

DEFINING A STATE DIGITAL EQUITY OFFICE



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State governments are essential partners for closing the nation's digital divides and ensuring their citizens have both the access to affordable, robust broadband internet service and the internet enabled devices, digital literacy training, and technical support they need in order to fully benefit from the opportunities the internet promises. Broadband access and digital inclusion are inextricably linked and achieving digital equity requires concerted, sustained efforts to both increase broadband access and digital inclusion. Currently, many states are leading efforts to increase broadband access throughout their state while locally led digital inclusion organizations and activities are rapidly growing to meet the increased need COVID exposed. As these efforts increase, so does the need for states to lead and invest in digital inclusion efforts.

States are in a unique position to lead cross-sector, cross-departmental, multi-faceted digital inclusion activities that impact the entire state. The state's knowledge, coordination and convening ability and expertise combined with its relationships with local governments and citizens provides a unique opportunity for a leadership role in promoting and expanding digital equity.

This document outlines NDIA's recommendations for states as they assume digital inclusion work followed by a list of recommended functions and activities states should engage in to increase digital equity throughout their state.



DIGITAL INCLUSION

Digital Inclusion refers to the activities necessary to ensure that all individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, have access to and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). This includes 5 elements:

- affordable, robust broadband internet service;
- internet-enabled devices that meet the needs of the user;
- access to digital literacy training;
- quality technical support; and
- applications and online content designed to enable and encourage self-sufficiency, participation and collaboration.

Digital Inclusion must evolve as technology advances. Digital Inclusion requires intentional strategies and investments to reduce and eliminate historical, institutional and structural barriers to access and use technology.

DIGITAL EQUITY

Digital Equity is a condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy and economy. Digital Equity is necessary for civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services.

States should establish a Digital Equity Office, serving as a coordinator for all state-level digital inclusion activities.

1. The digital equity office should be housed in the existing state broadband office or co-located with the broadband office as digital inclusion is inextricably linked to broadband access expansion efforts.
2. States should equip the digital equity office with staff and resources to lead digital inclusion activities.
3. States should equip the digital equity office with the authority to lead and coordinate interagency and all state level digital inclusion activities.
4. The digital equity office should lead creation of a digital equity plan in coordination with other relevant state offices and community-based-organizations.

The state digital equity office's roles and responsibilities should include: leading the coordination of digital inclusion activities on behalf of the state, assisting in the development of digital equity policy, coordinating funding, strengthening local digital equity ecosystems, educating policymakers, local governments, and stakeholders on digital equity and inclusion, guiding digital equity focused research and data use, and piloting scalable digital inclusion models.

STATE DIGITAL EQUITY OFFICE'S ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES:

Lead: The first and primary role the state Digital Equity Office should undertake is to coordinate digital inclusion activities on behalf of the state. Digital inclusion activities may vary from state to state but will include addressing broadband affordability and ensuring citizens have access to internet-enabled devices, digital literacy training, and quality technical support. All other roles and responsibilities fall under this first and primary task. Given the size and breadth of the digital divide, closing the digital divide is a shared responsibility amongst state and local leaders. The digital equity office cannot control all aspects of closing their state's digital divide, however, they can coordinate and collaborate with state and local leaders such as the State Librarian and local digital inclusion practitioners and champions to increase digital equity throughout the state.

COORDINATE AND CONVENE STATE LEVEL EFFORTS

- Assist the Governor, legislature, and state agencies in evaluating, understanding, and responding to the impact of digital equity gaps on agency service delivery models.
- Coordinate state digital inclusion activities for the state to ensure state activities align and support each other in order to prevent duplicative efforts.

- Build interdepartmental partnerships with sister state agencies, such as departments of social services, cultural agencies, libraries and education departments.
- Coordinate new and existing digital inclusion efforts to align with broadband deployment and expansion efforts.
- Convene state agencies and local stakeholders (such as local governments, anchor institutions, digital inclusion programs, and populations impacted by digital inequities) to coordinate digital inclusion activities.
- Convene policymakers and stakeholders around digital inclusion topics.

ASSIST IN DEVELOPING POLICY SUPPORTIVE OF DIGITAL EQUITY

- Identify needed state and federal policy solutions for increasing digital equity.
- Design policy solutions and provide recommendations to the Governor and State legislature.
- Provide expertise and information to the state's federal delegation to inform and advocate for federal digital inclusion policy.
- Participate in federal and national conversations and peer to peer groups (such as NDIA and [Schools, Health & Libraries Broadband Coalition](#)).

COORDINATE FUNDING

- Create and manage digital inclusion grant program(s) to support the growth of local digital inclusion activities.
- Identify and leverage existing state controlled funds for digital inclusion activities at the state and local level (including Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program).
- Leverage and direct federal funding to digital inclusion activities at the state and local level.

STRENGTHEN LOCAL DIGITAL EQUITY ECOSYSTEMS

- Foster the development and growth of a collaborative digital equity ecosystem throughout the state.
- Lead or participate in a statewide coalition to provide organizational and peer support to communities and digital inclusion programs.
- Support existing and the growth and establishment of new digital inclusion organizations and programs through technical assistance and local capacity building and development.

EDUCATE

- Educate policymakers, local governments, and stakeholders on the importance of digital equity, common terms and definitions, themes, best practices, and available resources.
- Coordinate efforts to educate citizens about available federal programs supporting digital equity, including home broadband subscription and personal device subsidies.
- Create digital equity educational resources to inform policymakers, local governments, and stakeholders, including state level data, barriers to digital equity and best practice solutions
- Create educational resources for use by partners.

GUIDE DATA, RESEARCH AND BEST PRACTICES

- Aggregate and analyze existing broadband availability and adoption data and research to inform policy recommendations, benchmark progress, and develop goals.
- Identify best practices and for digital inclusion programs and activities to provide to stakeholders and partners.

- Provide accessible shared space to store data and best practices for use by partners and stakeholders.
- Include broadband adoption data in existing broadband state mapping efforts.

PILOT AND SCALE MODELS STATEWIDE

- Pilot robust, multi-faceted digital inclusion programs in diverse communities with the goal of scaling and equipping partners to undertake for scaling statewide.
- Partner with local partners to scale existing digital inclusion programs statewide.
- Share best practices with other states.

