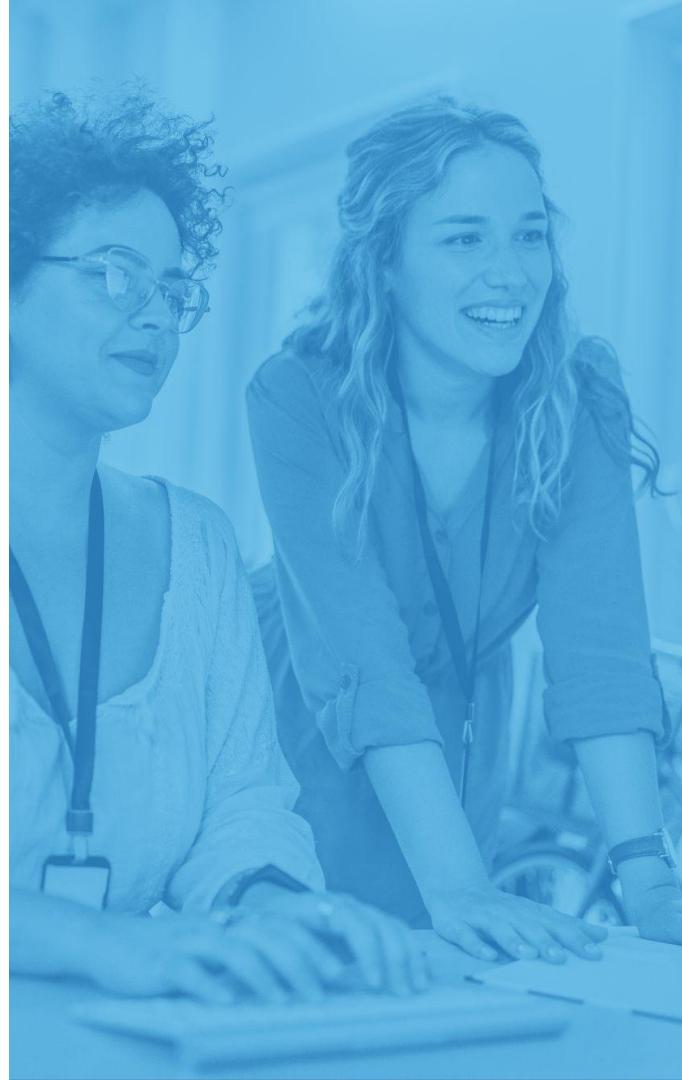


Digital Life Skills

Needs & Desires:

→ Integrated Learning with Special Needs

- ◆ Some segments of the population have unique needs separate from digital skills that impact their learning experience and therefore must be taken into consideration. Digital literacy programs should take behavioral health (stability, trust-building, and recovery from trauma), non-English language support, and cultural sensitivities into account alongside digital skills to be truly inclusive. Access to resources and basic digital literacy needs to be universal to prevent anyone from being left behind. Certain vulnerable groups, such as refugees and the justice-involved, require a more holistic approach.



Barriers, Needs, & Opportunities: By Priority Population

Priority Populations

LOW INCOME

Under-resourced and underserved households & neighborhoods in the Central Region at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Line. Those experiencing one of several different dimensions of accommodation problems, including affordability, safety, quality, insecurity, and homelessness.

RURAL

Individuals and businesses located in areas currently unserved by commercial internet service providers due to population densities too low to make building new infrastructure financially desirable.

SENIORS / OLDER ADULTS

Individuals who are 65 or older.

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

As defined by the ADA, a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment.

NEW AMERICANS, IMMIGRANTS & MIGRANT FAMILIES

An individual in the U.S. who is aspiring to take the Path to U.S. Citizenship, or who has, in the recent past, become a naturalized citizen of the United States of America.

STUDENTS

Those engaged in PreK-12, vocational or trade school, and Higher Ed.

JUSTICE INVOLVED

Those who have had interactions with the criminal justice system as a defendant.

VETERANS

Person(s) who served in the active military, naval, or air service.

Intersecting Barriers, Needs & Opportunities



We want to acknowledge that individuals can possess multiple social identities that intersect and interact with each other, shaping their experiences and social realities. These intersecting identities are considered in this report; the unique challenges faced by any individual we describe here cannot be understood in isolation.

On the following pages, this intersectionality may show up as redundancies; though the barriers, needs and opportunities of these groups may be unique to each, many also overlap and include the same or similar elements.

Overall, we know that the digital divide disproportionately impacts black and brown communities, rural residents and low-income families in Central Ohio.



Low-Income

FRANKLIN COUNTY
DIGITAL EQUITY COALITION

Low Income

Barriers:

1. Affordability & Quality of Internet Access

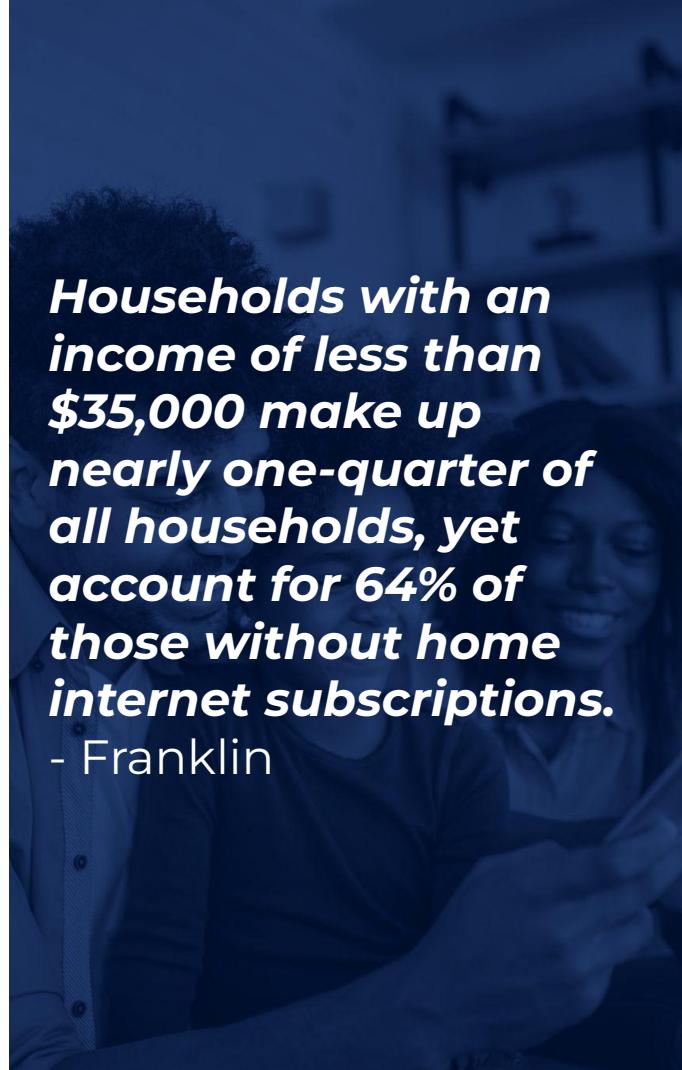
Low-income individuals face difficulties affording high-quality internet services, even with subsidized plans. Temporary and uncertain affordability options, along with poor quality of basic plans, add to the burden, especially for large families.

2. Technological Literacy & Access to Digital Tools

Many low-income individuals, especially older adults, lack digital literacy skills. While they may possess devices, they struggle to effectively use them. This includes challenges with specific apps, email, and online platforms.

3. Workplace Expectations

Employers often expect employees, regardless of their age or background, to have pre-existing knowledge of technology, access to the internet at home, and adapt quickly to changes, with little to no training provided. This assumption can create a significant barrier for those who have not had the opportunity to develop these skills prior to employment, or cannot afford access to digital and online tools.



Households with an income of less than \$35,000 make up nearly one-quarter of all households, yet account for 64% of those without home internet subscriptions.

- Franklin

Low Income

Barriers:

1. Stigma, Perception, & Trust

Following the patterns of redlining and other market forces, low-income urban and low population density rural areas disproportionately have lower quality internet and less options. This combined with the lack of transparency from ISPs and a history of negative experiences leaves many low income residents feeling frustrated, angry, and manipulated.

When compared to major spending categories, the digital inclusion budget for families making less than \$30,000 a year rival their expenditures for transportation and food. Households under the 200% federal poverty level expend a disproportionately higher amount of household income for digital necessities for the same services when compared to affluent households.

Furthermore, the lack of exposure to the internet and digital technologies for low income households can result in a lack of awareness about the importance and value of online connectivity, digital devices, and skills which leads to a lack of motivation to engage in digital inclusion opportunities.



“[My Service Provider] keeps raising the prices. It’s not really getting any better. The prices don’t really match the quality.”

- Franklin

Low Income

Needs & Desires:

1. Device Access

There is a demand for every family to have access to a computer. Other digital devices like iPads and iPhones are seen as important for interactive play and exposure to technology.

2. Digital Literacy and Support

Low income residents show a clear need for education and one-on-one support to help individuals navigate the digital world. This includes understanding how to use specific platforms like MyChart, apps, and different software systems.

3. Workforce Integration

For individuals entering the workforce, there is a need for targeted training programs to familiarize them with the necessary digital skills. They also want to leverage the internet for work-from-home opportunities to supplement their income.

4. Technology for Social Connections

Internet access is not only desired for practical reasons such as work and health services, but also for social connections, entertainment, and play.



"I only get \$64 a month on food stamps, my son lives with me and is out of a job, and we have internet but it's \$49.99 a month."

- Delaware

Low Income

Digital Inclusion Opportunities:

1. Establish or expand long-term, subsidized internet plans for low-income residents, ensuring affordability and stability.
2. Enhance the quality of basic internet plans. Even if they are affordable, if they provide a poor user experience, it discourages use and diminishes their value.
3. Encourage employers to contribute to employees' home internet bills, especially if they offer or mandate remote or hybrid work.
4. Facilitate intergenerational learning and support, encouraging younger, more tech-savvy family members to help older members navigate digital technologies.
5. Advocate for more on-the-job digital skills training, so that those returning to the workforce or changing careers can keep up with technological changes and demands.
6. Schools, libraries, and non-profit organizations can collaborate with tech companies to develop programs that distribute used or refurbished devices to families who cannot afford them.



A large, abstract graphic in the background consists of numerous thin, light blue lines forming organic, flowing shapes that resemble waves or smoke. These lines are more concentrated in the lower right quadrant, creating a sense of motion and depth.

Rural

FRANKLIN COUNTY
DIGITAL EQUITY COALITION



Rural

Barriers:

1. Quality of Service

Both satellite and wireless connections in rural areas suffer from performance issues, including lag and complete unavailability. Despite being marketed as unlimited, phone plans often come with limitations that can frustrate users. Hotspots, which are frequently the only option for connecting farming equipment and devices, tend to perform poorly or not at all.

2. Insufficient Infrastructure

Rural areas face hindered internet access and unreliable connections due to limited wired options, overlapping service areas, and inadequate cell tower coverage. The existing infrastructure in rural areas is considered inadequate for the growing number of users, leading to bandwidth issues caused by "over-subscription."

3. Trust and Knowledge

Mistrust is common among rural residents towards companies, government, and internet service providers due to past unreliable or deceptive practices. Limited familiarity with digital tools and online navigation further hinders their effective use of the internet.

"As a farmer, I don't care about education. If you give me a crappy Chromebook I'll throw it away. Until we have high quality, reliable, and affordable internet in our homes nothing else matters."

- Morrow



Rural

Needs & Desires:

1. Internet Access

Rural residents express a strong desire for increased access to reliable and competitively priced high-speed internet connections in rural areas, including wireless options. Additionally, extending 4G or higher connectivity is necessary to ensure households with weak reception can receive a full-strength signal.

2. Cooperative Initiatives

The formation of cooperatives to provide internet access is highly desired, with a particular interest in non-traditional providers such as electric and telecommunications cooperatives. Community members are also interested in "To and Through" initiatives that utilize existing middle-mile fiber and wireless technologies to reach nearby households.

3. Regulation and Quality Control

Rural residents show a recognized need for rules and quality control in rural infrastructure installation, emphasizing the importance of qualified professionals who understand the unique needs of farming communities and can install infrastructure accordingly.

"Utility companies drive their trucks through fields, run lines across field entrances, and install lines too low. We hit lines with our equipment all the time. It's dangerous and disruptive."

"I am driving down the road on the phone and the call just drops. I get delayed messages and voicemails all the time."

- Morrow



Rural

Digital Inclusion Opportunities:

1. Improve internet access in rural areas by investing in more reliable and comprehensive infrastructure. This can involve supporting the formation of cooperatives, developing public-private partnerships, and encouraging non-traditional providers, like electric and telecommunications cooperatives, to deploy broadband service.
2. Prioritize increased access to high-speed, reliable, and affordable internet connections. Address issues such as bandwidth limitations.
3. Implement "to and through" initiatives to leverage existing middle-mile fiber to reach nearby households. Increase 4G or higher extensions to households with weak reception.
4. Consider the unique needs of farming communities, such as the need for WiFi in fields and barns for remote monitoring of crops and livestock.
5. Work with service providers to ensure they don't impose unnecessarily high fees or provide inadequate service, and encourage transparency in their coverage and service standards.

"If we had WiFi access in our fields and barns we could remote monitor our animals and crops. Animals die because we can't see what's going on in real time. Connected devices would allow us to get to them faster."

- Morrow



Seniors/Older Adults

FRANKLIN COUNTY
DIGITAL EQUITY COALITION

Seniors / Older Adults

Barriers:

1. Security and Privacy

Seniors have substantial concerns about online security, privacy, and scams. Experiences with hacking or scams can make them even more cautious or fearful. They feel that the internet exposes too much private information and may take away control over their personal data.

2. Technology Accessibility and Usability

Many seniors use cell phones as their primary device but struggle with functionality, including typing and completing forms. The terms and concepts often used in technology and device instruction are foreign to them, which leads to confusion and inability to troubleshoot issues. They find automation features, online autofill, intelligent search functions, and AI aspects to be overwhelming and intimidating.

3. Economics and Affordability

The rising cost of living makes affording internet services a challenge for many seniors. Some also express that they do not use the internet enough to justify the expense. Lack of awareness about the potential benefits and uses of the internet and computers creates a motivational barrier.

"I pay all of my bills through the mail and writing checks. I like to have control. I would never bank online. Once you put your information out there you lose control over it."

"All the devices today have special rules. It's common sense if you're young, but not for us."

- Pickaway Senior Center

Seniors / Older Adults

Needs & Desires:

1. Specialized Training & Support

Seniors express the desire for training in digital skills, technology usage, and internet navigation that is specific to their unique needs and cognitive abilities. They appreciate hands-on and immediate support, and learning with familiar terminology and concepts. Many struggle with feeling like there is no help for them and often rely on family.

2. Personal Connection & Exploring Personal Interests

Seniors show a significant interest in maintaining connection with their hobbies and interests through digital means. Some are even tech-curious, demonstrating a willingness to explore and learn new technologies.



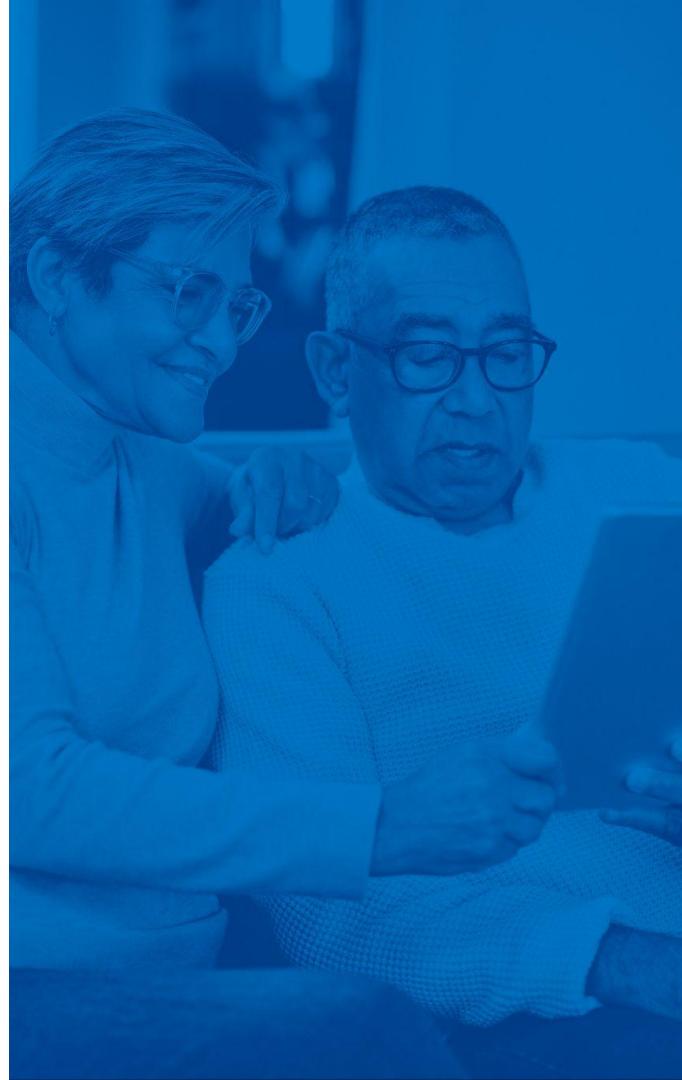
"I've always been tech curious...I've always tinkered with new technology. Now I have an Alexa, I'm on Twitter and Snapchat, I do it all."

- Pickaway Senior Center

Seniors / Older Adults

Digital Inclusion Opportunities:

1. There's a clear need for tailored digital literacy programs for seniors, using language and concepts that are familiar to them. These programs should include aspects like internet safety, password management, and device troubleshooting. Empathetic support from patient instructors, who are willing to teach without taking over, could significantly improve seniors' technology learning experience.
2. Cost-effective and user-friendly technology solutions that cater to the specific physical and cognitive needs of seniors could significantly increase their engagement with technology.
3. Encouraging continued exposure to technology throughout their lives could help seniors keep pace with digital advancements and prevent them from feeling left behind.
4. Introduce, educational opportunities and the development of secure platforms that address cybersecurity concerns among seniors.
5. Given the importance of hobbies and personal interests, technology solutions and training could be contextualized around these interests to increase relevance and motivation.





New Americans, Immigrants, & Migrant Families

FRANKLIN COUNTY
DIGITAL EQUITY COALITION

New Americans, Immigrants, & Migrant Families

Barriers:

1. Digital Divide

The pandemic has exacerbated the digital divide, particularly among immigrant and refugee communities. Gaps in online connectivity, access to devices, and digital skills have negatively impacted their social and economic status. People feel uncomfortable going to places for support that don't speak their language. During and after the pandemic, many physical offices are no longer open so people don't have anywhere to go for help if they are digitally excluded.

2. Cultural Interpretations and Fears

Different cultural interpretations of technology and its value can lead to fear and uncertainty among immigrants and refugees. Concerns about potential risks associated with digital interactions may arise.

3. Refugee Challenges

Refugee camps prioritize survival, resulting in minimal exposure to digital technology. Children born in these camps lack access to internet connectivity. After resettlement, in addition to digital technologies, immigrants face difficulties adapting to American systems in areas such as health, employment, education, public benefits, and legal processes, which can be vastly different from what they are accustomed to.



"Many immigrants from rural and indigenous areas of other countries lack the skills to read or write, let alone digital literacy skills."

- Empowering Voices,
Immigrants

New Americans, Immigrants, & Migrant Families

Needs & Desires:

1. Access to Devices

There is a need for devices, particularly those donated by organizations, to be provided to individuals who lack access.

2. Education and Support

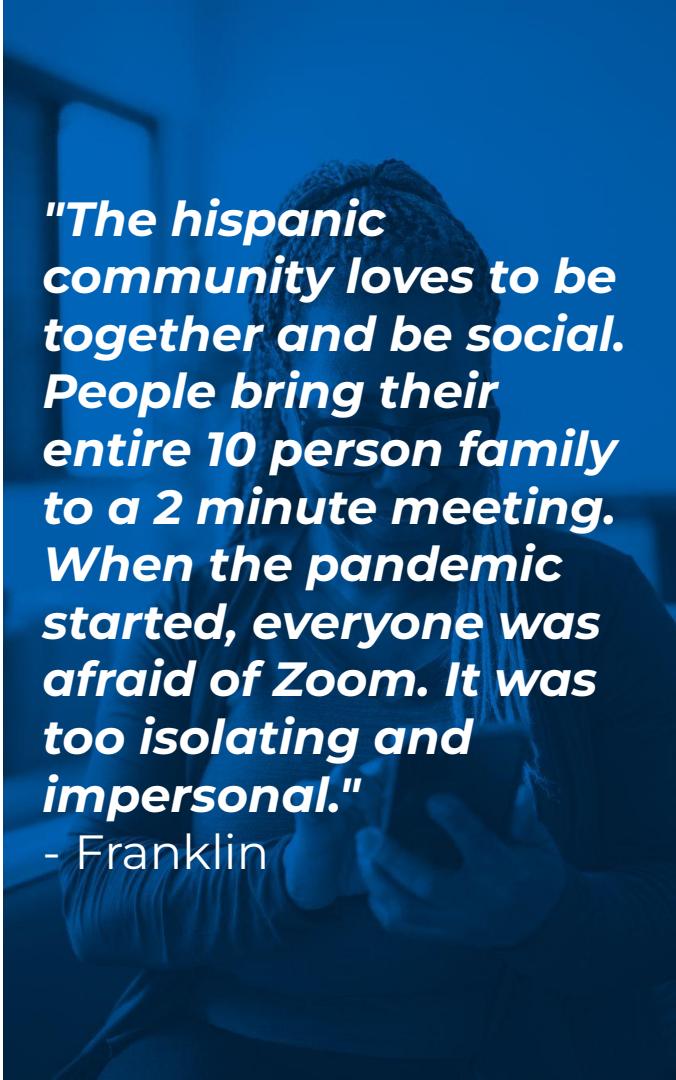
There is a desire for a curriculum that disseminates digital skills to the new American community. Increased availability of social workers and personnel in service-providing organizations who speak different languages is crucial to assist non-English speaking individuals and meet their needs effectively.

3. Public WiFi Accessibility

There is a desire to establish free public wifi in central areas. It is crucial to extend this initiative beyond downtown areas and ensure coverage reaches immigrant communities in need.

4. Multilingual Support

There is a demand for an increased number of social workers and service providers who speak different languages to facilitate meaningful engagement and support within diverse communities.



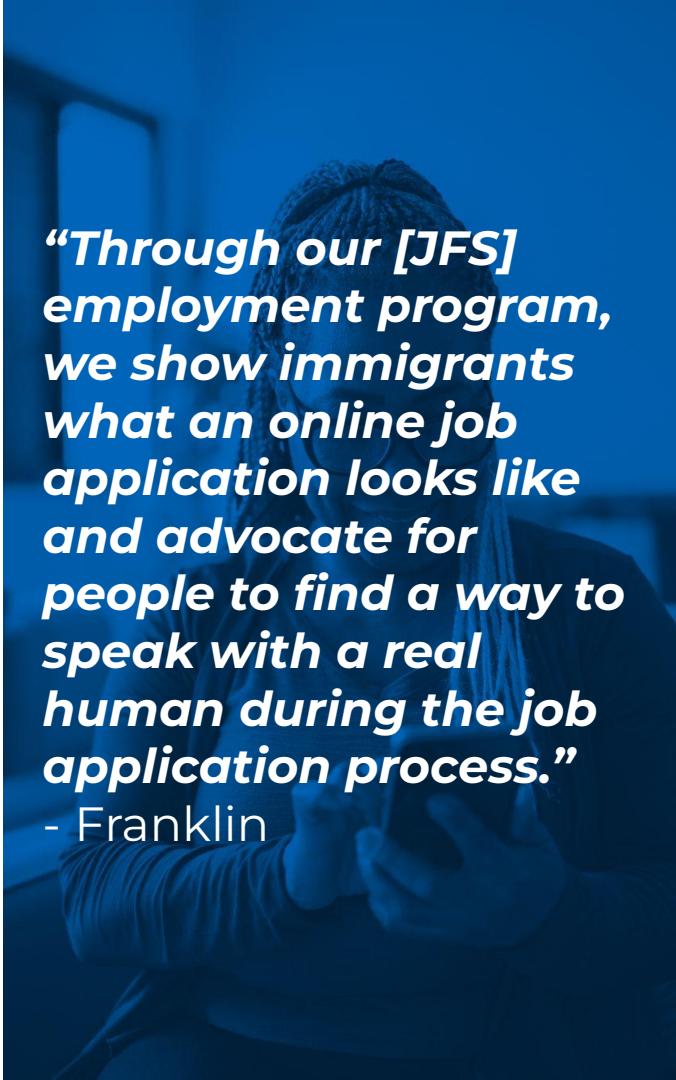
"The hispanic community loves to be together and be social. People bring their entire 10 person family to a 2 minute meeting. When the pandemic started, everyone was afraid of Zoom. It was too isolating and impersonal."

- Franklin

New Americans, Immigrants, & Migrant Families

Digital Inclusion Opportunities:

1. Establish digital literacy training programs for immigrants and refugees, especially those from rural and indigenous areas. This could be achieved through government policy or collaborations with NGOs and education providers.
2. Develop a shared curriculum for disseminating digital skills to new American communities. This could help ensure a standard level of digital literacy, making it easier for individuals to access online services and resources.
3. Develop resources and programs to educate immigrants and refugees about technology in a way that respects and understands their cultural interpretations and fears. This could involve using community elders or leaders as intermediaries to share knowledge.
4. Advocate for simplified job application processes and for employers to provide accommodations to non-English-speaking applicants. This could involve working with companies to simplify their online application processes, provide more human support, or providing translation services.
5. Design digital inclusion initiatives that respect cultural preferences for in-person interactions.



“Through our [JFS] employment program, we show immigrants what an online job application looks like and advocate for people to find a way to speak with a real human during the job application process.”

- Franklin

A large, abstract graphic in the background consists of numerous thin, light blue lines forming organic, flowing shapes that resemble waves or ripples across the entire frame.

Students

FRANKLIN COUNTY
DIGITAL EQUITY COALITION

Students

Barriers:

1. Limited Device Availability

Many students lack personal computers or laptops at home, making it difficult for them to participate in online classes or complete digital assignments.

2. Unequal Internet Connectivity

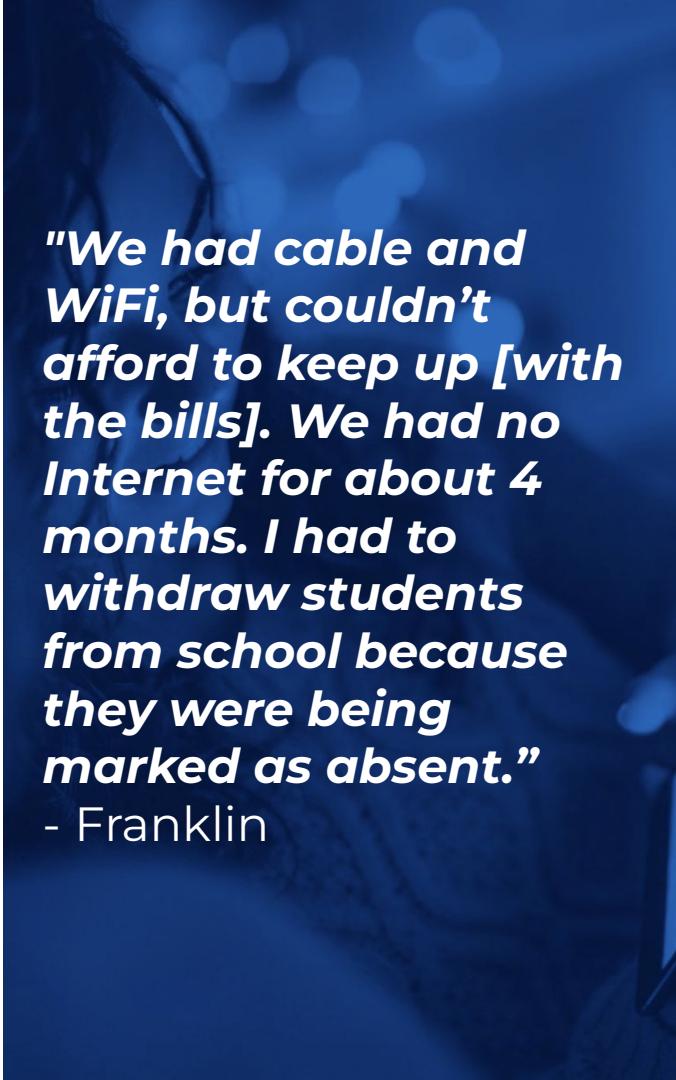
Students face challenges in accessing reliable internet connections and completing online assignments due to infrastructure limitations, affordability issues, or living in areas with poor connectivity.

3. Increase in Online Learning

The pandemic forced schools to close and switch to remote learning, placing a heavy reliance on digital tools and internet access for education, and exacerbating existing technology disparities. Since then, educational institutions have continued to embrace digital learning, contributing to the digital divide among students.

4. Non-English Language Learners

English language learners (ELL) may face difficulties if traditional or online learning platforms, materials, or resources are not available in their native language. Limited language proficiency can impede their understanding and engagement in learning activities.

A blue-tinted photograph of a person sitting at a desk, looking down at a laptop screen. The person's face is partially visible, showing concentration. The background is blurred.

"We had cable and WiFi, but couldn't afford to keep up [with the bills]. We had no Internet for about 4 months. I had to withdraw students from school because they were being marked as absent."

- Franklin

Students

Needs & Desires:

1. Affordable and Reliable Internet Access

Students need dependable high-speed internet connections to access online resources, complete homework, participate in online classes, and communicate with teachers and classmates.

2. Access to Devices

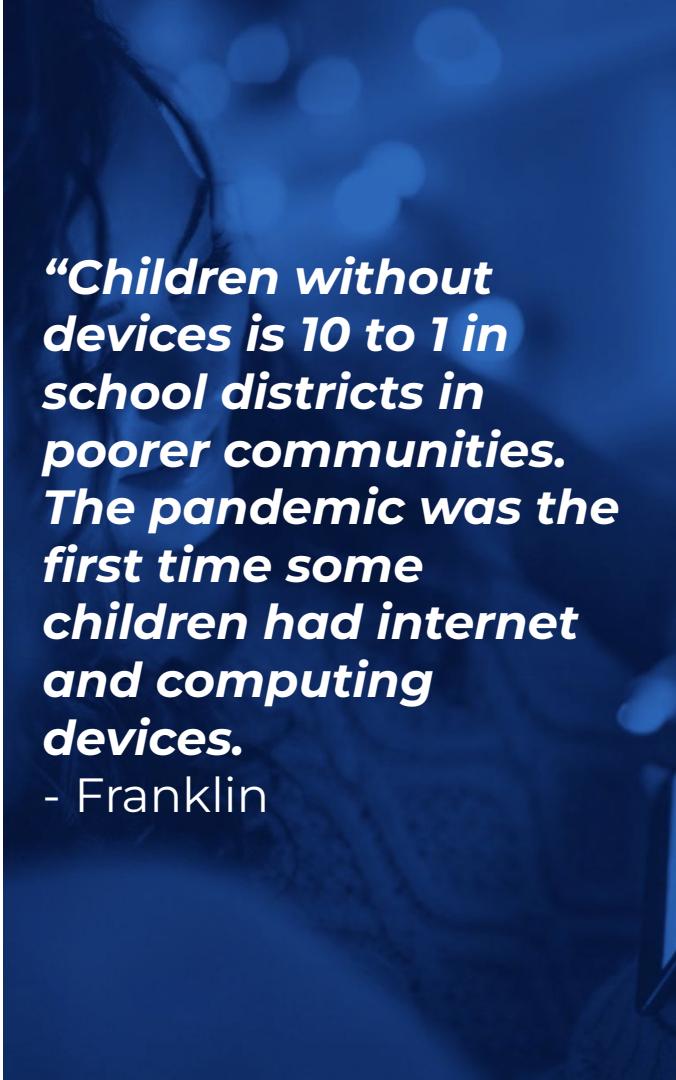
Students need reliable access to up-to-date devices such as computers, tablets, or smartphones that can handle modern educational software and applications.

3. Technical Support

Students need access to support when technical issues arise, whether it's troubleshooting a device, software issues, or internet connectivity problems.

4. Flexible Digital Learning Environments

Students desire learning environments that blend traditional face-to-face instruction with digital learning experiences.

A dark, slightly blurred photograph of a person from the side and back, sitting at a desk and looking down at a laptop computer. The scene is dimly lit, with a strong blue tint, suggesting a quiet, focused environment.

“Children without devices is 10 to 1 in school districts in poorer communities. The pandemic was the first time some children had internet and computing devices.

- Franklin



Justice Involved

FRANKLIN COUNTY
DIGITAL EQUITY COALITION

Justice Involved

Barriers:

1. Limited Digital Exposure and Literacy

Justice involved individuals have restricted access to digital devices and the internet, leading to a lack of digital literacy. The rapid pace of technological change presents a challenge as these individuals spend years isolated from it in institutions.

2. Access to Devices

Upon release, individuals face financial barriers in accessing devices and internet connectivity, hindering their participation in the digital economy.

3. Psychological Barriers

Trauma inhibits trust and engagement with resources. Feelings of shame and low self-confidence discourage seeking help and learning new skills. Inadequately handled telehealth sessions can lead to re-traumatization.

4. Telehealth Challenges

Telemedicine carries a risk of re-traumatization when trauma-related discussions are mishandled. Inadequate management can result in harmful actions by individuals towards themselves or others.

"There is a phone update every day and it takes time to become technologically savvy. When you're incarcerated for 10-20 years, the phone you're familiar with is a flip phone, then you come out and now a phone is a mini computer."

- Empowering Voices,
Franklin County

Justice Involved

Needs & Desires:

1. Rehabilitation, Education, and Training

There is a significant need for re-education, recovery, and re-entry support for justice-involved individuals. Creating a safe learning environment and building trust and self-confidence are crucial for their comfort with digital tools and online access. Additionally, implementing a consistent training program across service providing organizations can help scale efforts.

2. Policy Changes, Advocacy, and Community Collaboration

Policy changes and advocacy are needed to ensure the inclusion of justice-involved individuals. Collaborating across the community can increase digital literacy knowledge and awareness. Networking and breaking down silos promote shared learning.

3. Support for Remote Jobs and Strategic Partnership

Justice-involved individuals require support to pursue remote jobs, which can provide opportunities despite their records. Small organizations would benefit from increased support and strategic partnerships to scale their efforts and reach more individuals.

***"The community
doesn't trust me and
now you're telling me
that I have to apply for
a job online by myself.
But I don't trust myself
to do that either."***

- Empowering Voices,
Franklin County

Justice Involved

Digital Inclusion Opportunities:

1. Establish safe and controlled environments where individuals can learn and explore digital tools and the online world. These spaces should foster a non-judgmental and supportive atmosphere that encourages exploration and reduces the fear of failure.
2. Create support systems specifically for assisting justice-involved individuals with job applications. This could involve teaching digital skills necessary for job applications and providing support for remote work opportunities, which could widen the job market for justice-involved individuals.
3. Recognize that digital inclusion is intertwined with other aspects of life, and ensure that support provided covers these various aspects. This could include financial education, job application support, and mental health support.
4. Provide training for medical professionals to handle digital interactions sensitively, ensuring that they do not inadvertently re-traumatize individuals during telehealth sessions.
5. Make sure that justice-involved individuals have access to the necessary hardware (e.g., smartphones, laptops) to access digital resources. This could be achieved through donation drives, funding programs, or partnerships with tech companies.

"With in-person support groups, there are people whose shoulders I can cry on, but in remote, when that meeting ends I am alone and left to deal with my trauma on my own."

- Empowering Voices,
Franklin County



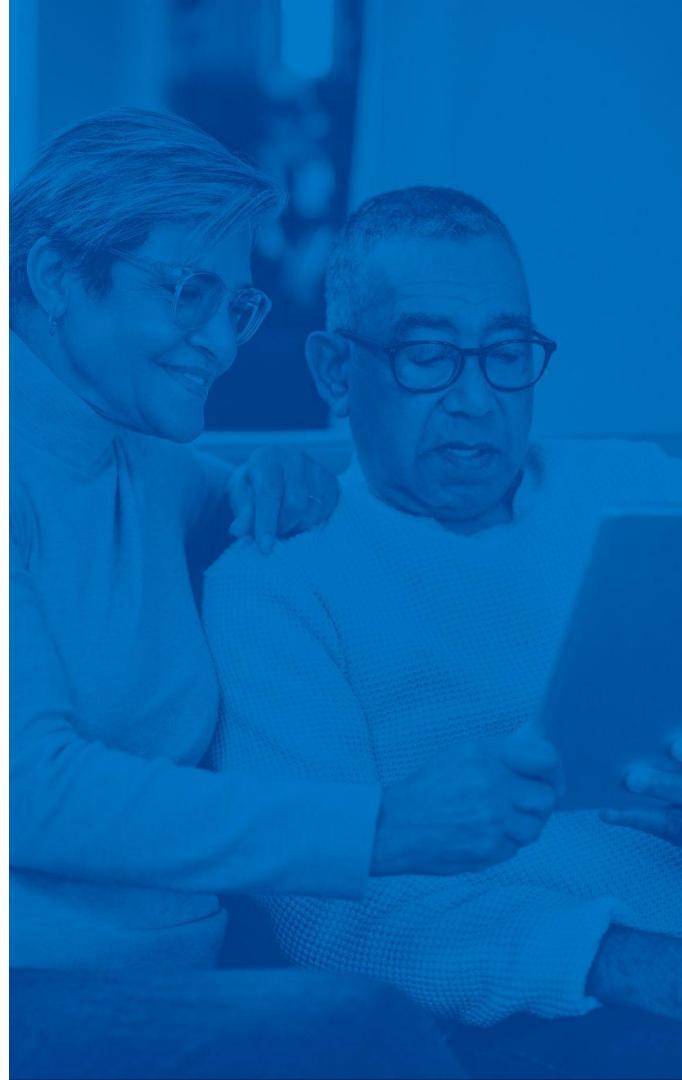
Veterans & People with Disabilities

FRANKLIN COUNTY
DIGITAL EQUITY COALITION

Veterans and People with Disabilities

While we require additional research with these populations, we are confident that these identities are intersectional and their needs overlap with those of other populations featured in this report.

Access to reliable internet, devices and digital skills are critical for veterans and people with disabilities to fully participate in the digital age, yet many still face significant barriers. The following page provides scenarios in which the digital divide may hinder their ability to thrive.



Veterans & People with Disabilities

Barriers:

1. Insufficient Digital Literacy

Veterans and people with disabilities who have not received adequate and tailored training or exposure to digital technologies may struggle with basic digital literacy skills. This can make it challenging for them to navigate websites, use productivity tools, or engage with educational resources or services available online.

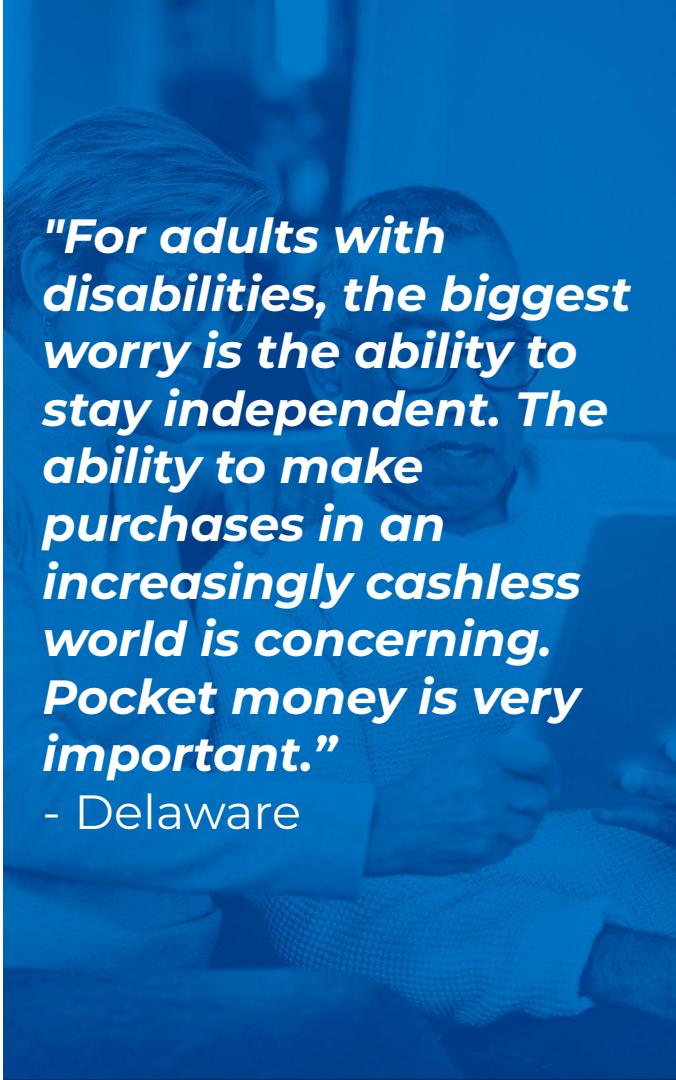
2. Accessibility Barriers

People with disabilities may encounter barriers to digital interaction if online platforms, materials, or tools do not make appropriate accommodations. For example, inaccessible websites, lack of alternative formats for content, or inadequate assistive technologies can prevent people with disabilities from fully engaging in online activities. Furthermore, with the ongoing digitalization of everyday activities, people with disabilities become increasingly dependent on others to help them do the things they want and need.

"If you go to Kroger to do a pick-up and there's no phone number, you have to go in the building because you can't scan a QR code. 25% of people with developmental disabilities don't have a smartphone. Everything is going to apps and cashless now, which is frustrating and exclusionary." - Delaware

3. Lack of Tailored Resources/Support

Veterans and those with disabilities face intersecting challenges with other populations that require specialized digital inclusion approaches to address affordability and physical and/or mental barriers.



"For adults with disabilities, the biggest worry is the ability to stay independent. The ability to make purchases in an increasingly cashless world is concerning. Pocket money is very important."

- Delaware



Digital Inclusion Objectives & Strategies

Central Region

Digital Inclusion Objectives

Internet Accessibility

Expand reliable, high-quality residential, commercial, and public internet options that meet national standards through equitable cost structures in underserved areas and increase options in all areas of the Central Region.

Internet Affordability

Establish equitable cost structures paired with service options that meet national quality standards, and support a coordinated outreach approach that effectively provides residents with information to adopt and maintain affordable internet service.

Device Access

Create a sustainable stream of appropriate high-quality digital devices paired with wrap-around support that are available at low to no-cost to benefit residents who need them.

Digital Life Skills

Expand and increase access to digital skills training with the addition of lifelong learning opportunities across provider organizations that support residents' individualized needs on a continuum from survival to career.

Financial Sustainment

Establish long-term funding for digital inclusion beyond the federal investment.

Trust & Digital Transformation

Support community wide Behavior Change by exposing the benefits and value of technology for digital empowerment.

Trust and Digital Transformation: Opportunities

Building community trust, catalyzing community wide digital transformation, and facilitating behavior change is foundational to the success of all digital inclusion priorities and strategies.

Simplification, Accessibility, & Transparency

Many people feel intimidated by jargon and technical language. When it comes to technology, it is critical to communicate with people using simple, accessible, and familiar language. This applies to topics like understanding internet speeds, knowing what internet plans and services to choose, navigating devices and applications, and differentiating between cellular data plans and the internet.

Digital Safety Literacy

Given the fear of scams, breaches of privacy, and general online abuse, there's an urgent need to offer robust education on online safety and security. This includes how to spot scams, manage passwords, and use automation features securely.

Digital Confidence

Even when internet access is available, psychological barriers persist: stigma related to asking for help, fear, lack of self-confidence, and past trauma. These elements underscore the need for a holistic approach, addressing both tangible and psychological barriers to learning.

Emphasizing Value and Practical Use

Many don't understand the value or potential applications of the digital world, suggesting a need to demonstrate how digital tools can enhance well-being, provide access to essential services, and even boost economic opportunities.

Collaboration and Networking

Increasing digital literacy and trust requires a collaborative effort across communities, organizations, and even different regions. Sharing information, leveraging each other's strengths, and creating a consistent curriculum can improve the scale and effectiveness of digital literacy efforts.

Humanizing Digital Interactions

With the increasing digitization of services, there's a desire to maintain human connection. Whether it's speaking with a human for tech support or face-to-face learning sessions, incorporating human elements can help overcome trust issues and resistance to change.

Repairing Relationships with ISPs & Institutions

Distrust stems from a history of negative experiences and broken promises that make people feel misled.

Trust and Digital Transformation: Strategies

Fundamentals

1. Create a coordinated **region-wide ‘Digital Navigator Ecosystem’** in collaboration with statewide efforts to empower people to gain access to what they want and need to do online.
 - a. Provide Digital Navigator training on communication tactics and how to use simple, non-jargon, user-friendly language when supporting residents.
2. Leverage **Community Co-design methodologies** to involve community members in the decision-making process for digital inclusion initiatives to help foster resident alignment, ownership and buy-in.
3. Launch a **regional outreach and communications campaign** to build a common community-wide understanding of the importance of digitalization, emphasizing the benefits and mitigating barriers. Focus on language and topics that are relevant, familiar, and approachable to different audiences.

Accelerants

1. Facilitate regional participation and collaboration through networking across organizations. **Resource the RDIA platform** for organizations to share information, resources, and collaborate on digital inclusion efforts.
2. **Build the community’s capacity to leverage Human-Centered Design principles and methods** in the design, development, and deployment of digital inclusion initiatives to ensure solutions are desirable, enjoyable, and useful for each unique audience.
3. Build safe, controlled, and inclusive environments for people to learn and get exposed to digital tools. This can help in overcoming fear and building confidence.
 - a. Give **special attention to different cultural interpretations** of technology.
 - b. **Focus on ‘meaningful use’:** practical skills, personal interests, and fun in order to build motivation and drive digital exploration.
4. Demonstrate that the government is proactive in protecting citizens by creating regulations that protect consumer data and privacy, especially for vulnerable online users (youth and seniors).



Region-Wide ‘Digital-Navigator Ecosystem’

Resource a coordinated region-wide ‘Digital Navigator Ecosystem’ in collaboration with statewide efforts to empower people to gain access to what they want and need to do online.

LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3	
Community-Wide Training	Anchor Institution Referral Network	Embedded Support Network	Volunteer Ambassador Network
<p>Digital Advocates – Deliver workshops, equipping front line workers across hundreds of social service, education, government, and other entities with the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to help those they serve bridge the digital divide.</p> <p>Digital Connectors – Engage anchor institutions throughout the region to cross-train their team to assess and identify need, promote access programs, and refer/connect residents to the digital navigation support that will best help them.</p> <p>Digital Coaches – Engage organizations throughout the region with embedded/dedicated digital navigators, customizing digital inclusion services to the populations they serve; share lessons learned with other navigators state-wide.</p>			Support this work with a volunteer pool of individuals who can add capacity to community organizations to provide tech support and coaching for residents.

Internet Accessibility: Opportunities

Internet is a basic need. If not met in certain areas of the region, stakeholders are challenged to think about the other priorities of digital equity.

Rural Infrastructure Development

There's a clear need for internet infrastructure in rural areas, both for residents and for farming businesses. Ensure infrastructure can handle high data loads to serve the needs of tech-heavy agriculture.

Public Wi-Fi Access Points

Given that many people are using public Wi-Fi, a strategy could be to increase the number of these points in public areas, community centers, libraries, etc. Additionally, providing secure public Wi-Fi access zones for those who need to travel for connectivity is essential to ensure online safety.

Dedicated Small Business & Farming Support

Residential internet access should not be the sole focus of digital inclusion work. Small businesses are key for local economic growth and many have expressed the importance of the internet to run their operations, including rural agricultural businesses.

Awareness Building and Communications

There is a lot of confusion and misinformation about what internet access means and what is needed. Awareness campaigns using familiar terminology can demystify the language and make information more accessible. This includes explaining different types of access, speeds, and costs, as well as the benefits of being online.

Leverage Existing Infrastructure and High Priority Access Points

In addition to building new infrastructure, leverage existing community assets and structures to expand connectivity options. For example, upgrading infrastructure within schools, libraries, or other public buildings to serve as public Wi-Fi hotspots; developing collaborations with key industry sectors such as healthcare facilities and financial institutions; and improving cell tower networks in rural areas.

Internet Accessibility: Strategies

Fundamentals

1. Provide **low-cost, high speed, and reliable internet connectivity** in all areas of the State.
2. Plan and build out **Fiber to the Home** in as many areas of the State as possible.
3. **Promote competition and options** throughout the State.
4. **Support Connectivity Improvements through BEAD** and align equity priorities with the BEAD program and investments.
5. **Accurately capture internet availability through FCC maps.**

Accelerants

1. Provide secure **public Wi-Fi access zones** for those who need to travel outside their place or residence for connectivity.
2. Deploy an **awareness campaign** using familiar terminology to demystify service provider language and make information more accessible. This includes explaining different types of access, speeds, and costs, as well as the benefits of being online.
3. Establish **funding mechanisms/grants to assist with resident costs** to bring fiber service to their home and area.
4. Implement solutions like **mobile internet and expanded cellular network infrastructure** where physical infrastructure is lacking, and ensuring this infrastructure can handle high data loads to serve the needs of rural residents and businesses.

Internet Affordability: Opportunities

There is a difference between internet accessibility, availability, and affordability. Communicating and providing connectivity options is not enough. It must also be affordable in relation to each household's budget.

Defining Affordability

The definition of 'affordability' differs based on income and perceived value. There is a need to clarify and standardize affordable, stable internet pricing. No household should pay more than 1% of their income for residential internet.

Internet as a Necessity

There's a strong sentiment that internet access has become a basic need, similar to other utilities. It should be budgeted for accordingly and viewed as an essential service, not a luxury.

Income-Based Plans

There is a strong desire for income-based pricing or subsidized plans, particularly for low-income households. These should provide reliable, high-speed internet without necessitating sacrifices in other areas.

Quality

Affordability should not compromise the quality of internet service. Access to high-speed internet is essential for everyone to be part of the new digital society. This includes both home and mobile internet access.

Education and Awareness

Clear, easily understood information about internet plans is needed. There's a need for understanding the value of connectivity and the necessary costs associated with it.

Trust and Transparency

There is concern about affordable internet programs disappearing and leaving consumers with high costs. Clear communication from providers and long term financial sustainment of affordability programs are needed.

Policy Changes

There's a call for policy changes, such as bundling broadband with other utilities, leveraging untapped funds, and funding non-traditional provider models to generate competition within the internet provider market.

Employer and Institutional Support

Companies and service providing institutions that require or provide the option of remote work and remote service delivery should contribute to offsetting the cost of home internet for employees and patrons.

Internet Affordability: Strategies

Fundamentals

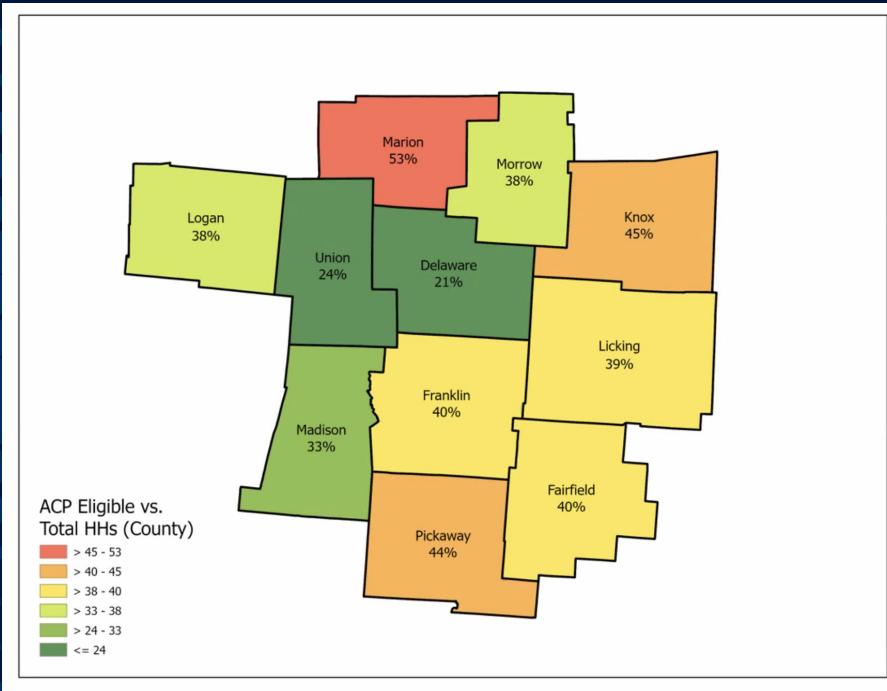
1. Advocate for **policies that promote competition among ISPs**. This could include removing barriers for new providers to enter the market, incentivizing the formation of co-operatives, and encouraging the development of community-owned and operated networks.
2. Establish legislation to standardize permanent income-based pricing plans to **ensure no household pays more than 1% of their annual income** on home internet.
3. Construct and execute a **messaging and awareness campaign about affordable internet options** that connects with, and supports the needs of under-resourced residents and geographies.
4. Create a digital inclusion resource portal and tools, including an **Internet Comparison Tool**, to be used by residents and digital support teams.

Accelerants

1. **Invest in infrastructure through public-private partnerships** to offset infrastructural costs and ultimately lower the cost to service rural and low-income areas where return on investment may be low due to less population density, etc.
2. **Incorporate affordable internet access into affordable housing initiatives.** This could involve partnerships with ISPs to provide low-cost internet services in affordable housing units.
3. **Advocate or incentivize companies that offer remote work for hourly jobs to contribute to the cost of home internet for their employees.** This could be particularly impactful in urban areas with a high concentration of such companies.

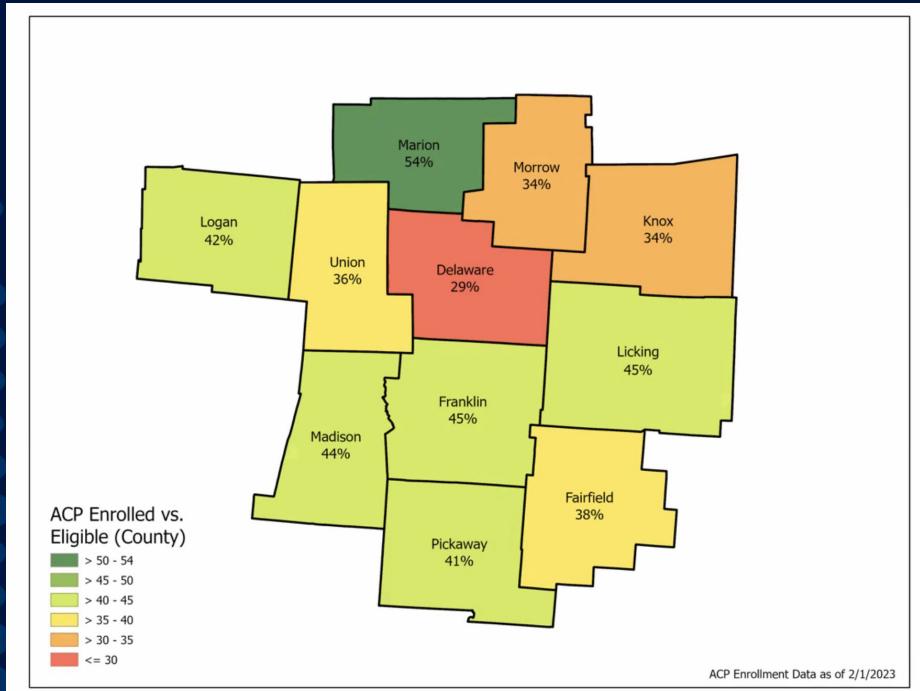
FCC Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP)

ACP will help but it is not enough and is not long-term. The following maps show the percentage of ACP eligible households that have adopted the program in the Central Region as of Q2 2023.



ACP Eligible vs.
Total HHs (County)

- > 45 - 53
- > 40 - 45
- > 38 - 40
- > 33 - 38
- > 24 - 33
- <= 24



ACP Enrollment Data as of 2/1/2023

Device Access: Opportunities

Any device may not be the right device, and a device alone is not enough. Device types must be appropriately matched to the user and include end-to-end support throughout the device's lifecycle.

Affordable Devices

The cost of devices is a recurring concern. Residents mentioned the need for devices to be affordable relative to an individual's means, and highlighted the difficulties faced by those who can't afford to purchase devices. Everyone, regardless of their income or background, should have exposure and access to the devices they need to participate in today's digital society.

Device Functionality and Compatibility

It is important for devices to be up-to-date and capable of accessing required online services, including specialized software. Many websites are not compatible with mobile devices, which can cause problems, particularly for those who rely on smartphones for internet access.

Device Literacy

There is a need for education about different types of devices and how to use them. This knowledge is important for understanding the best device to use to accomplish different tasks most effectively.

Wrap Around Support and Maintenance

Concerns were raised about the logistics of dealing with devices when they are out of date or no longer working. There is a need for reliable troubleshooting, repair, and maintenance support for devices, especially for seniors and other vulnerable groups.

Mobility and Versatility

Portable and versatile devices like smartphones, tablets, and laptops that can connect to different services and can be used in various settings are important for remote job opportunities, education, and overall connectivity.

Physical Limitations

An individual's health and physical limitations may affect device use. It is important to consider non-traditional devices, adapted devices, and specialized features that can enable digital independence among those with disabilities.

Device Access: Strategies

Fundamentals

1. **Organize tech support available to those receiving devices** to offer reliable maintenance, repair, and modification services. Businesses or government partners could contribute a percentage of their service/support to this initiative.
2. **Build out a Private and Public Sector Device donation supply chain** to increase the availability of affordable devices that can be **distributed regionally, and potentially state-wide**. Create a platform to connect device suppliers with device requests.
3. **Establish flagship device distribution points** that intersect with places that residents already go (i.e. food banks, Goodwill Stores, Schools, etc.).
4. **Establish a 'device bank', virtual distribution interface**, to enable non-profits and programs to submit device requests to be met by donors.
5. **Establish a sustainable cash fund for offsetting refurbishing costs for donation and the purchasing of new devices.** Coordinate collective purchasing power with the cash fund and other large purchasers (schools, government, companies, etc.) to bring down the cost of devices.

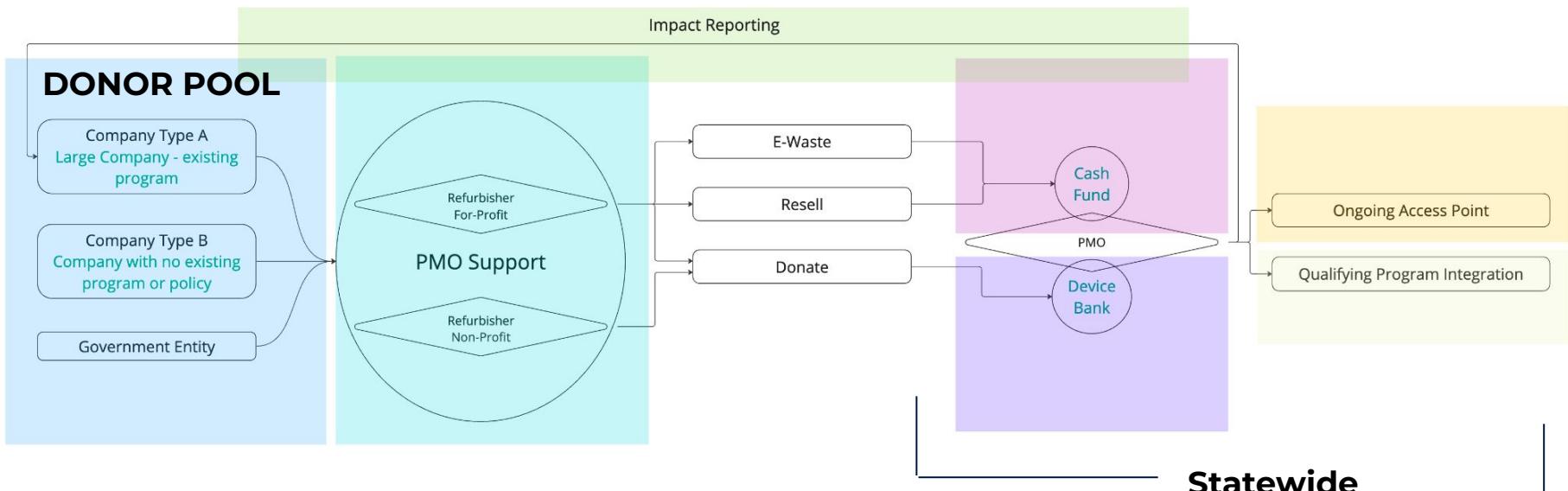
Device Access: Strategies

Accelerants

1. **Ensure donated devices meet a set of common “community good standards,”** are distributed in like new packaging, and ready to use condition.
2. **Conduct outreach programs** in community centers, libraries, and schools to educate residents **about the importance of different types of appropriate digital devices** and the opportunities they provide.
3. **Advocate for devices that are compatible with a wide range of services and websites.** Develop special programs for seniors, low-income families, and other vulnerable groups that may have unique barriers to device access. This could involve home visits, personalized training, or specialized devices that meet their particular needs.
4. Establish **long term funding structures to enable schools to provide students with devices** for home use, particularly in school districts where the student-to-device ratio is low.
5. **Revise policy to enable device refurbishment and donation of government devices** to community good purposes.
6. Encourage private sector companies to finance digital inclusion projects in exchange for positive PR, tax incentives, and a digitally-ready workforce.
 - a. Ex: **Provide a tax incentive for companies who donate at least 10% of their retired devices or 5% of device refurbishment proceeds to communities in Ohio.**

Device Access: Strategies

Device Donation Ecosystem Model



Digital Life Skills: Opportunities

With the rapid change of technology, the ability to learn and adapt is essential. Digital Skills are not a point-in-time need, but a persistent and ongoing need for lifelong learning.

Digital Exposure

A significant portion of the population, including those with developmental disabilities, seniors, immigrants, and people re-entering society after incarceration, lack access and exposure to digital technology.

Individualized Learning

There is a need for digital skills training and education tailored to different age groups and communities, ideally delivered in a way that addresses language and cultural barriers. A recurring theme is the need for patient, empathetic, and hands-on teaching methods. Many people feel that their loved ones or support networks move too quickly, use confusing terminology, or simply do things for them, limiting their opportunity to learn.

Social and Psychological Barriers

Psychological barriers, such as frustration, embarrassment, and a lack of motivation or self-confidence, often hinder learning. Digital skills trainings need to take these considerations into account.

Community Collaboration

To provide a digital skills ecosystem on a larger scale, there is a need for collaboration among community organizations, strategic partnerships, and government policies aimed at providing consistent, coordinated, and standardized digital learning opportunities at all levels of proficiency.

Cultural and Language Considerations

Non-English speakers and individuals from different cultural backgrounds face unique barriers to digital literacy. Cultural and language appropriate resources, as well as a respectful understanding of cultural communication norms, are necessary for successful training.

Technology and Employment

Employers often expect employees to have a certain level of digital skills, but provide little training. There's a need for employment-related digital training, and support for older adults re-entering the workforce.

Digital Life Skills: Strategies

Fundamentals

1. **Fund a Scalable Skills Training Program with central resources and guidance with hyper-local implementation that is integrated with device distribution.** Programs should be specifically designed to cater to different groups: easy to understand, using familiar terms and concepts, and need to be available in various languages to cater to non-English speakers.
2. **Establish a competitive grant fund to support inclusive training programs** that meet the unique needs of each segment of the population.
3. **Fund tech skills training programs that incentivise participation with compensation, certificates and job pathways.**
4. Propose a policy to integrate **digital skills as a mandatory part of basic education** for every individual.

Accelerants

1. **Open Source all curriculum and materials** funded with State Digital Equity Dollars.
2. **Formalize a network of resources and support** that can help individuals learn and adapt to digital technology.
 - a. This network could include social workers, volunteers, and technology experts. Also, leverage existing community structures and trusted leaders to facilitate learning and break down trust barriers.
 - b. Identify and train local community leaders who can then pass on their digital skills to others in their community. These champions can provide personalized, locally relevant training and support.
3. For areas with fewer resources, **consider a mobile technology lab that can travel and provide resources** and training to various locations.
4. **Regularly assess the effectiveness of training programs and make necessary adjustments.** This could include seeking feedback from participants or conducting tests to measure improvement in digital skills.

Financial Sustainment: Strategies

The digital divide is a persistent and ongoing problem now and into the future. Securing sustainable funding and financial support is crucial to maintaining and expanding digital inclusion initiatives.

Fundamentals

1. **Prioritize funding digital equity projects that have local matching investment** to maximize the potential that efforts can continue beyond this period of funding.
2. **Require sustainment plans in final reports** of funded projects.
3. **Demonstrate the effectiveness of digital inclusion programs and investments on regional and statewide economic prosperity through rigorous monitoring, evaluation, impact measurement, and communicating success stories through qualitative and quantitative data.** Share this information transparently and equip regional network leads to sell the impact to local and national funders.
4. **Apply a digital equity lens across existing funding priorities and programs** incorporating considerations from these objectives.
5. **Establish a permanent funding source/approach to Digital Equity by the State.**

Accelerants

1. **Explore ongoing funding potential of device resell funds as a replenished fund.**
2. **Raise private and philanthropic investment.** Tech companies and other corporations often provide financial support for initiatives that align with their corporate social responsibility goals. Approach these companies with well-defined proposals outlining the benefits their support could provide to the community.
 - a. **Encourage private sector companies to finance digital inclusion projects** in exchange for positive PR, tax incentives, and a digitally-ready workforce.
3. **If appropriate, consider offering/allowing some services for a fee** to those who can afford it.
4. Explore a digital inclusion endowment.

Overall Policy Considerations

- Demonstrate that the government is proactive in protecting citizens by **creating regulations that protect consumer data and privacy, especially for vulnerable online users** (youth and seniors).
- **Advocate or incentivize companies that offer remote work for hourly jobs to contribute to the cost of home internet for their employees.** This could be particularly impactful in urban areas with a high concentration of such companies.
- **Revise policy to allow device refurbishment and donation of government devices** to community good purposes.
- **Provide a tax incentive for companies who donate at least 10% of their retired devices or 5% of device refurbishment proceeds to communities in Ohio.**
- Consider a policy to **integrate digital skills as a mandatory part of basic education** for every individual.
- **Open Source all skills training curriculum and materials** funded with State Digital Equity Dollars.
- Establish a **permanent funding source/approach to Digital Equity by the State.**

Data Sources for Reference

Data Sources

- [**RDIA Engagement Discussion Outputs by Session \(all 10 sessions\)**](#)
- 5 In-Person Community Engagement Session Workshop Activities Outputs
 - ◆ [**Delaware**](#)
 - ◆ [**Licking-Knox**](#)
 - ◆ [**Pickaway-Fairfield**](#)
 - ◆ [**Marion-Morrow**](#)
 - ◆ [**Logan-Union-Madison**](#)
- [**Franklin County Digital Equity Action Agenda**](#)
- Broadband Ohio Digital Inclusion Asset Mapping Survey (Responses)
- DEC Activity Matrix (Franklin County Asset Map)
- In-person Community Engagement Session Attendees List

