STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
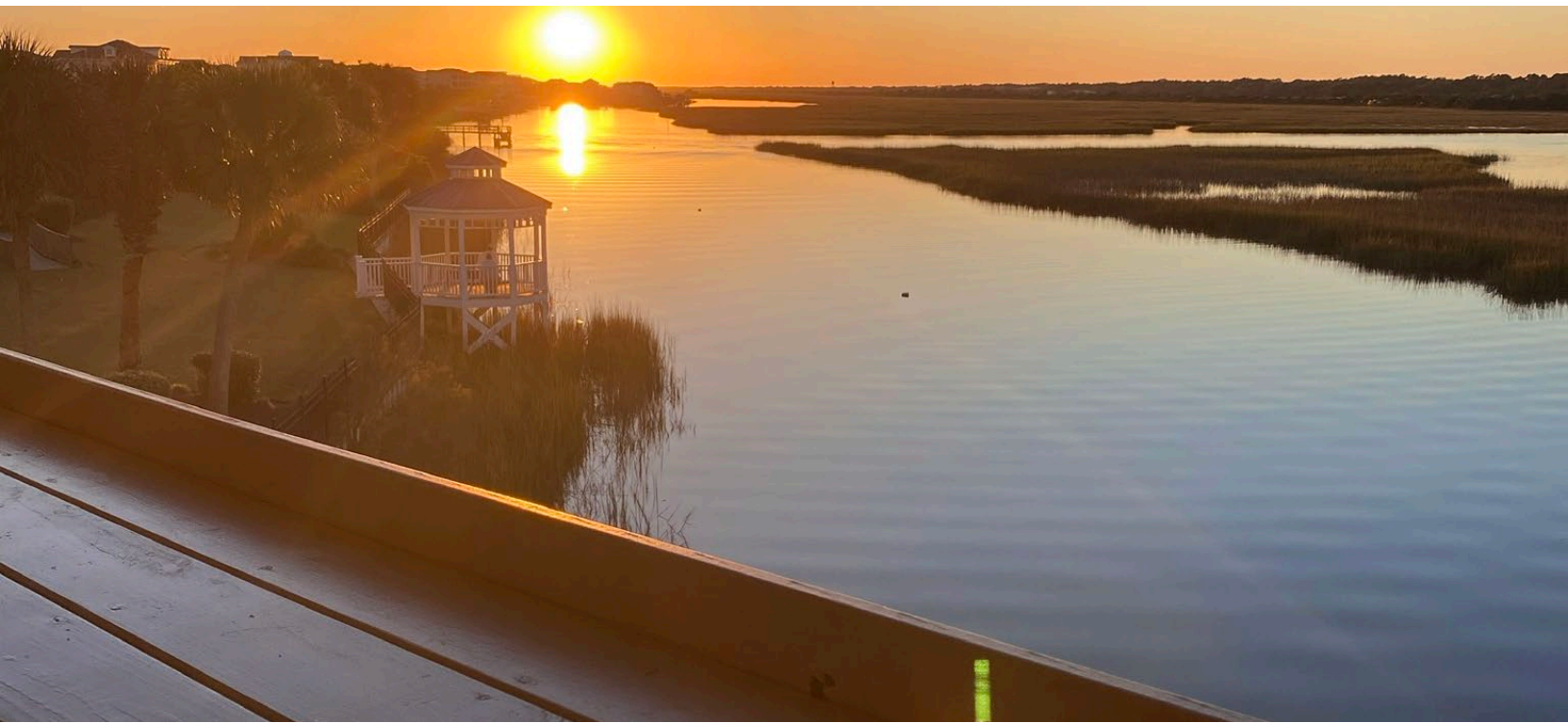# DIGITAL EQUITY PLAN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY (ENGLISH)

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

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

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

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

This plan reviews, synthesizes, and combines data, best practices, and dreams yet unrealized into a plan to connect all North Carolinians to each other, the world, and their futures. It will be submitted to NTIA in the first quarter of 2024, after the solicitation and incorporation of public input in late 2023.

Once the plan is approved, the division will apply for Digital Equity Capacity Building Grant funding from NTIA and will initiate a five-year implementation period. The division will continually document and evaluate the implementation of this plan and will report periodically to the public on the impact, learnings, and any necessary modifications of the strategies.

VISION AND MISSION

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

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

Mission: The NCDIT Office of Digital Equity and Literacy will partner and collaborate with communities across the state and ensure all North Carolinians have:

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

PLANNING PROCESS

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

Phase 1: Identifying Key Partners and Developing an Outreach Plan
Leveraging North Carolina's strong, established network of digital equity partners as well as engaging key organizations serving covered populations was the first priority for the planning process. This network of partners has served in an advisory capacity throughout all elements of the planning process.

Phase 2: Community Outreach and Data Collection
To ensure the digital equity plan was inclusive of all N.C. communities and populations' needs, the division engaged in key activities related to outreach and data collection, including:
- Engaging Local Digital Inclusion Planning Teams and Coalitions
- Hosting eight public Regional Convenings in each economic prosperity zone culminating in an in-person summit and a virtual convening.
- Engaging state agencies to align priorities.
- Developing an asset inventory of more than 1300 resources, programs, and initiatives meeting digital including needs across the state.
- Deploying a first of its kind Digital Equity Survey which received more than 6,600 survey responses between May and October of 2023.
- Hosting 23 Listening sessions focused on the needs and experiences of covered populations.
- Engaged with Tribal communities to solicit their input and seek ways to collaborate.

Phase 3: Plan Development and Public Comment
The significant outreach and data collection efforts outlined in Phase 2, have culminated in the development of this plan. The division knows this is just the beginning of efforts to advance digital equity and is committed to continued outreach and partnership including through public comment and continued public engagement.

CURRENT STATE OF DIGITAL EQUITY

Assets
Central to understanding the needs of covered populations in North Carolina is identifying the programs, initiatives, and resources available (also known as assets) in the state. The division has worked to develop a strong network of organizations that serve the digital needs of the state over many. Organizations, local governments, anchor institutions, churches, and businesses across the state have been addressing digital needs in their community; however, no formal efforts to catalog each entity and its services have been developed until now.

The division identified 1,343 existing digital inclusion assets in North Carolina and 974 organizations, government, or faith-based institutions providing digital inclusion resources and support, representing assets in all 100 counties. Public devices and internet access were the most common resources (519) available followed by digital skills training and technical support (328). Access to devices (193) and digital navigation support (157) were also implemented across the state.

The division identified organizations working to meet digital needs for all covered populations. The division identified the most services for aging individuals, and the least for individuals who are incarcerated or in re-entry. While many organizations served individuals with disabilities, the division only identified a handful that focused solely on the needs of people with disabilities and provided digital inclusion services. A more specific focus on the needs of these covered populations is needed.

A clear asset in North Carolina is the number and quality of local and regional digital inclusion plans and coalitions in the state. A digital inclusion plan is often the first formal step for a community to "reduce the digital divide and prioritize digital equity for their residents." Through partnership with the Institute for Emerging Issues at NC State University, the division also analyzed key themes, barriers and recommendations from the 27 draft and adopted digital inclusion plans in the state and interviewed representatives from each planning team and coalition. These plans represent 48 counties and the Qualla Boundary, home of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

While the division is proud of the organizations and resources collected through this initial asset inventory, a sustained effort to identify organizations must continue through an on-going process.

Digital Equity Barriers and Needs
North Carolina's covered populations are not monolithic – their identities are intertwined. The division's community-driven planning process confirmed what the division already believed: almost every individual is identifiable within more than one covered population; and their barriers to digital equity may be multiple, overlapping, and reinforcing.

There were several barriers to digital equity that were raised by multiple covered populations and across the geography of North Carolina. These barriers, when removed, would resolve most of the gaps for all covered populations.

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

5. **Availability and affordability of devices and technical support.** Fully participating in a digital society requires access to reliable devices that meet the needs of its user(s) as well as repair and technical assistance services to address issues with those devices.

STRATEGIES AND IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

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

The strategies and implementation activities to meet these needs include:

- **Strategy 1:** All North Carolinians have access to high-speed internet and to affordable, low-cost internet services.
  - Implementation Activity 1.1: Support the state's Broadband, Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) program plan objectives and implementation to ensure alignment with North Carolina Digital Equity Plan Goals.
  - Implementation Activity 1.2: Support Community Anchor Institutions (CAIs) to improve and expand free, public Wi-Fi locations.
  - Implementation Activity 1.3: Increase awareness of and enrollment low-cost and subsidized broadband internet programs like the Affordable Connectivity program (ACP).

- **Strategy 2:** Promote practices that support online accessibility and inclusivity of public resources and services.
  - Implementation Activity 2.1: Leverage partnerships within state government, local government and organizations serving covered populations to identify and develop North Carolina standards for online accessibility and inclusivity.
  - Implementation Activity 2.1: Leverage partnerships to train staff in all cabinet-level agencies on online accessibility standards to improve the accessibility and inclusivity of state government websites and expand training and capacity to local governments and beyond.

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

- **Strategy 4:** Promote practices and leverage tools to ensure online privacy and security.
  - Implementation Activity 4.1: Partner with workforce and education agencies at the state and local levels to identify and adopt digital skills standards, including digital privacy and cybersecurity standards. (Crossover from Implementation Activity 3.1)

- ○ Implementation Activity 4.2: Integrate cybersecurity and privacy training into curricula being implemented by digital navigators and other digital literacy efforts across the state.
- **Strategy 5:** Ensure that North Carolinians have access to digital devices to meet their needs.
  - ○ Implementation Activity 5.1: Increase public access to devices at community anchor institutions.
  - ○ Implementation Activity 5.2: Increase the supply of no cost and low-cost devices in North Carolina's device ecosystem.
  - ○ Implementation Activity 5.3: Develop and sustain a high-volume refurbishment and distribution system that supports the efficient movement of devices throughout the ecosystem and that matches computing devices with the unique needs of the intended Covered Populations.
  - ○ Implementation Activity 5.4: Utilize trained and qualified partners for device deployment and technical support.

SUSTAINABILITY

All the strategies and activities outlined above should work together to build and strengthen a strong digital equity network (often described as an ecosystem) to meet digital needs of all covered populations. This network will be the backbone of the work, ensuring digital needs are met and that programs are sustainable long after Digital Equity Act funding has been spent. The division is committed to sustaining a healthy, robust digital equity network into the future that includes 1) Sustaining a diverse, inclusive community of digital equity practitioners, and 2) Building capacity across the state to identify and meet local needs.

ALIGNMENT WITH STATE PLANS AND GOALS

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