State Digital
Equity Plan

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1 Executive Summary

BroadbandOhio is working to bring reliable, affordable, high-speed internet to every Ohioan, in their home and in their community. Statewide, some 1.3 million Ohioans still lack subscriptions to high-speed internet. This is, in part, due to issues with infrastructure availability – of the 4.5 million locations in Ohio, 188,000 remain unserved (4 percent) and 144,000 remain underserved (3 percent)[1]. The Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) program seeks to address infrastructure.

In Ohio's Digital Opportunity Plan, BroadbandOhio seeks to address these the issues beyond connectivity – affordability, access to devices, and digital skills – that affect Ohioans access to high-speed internet. Statewide data show that:

- Of the 2.01 million Ohio households eligible for the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) (42 percent), only 1,025,139 have enrolled (51.4 percent of those eligible)
- Some 17 percent of Ohioans do not have an internet-ready device (e.g., laptop, computer, or tablet).
- At least 706,000 households earn $50,000 or less per year and have "low digital skills."

The impact of these issues varies by region and by covered population group.

- Fifty percent of the households without subscriptions are located in 10 of Ohio's 88 counties, especially Cuyahoga (161,000), Franklin (107,000), Hamilton (79,000), Montgomery (62,000), and Summit (54,000) counties9
- Lowest adoption rates are in the Appalachian counties
- Adoption gaps are disproportionate in low-income households and among aging people and people with disabilities
- For internet devices, the same trend is present, but with smaller gaps

Achieving a more digitally inclusive Ohio will empower people all across the state to fully engage in their communities, seek and maintain employment, better connect with loved ones, learn, and access healthcare and other essential services. BroadbandOhio cannot achieve this alone.

Fostering collaborative partnerships and empowering underserved communities are critical to ensure no Ohioan is left offline.

To develop Ohio's Digital Opportunity Plan, BroadbandOhio took a comprehensive, multi-layered approach to collaboration and stakeholder engagement. BroadbandOhio leveraged existing stakeholders, developed new relationships, and used multiple outreach channels. This approach ensures that the plan represents all Ohioans, with a special focus on covered populations.

Through ongoing partnerships and participation in listening sessions and surveys, over 5,500 stakeholders have already contributed to building the plan and Ohio's key strategies for closing the digital divide. These stakeholders represent state government agencies, local government agencies, internet service providers, community-based nonprofits, and residents, among others.

Ohio's key strategies center around continued support to regional and local partners, many of whom have prioritized digital inclusion efforts for decades. In alignment with this ethos, Ohio's 2023 Broadband Strategy priorities, and Ohio's BEAD goals and objectives, below are Ohio's key strategies for digital opportunity:
1. Continue Stakeholder Engagement
2. Expand Broadband Infrastructure
3. Increase Access to Affordable Broadband
4. Increase Access to Digital Skills Training and Technical Support, including Training and Support around Privacy, Security & Safety
5. Increase access to Affordable Devices
6. Accessibility & Inclusivity of Public Resources & Services

Ohio's Digital Opportunity Plan is a living document that will continue to be updated to best reflect the needs of Ohioans.

2 Introduction and Vision for Digital Equity

2.1 Vision

BroadbandOhio is working to bring reliable, affordable, high-speed internet to every Ohioan, in their home and in their community. While broadband expansion projects are increasing connectivity across Ohio and improving access to high-speed internet, gaps in access to affordable internet, internet-enabled devices, and digital skills training and technical support remain barriers to communities' use of this vital service.

Our vision of a more digitally equitable Ohio extends beyond connectivity; it encompasses equal opportunity to access quality education, healthcare, job opportunities, government services, and cultural resources online. By fostering collaborative partnerships and empowering under resourced communities to accomplish its goals, Ohio will ensure that no one is left behind.

By building an inclusive, connected, and technologically proficient society, BroadbandOhio aspires to create a thriving, resilient, and forward-looking Ohio that maximizes the potential of its residents. Together, we can shape a future where digital equity serves as the bedrock for progress, social cohesion, and collective prosperity across Ohio.

> "High-speed internet is no longer a luxury – it's a critical necessity for everything from school to work to healthcare. We must end the digital divide in our state, and by giving our rural and unserved areas access to affordable and reliable high-speed internet, we will enhance economic growth in these communities and bring about new opportunities for residents."
>
> — Governor Mike DeWine

2.2 Alignment with Existing Efforts to Improve Outcomes

BroadbandOhio facilitates the Broadband Working Group, which convenes various state government agencies to enable cross-agency cooperation and collaboration on broadband-related efforts. Monthly meetings allow the Working Group to regularly align on priorities and existing state efforts to improve outcomes across Ohio. The Working Group consists of InnovateOhio, Department of Development (Office of Workforce Transformation, Governor's Office of Appalachia), Department of Education, Department of Administrative Services, Department of Higher Education, OARnet, and the Ohio Education Computer Network Management Council.

Beyond the Working Group, BroadbandOhio worked with key state agencies as part of the State Digital Equity Planning process to ensure that Ohio's Digital Opportunity Plan is aligned with key state priorities in the categories described below:

- Economic and workforce development goals, plans, and outcomes
- Educational outcomes
- Health outcomes
- Delivery of other essential services

2.2.1 Economic and workforce development goals, plans, and outcomes
Strengthening Ohio's Broadband & 5G Workforce

Ohio's Broadband & 5G Workforce strategy outlines a plan for industry career awareness and creating more training and education programs in the state. Significant public and private investments are being made in broadband and 5G at the state and federal level, which, in turn, is expected to create tens of thousands of jobs in Ohio over the next decade. The strategy addresses three key issues:

1. Increasing broadband industry career awareness by exposing middle school and high school students to the industry through curriculum and internships;
2. Developing and supporting more education and training programs to educate and train Ohioans;
3. Capitalizing on state and federal funding programs, like TechCred and WIOA, to help finance the education and training that will bring to market the talent supply needed for the broadband and 5G industry in Ohio[1]

Filling the demand for skilled labor to build infrastructure is a key step forward in supporting increased access to broadband in unserved and underserved areas of the state.

TechCred

The TechCred program helps Ohioans learn new skills and helps employers build a stronger workforce with the skills needed in today's technology-infused economy. Eligible credentials must be industry-recognized, technology-focused, short term, and responsible. Technology-focused credentials prioritize the development of digital skills and include those related to software development or utilization, cyber security, broadband and 5G technology, and other emerging fields. Where possible, online and distance-learning programs are encouraged. Employers may be reimbursed for costs incurred to support employee certification[2].

After 16 rounds, 52,767 tech-focused credentials have been awarded to 2,066 Ohio employers, totaling $58.9M in awards[3].

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[1] Strengthening Ohio's Broadband & 5G Workforce, BroadbandOhio
[2] Ohio TechCred
[3] 2022 Annual Report, Governor's Office of Workforce Transformation

Individual Microcredential Assistance Program

The Individual Microcredential Assistance Program (IMAP) helps Ohioans who are low income, partially unemployed, or totally unemployed participate in a training program to receive a credential at no cost. IMAP training providers cover all tuition, fees, and additional costs to help individuals learn new skills and earn a credential that can lead to a good job.

Ohio offers 136 training programs, 128 of which can be completed online from anywhere in the state. In 2022, more than $6.1 million was awarded to 24 training providers to help 4,278 Ohioans[4].

High School Tech Internship Pilot Program

The High School Tech Internship v3.0 pilot program is a competitive opportunity for Ohio employers to receive reimbursement for establishing a recruitment pipeline by hosting high school interns in tech-related roles. Educational Entities work closely with business partners to apply for this program. The goal of the internship is to provide business with the tech talent they need while also providing students with valuable work experience at an early age. Interns are expected to perform job duties similar to what is expected of an entry-level employee in technology roles that focus on software development, data, cloud and IT infrastructure, cybersecurity, and other technology-focused roles. Businesses will be reimbursed up to 100 percent of the wages paid to interns to encourage employers to hire high school students in technology roles. Businesses also will be eligible to earn bonuses for each student that earns a credential[5].

Ohio Central School System and Workforce Development

The Office of Workforce Development, under the purview of the Ohio Central School System (OCSS) within the Office of Holistic Services of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC), collaborates with various state agencies and private sector businesses to offer training and education credentials in transferrable job skills that provide work opportunities to restored citizens, as well as employment opportunities for incarcerated adults. The Office was created to train the incarcerated to build Ohio's Workforce and collaborates closely with the Governor's Office of Workforce Transformation and the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services to inform training.

ODRC's 2023 Roadmap & 2022 Accomplishments outlines key achievements and future goals for the Department to support additional workforce development opportunities, which include:

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[4] Ibid
[5] High School Tech Internship Pilot Program, Governor's Office of Workforce Transformation

- Tower technician program implemented as a part of Ohio 5g
- Create an IT workforce development program
- Implement 21st century career technical programs, including fiber optic technician and 5G broadband

OCSS also participates in Ohio's Broadband and 5G Sector Partnership. Partners provide advice and recommendations to inform Ohio's broadband and 5G workforce strategy.

OhioMeansJobs

OhioMeansJobs helps Ohioans find jobs, learn career skills, meet the requirements of government benefits and more on their webpage and at Job Centers across Ohio. OhioMeansJobs offer resources to help specific groups with their job and career needs, including older adults, restored citizens, and military service members[6].

2.2.2 Educational outcomes
Opportunity to Learn

In January 2021, the Ohio Department of Education and the Management Council partnered to deploy an *Opportunity to Learn* survey designed to gather information on the degree to which students have internet connectivity and devices at home. At the time of the survey, an estimated 72% of Ohio's K-12 students in traditional public districts were learning in fully remote or hybrid settings. With so many students learning remotely, internet connectivity and devices were key factors in understanding a student's ready access to regularly offered educational opportunities.

More than 500 traditional public districts (85%) responded to the survey, representing 1.3 million of Ohio's 1.7 million students. Survey results indicated disparities across district typology and implications for racial equity. For example:

- On average, 74% of K-12 students across six major urban districts that were primarily fully remote had internet connectivity, compared to 95% among towns.
- Districts serving large populations of white students report the highest percentages of student with internet connectivity at home (84%), while districts serving large populations of Hispanic students report the lowest rates (78%).

To help schools and districts eliminate these digital inequities, the Department, working in conjunction with public-private partners, launched RemoteEDx, a $15 million suite of resources for schools. A component of RemoteEDx included the deployment of Ohio

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[6] OhioMeansJobs

Connectivity Champions[7]. Post-pandemic, addressing digital inequities remains a priority for the Department.

Broadband Connectivity Grant

In 2020, the Ohio Department of Education, in collaboration with BroadbandOhio, provided Ohio schools and Educational Service Centers the opportunity to apply for $50 million of state funding through the federal CARES Act to supply hotspots and internet-enabled devices to students[8].

Future Forward Ohio

Future Forward Ohio encompasses the Ohio Department of Education's strategic priorities for helping students recover from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Three key coordinating strategies are guiding the Department's work, including *Overcoming Obstacles to Learning*. *Overcoming Obstacles to Learning* means addressing barriers that prevent students from engaging in learning, such as attendance, mental health, and high-speed internet access. Ohio is ensuring more students and families have access to additional learning opportunities at home, such as online learning through programs and services. This includes a $3 million investment to continue the work of the Connectivity Champions[9].

Ohio Central School System

The Ohio Central School System (OCSS), housed within the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections (ODRC), supports incarcerated adults with education, tech trade certifications, apprenticeships, and employability. Through OCSS, ODRC provides access to educational and workforce development opportunities for over 44,396 individuals across its facilities.

In an effort to provide a modernized, 21st century education to students, ODRC partnered with Google to upgrade technology and provide training and skills-building for educators. In 2019, ODRC provided 10,000 Chromebooks to be used as educational tools.

Through this partnership, educators are now able to use tools such as online assessment, virtual activities, and customized content to drive engagement and participation and enhance the overall learning experience, and students are able to access a suite of resources, from computer skill training to degree and certification programs, to better prepare them for opportunities upon reentry[10].

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[7] Data Insights: Ohio Students' Internet Connectivity and Technology Access, Ohio Department of Education, 2023
[8] Ohio Connectivity Grant
[9] Future Forward Ohio, Ohio Department of Education, 2023
[10] Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction: Creating a secure virtual classroom, Google Workspace

ODRC's 2023 Roadmap & 2022 Accomplishments outlines key achievements and future goals for the Department to support additional educational opportunities, which include:

- Distribution of 10,000 additional Chromebooks for reentry and education; and
- Implementing Google classroom as a pilot at the Ohio Reformatory for Women[11].

Currently, each of ODRC's 28 facilities, from highest security to lowest, has some form of college offering through the Department's partnership with six colleges and universities across the state.

2.2.3 Health outcomes

Ohio State Health Improvement Plan

Ohio's State Health Improvement Plan (SHIP) is a tool to strengthen state and local efforts to improve health, well-being, and economic vitality in Ohio. With the long-term goal of ensuring Ohioans achieve their full health potential, the SHIP takes a comprehensive approach to achieving equity and addressing the many factors that shape our health, including housing, poverty, education, and trauma.

The SHIP looks to address inequity by prioritizing populations with outcomes that are at least 10% worse than outcomes for Ohio overall when disaggregated data is available. These populations include racial and ethnic minorities, older adults, low-income individuals, rural populations, and people with a disability, among others that directly align with the covered populations outlined in the State Digital Equity Planning Grant.

The SHIP framework highlights 3 priority factors and evidence-informed strategies to achieve objectives within each factor. The 2020-2022 SHIP framework priorities include access to care – health insurance coverage, local access to healthcare providers, unmet need for mental health care – with strategies that could be achieved for all Ohioans with access to digital inclusion initiatives. For example, a key strategy for ensuring local access to healthcare providers is telehealth[12]. The following sections will outline BroadbandOhio's efforts to expand access to telehealth services.

As updates are made every few years, BroadbandOhio staff remain active contributors to the Ohio Department of Health's State Health Assessment and SHIP process.

School-Based Telehealth Projects

BroadbandOhio is working to expand telehealth access and usage via targeted programming, including two existing school-based telehealth projects across multiple districts in southeast Ohio. These projects have provided nearly 22,000 students with

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[11] [2023 ODRC Roadmap](#), ODRC
[12] [State Health Improvement Plan](#), Ohio Department of Health

access to telehealth services beginning in 2020. School-based health initiatives ensure that students are in school, healthy, and ready to learn, improving educational attainment and both education and health care outcomes.

Switzerland of Ohio Local School District/Telehealth in Schools Blueprint

In March 2020, Ohio announced a multi-phased telehealth pilot project to connect K-12 students in the Switzerland of Ohio Local School District to robust behavioral health services while also providing high-speed internet connections to community members. Switzerland of Ohio is Ohio's largest geographic school district, serving all of Monroe County and parts of Belmont and Noble Counties in rural, southeast Ohio. At the time, the district contracted with two counselors from Southeast, Inc. to provide in-person services to students across the district. Travel time across the district and cell phone coverage between buildings posed unique challenges for the district and behavioral health counselors to best serve students in need.

In February 2021, Phase 1 of the pilot was operational, and the Telehealth in Schools Blueprint was released to share lessons learned and to support school districts across the state in implementing their own telehealth programs.

Phase 2 to connect community members in the district to high-speed internet is in progress.

Muskingum Valley Educational Service Center

In May 2021, Ohio announced a second telehealth pilot project in the Muskingum Valley Educational Center (MVESC) service area. The project supports telehealth services in 15 school districts (54 school buildings), in partnership with nine behavioral health providers, spanning six counties in Appalachian Ohio.

By spring 2023, all 54 school building sites across the 15 districts were operational. Additionally, school psychologists at MVESC are now being trained in-house to perform tele-assessment. Student tele-assessment will begin in fall 2023.

MVESC continues to look for opportunities to expand telehealth services to neighboring districts and telehealth services and training opportunities to other related services professionals.

Statewide Telehealth Administrator

BroadbandOhio has partnered with OCHIN as a statewide telehealth administrator to help expand access to crucial healthcare services for Ohio's K-12

students. OCHIN is a nonprofit leader in equitable health care innovation and a trusted partner to a growing national partner network, supporting access to care for systemically underserved communities. As Statewide Telehealth Administrator, OCHIN will support administrators in 10 districts in successfully implementing telehealth programs in their school buildings. OCHIN will also work to develop an Ohio-based behavioral health provider network to ensure access to providers for districts in areas with workforce shortages or other barriers. The partnership with OCHIN was announced in February 2023 and remains in progress.

Other Statewide Telehealth Resources

The Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC)'s Office of Holistic Services promotes optimal wellness by providing integrated client-centered services. The Office oversees Behavioral Health Operations and Medical Operations.

ODRC has successfully implemented telemedicine, an interactive video technology that provides specialty medical consults to Ohio prisons. This technology, the use of which improves communication and continuity of care while decreasing transportation costs, links ODRC institutions across the state and Medical Operations with the Franklin Medical Center and The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center. ODRC is currently working toward modernizing the telehealth platform with OSU.

Additionally, ODRC, in collaboration with the Ohio Department of Medicaid, has developed the Medicaid Pre-Release Enrollment Program (MPREP) to eligible incarcerated individuals in Medicaid before their release from prison. Individuals eligible for pre-release care coordination are assigned a Care Manager by their Managed Care Organization (MCO). The MCO Care Manager will request to schedule a video or teleconference with the member 7-14 days before release to develop a transition plan (i.e., schedule doctor's appointments in the community, provide access to transportation, connect the member to other community services, etc.)[13].

2.2.4 Delivery of other essential services

Many industries across sectors are pivoting resources and services online, from the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles to government benefits and financial services. BroadbandOhio is looking to support community anchor institutions (CAIs) with gigabit internet service so they can serve as digital hubs for Ohioans to access these necessary resources. CAIs include hospitals, libraries, higher education institutions, and other community support organizations. Many other state agencies are also looking to support digital opportunity

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[13] Office of Holistic Services, ODRC

among the Ohioans they serve as well. A number of these agencies with programs and services are detailed below.

Ohio Department of Administrative Services

Ohio's Website Accessibility policy establishes minimum website accessibility requirements for information provided on public-facing State of Ohio websites. The policy went into effect in July 2021. Webpages created after the effective date are required to be compliant and all State of Ohio public-face webpages were required to compliant within two years of the effective date[14].

Ohio Department of Aging

The Ohio Department of Aging fosters sound public policy, research, and initiatives that benefit older Ohioans. The Department develops a strategic framework, required by the federal Older Americans Act, to provide leadership that improves and promotes the quality of life and personal choices for older Ohioans, adults with disabilities, and their families and caregivers. Ohio's 2023-2026 State Plan on Aging prioritizes strengthening community conditions, including access to technology and broadband, to support healthy aging among Ohioans. Broadband access, affordability, and digital skills training are also listed as key strategies to improve social connectedness among older adults[15].

Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities

The Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities (ODODD) is dedicated to improving the quality of life for Ohioans with developmental disabilities and their families. Many Ohioans with developmental disabilities encounter obstacles in daily tasks and activities, including accessing education and jobs. Technology can help people to overcome these barriers and live fuller lives. Ohio's Technology First Taskforce is an initiative to ensure that people with developmental disabilities have increased opportunities to live, work, and thrive in their home and communities through state-of-the-art planning, innovative technology and supports that focus on their talents, interests, and skills. The main priority of the Technology First initiative is to increase the use of innovative technology solutions within service delivery and operations for people with developmental disabilities[16].

In alignment, BroadbandOhio is providing high-speed internet connectivity to help hundreds of central Ohioans with developmental disabilities retain their independence and receive specialized care without having to leave home. BroadbandOhio awarded $600,000 in grants for a one-year pilot program to provide broadband access to up to 500 residents with

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[14] Website Accessibility, State of Ohio Administrative Policy, Ohio Department of Administrative Services
[15] State Plan on Aging, 2023-2026, Ohio Department of Aging
[16] Ohio Technology First Taskforce, Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities

developmental disabilities so they can access critical remote support services. Remote supports – such as motion detectors, bed and shower sensors, tablets, and more – allow off-site providers to monitor and respond to someone's health and safety needs using real-time video conferencing technology such as Skype, FaceTime, or StationMD, an online telehealth platform offering a broadband network of board-certified clinicians. The project aims to reduce emergency room visits, enhance record-keeping, and improve the quality of patient care.

Ohio Housing Finance Agency

The Ohio Housing Finance Agency (OHFA) facilitates the development, rehabilitation, and financing of low- to moderate-income housing. The Agency's programs help first-time home buyers, renters, senior citizens, and others find quality affordable housing that meets their needs. Each year, the Agency awards tax credits to developers, scored according to a federally required Qualified Allocation Plan (QAP), to build high quality affordable housing. The 2022-2023 QAP requires developers seeking tax credits to install broadband infrastructure in their developments. Residents must have access to broadband services in their units. Developers do not pay resident's service but must provide free access to high-speed internet in common areas. In previous QAPs, broadband was a recommendation for both newly constructed building and rehabilitation. By making this a requirement, OHFA staff hope to create opportunities for Ohioans who would not have had access[17].

Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services

The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) develops and supervises the state's public assistance, workforce development, unemployment compensation, child and adult protective services, adoption, childcare, and child support programs. ODJFS strategies ensure the most efficient, effective delivery of services and programs, which often means requiring digital skills and devices. To ensure that many of Ohio's most vulnerable populations are not left behind by this shift, ODJFS offers free iPads through a number of its assistance programs.

Ohio Public Library Information Network

The Ohio Public Library Information Network (OPLIN) provides broadband internet connections and related information services to Ohio public libraries. OPLIN's primary mission is to ensure the equity of access to digital information to all residents of Ohio. This means ensuring that all Ohioans have fast, free public internet access through the state's 251 independent local public library systems, as well as the use of high-quality research databases not freely available online.

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[17] Broadband Access in New Construction, Ohio Housing Finance Agency

As part of their FY2023-2025 Strategic Plan, OPLIN offers libraries subscriptions to a digital literacy assessment and tutorial service and supports a widespread adoption of the tools as part of libraries' digital equity efforts within their communities[18]. Currently, Ohio's public libraries offer the Northstar Digital Literacy program.

Northstar defines the basic skills needed to perform tasks on computers and online and provides online, self-guided modules to assess individuals' ability to perform tasks based on these skills. Standards and modules encompass:

- Essential Computer Skills – Basic Computer Skills, Internet Basics, Using Email, Windows OS, Mac OS
- Essential Software Skills – Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Google Docs
- Using Technology in Daily Life – Social Media, Information Literacy, Career Search Skills, Accessing Telehealth Appointments, Supporting K-12 Distance Learning, Your Digital Footprint[19]

Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections

The Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC) is dedicated to the mission of reducing recidivism among those they touch and the vision of reducing crime in Ohio. The Office of Reentry strives to connect individuals with communities, programs, and services to facilitate successful reintegration and has largely transitioned to electronic, web-based resources that require connectivity, devices, and digital skills to navigate. Key resources include:

- Relink – Relink is a free, user-friendly online resource tool that considers the entire continuum of care. It organizes and displays service providers by geo-location and categories of service in real-time, dramatically streamlining the connection between individuals in need and the critical services they seek to get help.
- findhelp – findhelp is a user-friendly platform that connects people in need and the programs that service them with dignity and ease. The tool simplifies the application process to access resources.

2.3   Strategy and Objectives

Ohio's 2023 Broadband Strategy sets forth a four-pronged broadband vision, anchored in 11 strategic pillars, detailed in **Appendix 7.1.1**, and outlined below. This vision aligns with and reinforces Ohio's focus on innovation, economic development and opportunity, and economic

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[18] FY2023-2015 Strategic Plan, OPLIN
[19] Northstar Digital Literacy

competitiveness for all Ohioans, as well as the goal of improving outcomes in education, health, and safety, especially for those in most need.

The state envisions broadband deployment and digital participation along 4 key priorities:
1. Bring reliable, affordable, high-speed internet to all Ohioans, in their homes and communities;
2. Promote the creation of world-class broadband networks throughout the state via the use of best-in-class technologies;
3. Enable participation in the modern economy;
4. Empower Ohioans through training, device access, and digital skills;

Ohio has taken a decentralized approach to closing the digital divide. Statewide initiatives have primarily focused on bringing reliable, affordable, high-speed internet to all Ohioans, promoting the creation of world-class broadband networks, and enabling participation in the modern economy. The state often looks to regional and local organizations to implement programming and services to empower Ohioans through training, device access and digital skills. Often these local organizations have a better sense of community needs and desires and can best direct state and federal resources to meet the needs of Ohioans.

Ohio's key strategies for closing the digital divide center around continued support to regional and local partners. In alignment with this ethos, the 2023 Broadband Strategy priorities, and Ohio's BEAD goals and objectives, below are Ohio's key strategies for digital opportunity.

Strategy: Continued Stakeholder Engagement
- **Objective:** Foster partnerships with local media outlets, community organizations, and influencers to amplify the message of digital opportunity, reaching diverse audiences across the state.
- **Objective:** Develop a user-friendly digital inclusion asset mapping tool to provide easy access to programs, services, and other resources for Ohioans.

Strategy: Expand Broadband Infrastructure
- **Objective:** Align planned activities across DEA and BEAD to ensure equitable deployment of resources to bring reliable, affordable, high-speed internet to all Ohioans, in their homes and communities.

Strategy: Increase Access to Affordable Broadband
- **Objective:** Support organizations in advocacy efforts for policies and incentives that encourage competition in the broadband market, leading to more affordable and accessible internet options for all Ohioans.

- **Objective:** Support organizations in ACP Outreach efforts to increase statewide enrollment from 49% to 55%.

Strategy: Increase Access to Digital Skills Training and Technical Support, including Training and Support around Privacy, Security & Safety
- **Objective:** Support organizations in developing and implementing digital skills programming in underserved communities, aiming to increase digital skills proficiency among Ohioans.
- **Objective:** Support organizations in increasing the Digital Navigator workforce to provide digital skills training and technical support in libraries, community centers, and other key locations in underserved communities across Ohioans.

Strategy: Increase access to Affordable Devices
- **Objective:** Develop a statewide device ecosystem to increase access to affordable devices for Ohioans that meets users' needs.
- **Objective:** Collaborate with large companies to invest in digital equity projects, leveraging corporate resources and expertise to amplify the impact of public initiatives. This may include in-kind support, like hardware donations, for a device ecosystem.

Strategy: Accessibility & Inclusivity of Public Resources & Services
- **Objective:** Encourage organizations to adopt web accessibility polices to ensure the inclusivity of public resources and services.

3 Current State of Digital Equity: Barriers and Assets

3.1   Asset Inventory

Ohio conducted an asset inventory of digital opportunity resources available to implement the Ohio's Digital Equity Plan and address the needs and gaps to achieve the State's goals and objectives for digital opportunity. The section below provides a comprehensive, though not exhaustive, list of findings to date, including existing resources, programs, and local plans that promote digital inclusion.

Ohio's asset inventory will continue to be updated as new resources are shared. If your organization, program, or resource is not reflected in this section or a linked appendix, please feel free to share your information in the BroadbandOhio Digital Inclusion Asset Mapping Survey.

Ohio ultimately plans to map digital inclusion assets in a user-friendly tool to allow residents to search for specific resources or browse options in their community.

3.1.1 Digital Inclusion Assets by Covered Population

Ohio has compiled a comprehensive, though not exhaustive, list of existing resources that promote digital inclusion across the state. This can be found in **Appendix 7.1.2**.

3.1.2 Existing Digital Opportunity Plans

Digital inclusion has been a priority for communities across Ohio for decades. Communities have both independently and with state support developed plans and engaged in efforts to close the digital divide. Existing and in-progress digital opportunity plans and programming to support planning are described below.

Franklin County Digital Equity Action Agenda

The Franklin County Digital Equity Action Agenda[20] was constructed using Franklin County Digital Equity Coalition (DEC) insights gleaned from coordinated crisis response and resident engagement work that begin in 2020 and builds upon the Franklin County DEC's 2021 Digital Equity Framework. The Action Agenda defines and articulates the issues, approaches, and foundational work needed to achieve digital equity in Central Ohio. The six-month process to document the Action Agenda was collaborative and included a diverse set of perspectives and implementers across the community. The Action Agenda was completed and published in October 2022 and remains a living document.

Digital Equity in Lucas County: Examining Community Barriers to the Digital World in Lucas County

The Lucas County Digital Equity Gap Analysis[21] was developed by the Center for Regional Development (CRD) at Bowling Green State University on behalf of Greater Toledo Digital Equity Coalition. CRD collected and analyzed data to determine the current state of

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[20] Franklin County Digital Equity Action Agenda, Franklin County Digital Equity Coalition, 2022

[21] Lucas County Digital Equity Gap Analysis, Toledo Lucas County Public Library, 2023

digital connectivity and access to digital resources in the greater Toledo community. The Gap Analysis also includes the priorities, strategic goals, and action plan developed by the Coalition to close the digital divide. The analysis was completed in May 2023.

Digital Equity & Inclusion: Planning for Greater Cleveland's Future

Digital Equity & Inclusion: Planning for Greater Cleveland's Future represents the work of the Greater Cleveland Digital Equity Coalition to develop long-term, sustainable solutions toward closing the digital divide. The plan explains what has been achieved by the Coalition since 2020 and what work is left to be done based on input from the Coalition's over 70 member organizations. The plan was published in May 2023.

Cleveland Digital Equity Plan

The City of Cleveland has taken major steps toward creating a digitally equitable Cleveland: releasing a Request for Proposals on internet infrastructure projects to connect as many digitally disconnected households in the city as possible, hiring the city's first Digital Equity and Inclusion Manager, and developing Cleveland's Digital Equity and Inclusion plan. The plan process began in 2023 and will continue until a neighborhood-led and -fed strategy can for closing the digital divide is developed with input from residents of the city's 17 wards. Beginning in 2023, the process to develop a plan and a neighborhood-led and -fed strategic plan is developed with input from residents of all 17 wards.

Summit County Digital Equity Framework

Summit County is taking a major step toward digital equity and inclusion with the creation of a Summit County Digital Equity Framework[22] in partnership with the National Digital Inclusion Alliance. This work includes a Summit County Digital Equity Coalition, including members from all 31 communities in the county, and an Equity Strategy, which is forthcoming.

Broadband Community Accelerator Program

Ohio's Broadband Community Accelerator program was developed in partnership with the Benton Institute for Broadband and Society and Heartland Forward. The program educates and supports community leadership teams as they create their community's broadband vision and goals and pursue the best possible broadband solutions for their area. In its first cohort, Ohio's program supported five communities (four counties and one region) in building broadband plans. A second cohort is slated to begin in Fall 2023.

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[22] Summit Connects, County of Summit, 2023

3.1.3 Existing Digital Equity Programs

Ohio has compiled a comprehensive, though not exhaustive, list of existing resources that promote digital inclusion across the state. This can be found in **Appendix 7.1.2**.

3.1.4 Broadband Access and Adoption

Below are resources to help Ohioans access the internet either at home or in their communities.

Ohio Connectivity Champions

Powered by the Management Council[23], Ohio Connectivity Champions work to remove barriers to internet access for families. Efforts include ensuring Ohioans have home internet access for online learning, telehealth, job seeking and applying, and skills development; helping school districts with deployment and development of connectivity programs; and coordinating with stakeholders including the Ohio Department of Education, libraries, digital equity coalitions, and Ohio's Information Technology Centers. Over the COVID-19 pandemic, the Connectivity Champions helped schools and districts link to and maximize use of a $50,000,000 BroadbandOhio Connectivity Grant aimed at immediately expanding broadband services across Ohio[24].

Similar roles, referred to as Tech Trainers or Digital Navigators, are employed by organizations across the state to provide similar support to residents.

Ohio Public Library Information Network

The Ohio Public Library Information Network (OPLIN) provides broadband internet connections and related information service to Ohio public libraries. Their primary mission is to ensure that all Ohioans have fast, free public internet access through the 251 independent local public library systems in Ohio. OPLIN's Find a Library tool allows you to search for a local library or browse lists by county.

Ohio Wi-Fi Hotspot Locations

InnovateOhio, with BroadbandOhio, has been working with providers to find public hotspot locations that Ohioans can use in areas where they may not have access to internet from home. In addition to all of Ohio's public libraries, the Ohio Wi-Fi Hotspot Locations webpage includes internet service providers, K-12 school districts, and higher education buildings that provide public access.

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[23] The Management Council coordinates and supports the collaborative efforts of Ohio's Education Computer Network, providing technology solutions that support educational success.
[24] Ohio Connectivity Champions

3.1.5 Broadband Affordability

Affordable Connectivity Program

The Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) is the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) benefit program. Approximately 1.984 million Ohio households – 41% of all Ohio households – are eligible for the ACP. Nearly 50% (49.8%) of eligible households across Ohio are enrolled. The Cleveland metropolitan area leads enrollment for the program within Ohio at 51% of eligible households, followed by the Columbus metropolitan area at 49%[25]. Ohio is a leader among states for ACP enrollment.

ACP provides a discount of up to $30 per month toward internet service for eligible households and up to $75 per month for households on qualifying Tribal lands. Of the 78 internet service providers that participate in the ACP across the state, 13 offer low-cost plans that would cost $0 to residents enrolled in the program[26]. See **Appendix 7.1.3** for a complete list of ACP-participating providers.

2023 ACP Outreach Grant Program

In FY2023, nine organizations across Ohio received nearly $2.5 billion from three FCC grant programs to support ACP outreach in their communities. The National Competitive Outreach Program funded seven Ohio organizations to serve as trusted community messengers for the ACP in historically underrepresented communities; the Your Home, Your Internet Pilot Program funded eligible entities to increase awareness of and encourage participation in the ACP for households receiving federal housing assistance; and the ACP Navigator Pilot Program funded neutral, trusted entities to assist consumers in applying for the ACP[27]. See **Figure 1** below for a complete list of ACP Outreach Grant Program grantees.

Figure 1. ACP Outreach Grant Program Grantees	
2023 ACP Outreach Grant Program	**Organization**
National Competitive Outreach Program	Ashtabula County Community Action Agency
	United Way of Greater Cincinnati
	Urban League of Greater Southwestern Ohio
	Cuyahoga County
	Famicos Foundation
	University Hospitals Cleveland Medical Center
	City of Columbus
ACP Navigator Pilot Program	Cuyahoga County Public Library

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[25] Affordable Connectivity Program, Institute for Local Self Reliance, 2023
[26] Companies Near Me, Universal Service Administrative Co., 2023
[27] Affordable Connectivity Outreach Grant Program, FCC, 2023

Your Home, Your Internet Pilot Program	Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority

Ohio Connectivity Champions

Beyond ensuring internet access, the Connectivity Champions promote and assist households in enrolling in cost saving programs such as the ACP.

Similar roles, referred to as Tech Trainers or Digital Navigators, are employed by organizations across the state to provide similar support to residents.

Internet Assistance Project

To meet Ohio's Technology First priorities, the Ohio Department of Development Disabilities (DODD) is empowering people with developmental disabilities and their families to explore the use of technology. To address concerns among this population about limited digital skills, access to technology and internet connectivity, and concerns with safety and privacy, DODD launched the Internet Access Project. The Internet Assistance Project provides funding to eligible county boards of developmental disabilities to support the boards in providing internet assistance to people with developmental disabilities[28].

Save the Dream Ohio – Utility Assistance Plus

Through the Save the Dream Ohio – Utility Assistance Plus program, the Ohio Housing Finance Agency provides eligible Ohio homeowners with financial assistance to pay delinquent utility bills – including internet service – in addition to property taxes and other housing costs not included in mortgage payments[29].

3.2   Needs and Gaps Assessment

Access to and affordability of high-speed internet are the top priorities among all Ohioans. When asked how Ohio could best support them, respondents to Ohio's Internet Access Survey prioritized expanded internet access and increased affordability of home internet in their area. While 70% of respondents have a home internet and phone plan, availability and price are cited as the primary reasons for not having a home internet subscription. This section describes the digital opportunity needs of Ohioans and assesses the gaps that will be addressed by Ohio's Digital Opportunity plan.
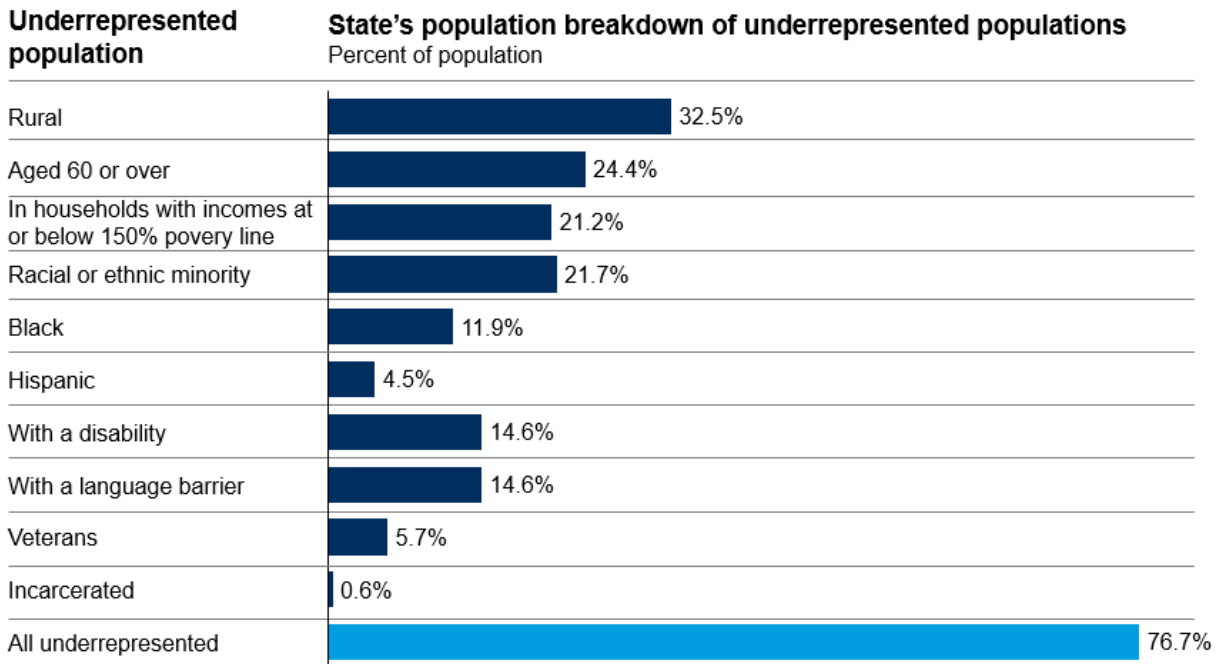
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[28] Internet Assistance Project, Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities
[29] Save the Dream Ohio – Utility Assistance Plus, Ohio Housing Finance Authority

3.2.1 Covered Population Needs Assessment

Together, Ohio's covered populations make up 77% of the state's total population. A breakdown of these populations can be found in **Figure 2** below.

Figure 2

Underrepresented population	State's population breakdown of underrepresented populations Percent of population
Rural	32.5%
Aged 60 or over	24.4%
In households with incomes at or below 150% povery line	21.2%
Racial or ethnic minority	21.7%
Black	11.9%
Hispanic	4.5%
With a disability	14.6%
With a language barrier	14.6%
Veterans	5.7%
Incarcerated	0.6%
All underrepresented	76.7%

Covered Households

Covered households are households earning incomes at or below 150% of the poverty line. Access to affordable broadband is a top concern for individuals in these households. Beyond a lack of infrastructure, the cost of home internet is prohibitive, limiting adoption.

While 70% of residents have both home and internet plans, only 57% of low-income residents had both home and data plans. Two-thirds of low-income residents cited price as the primary reason for not having home internet.

Residents believe that the lack of competition among internet service providers keeps prices high and further worry that with the end of the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), they will not have any affordable options. Already, there are many residents who are just above the ACP qualification threshold, but do not earn enough to afford a full-priced subscription. Among low-income residents, 67% pay $51 or more for their monthly home internet bill but only 24% are willing to pay this much for the speed and reliability they require. Already, there are many residents who are just above the ACP qualification

threshold, but do not earn enough to afford a full-priced subscription. A lack of qualification was cited as the primary reason among low-income residents for not enrolling in the ACP.

For covered households, a lack of home internet is a barrier to education and employment opportunities. Residents are not able to access training or other educational opportunities to build skills or earn certifications or degrees; they cannot search for an apply for jobs, which are increasingly posted online and require online applications; they cannot accept work-from-home positions; and they cannot use online platforms – like eBay, Etsy, or other sites – for supplemental income.

A lack of home internet is also a barrier to healthcare and government services, which have largely shifted resources online – telehealth appointments, chat features in electronic health records to communicate with providers, and benefit program applications, among other examples.

Beyond these more practical reasons, these residents want home internet for social connections, entertainment, and play.

Aging Individuals

Aging individuals are those 60 years of age or older. As many older adults are urged online, they often lack an understanding of the value of connectivity. They are also fearful of scams and generally mistrust technology. The high cost of subscriptions, coupled with this lack of understanding and mistrust, makes spending money on broadband a low priority. The cost of service is also increasingly an issue for older adults on fixed incomes.

Shame and embarrassment are other common themes among aging individuals. Older adults are knowledgeable and highly skilled in other arenas, but often lack digital skills. The shame or embarrassment of not being able to use a device or engage with a program online may keep these individuals from making attempts. Negative experiences with impatient family members or caregivers exacerbate these feelings and may make older adults hesitant to reach out for support.

A lack of digital skills can be a significant barrier to older job seekers and often limits social engagement opportunities and overall quality of life.

Rural Residents

Lack of infrastructure remains the number one need in rural areas. Topography across Ohio's Appalachian region, as well as low population density across all of Ohio's rural areas, make these areas costly and generally less desirable for internet service providers to build to. Where some infrastructure does exist, the high cost of line extension fees to connect directly to a home is often prohibitive for households.

Where broadband infrastructure does exist, often the quality diminishes the farther residents live from more densely populated town centers. Over half (51%) of residents in rural areas experience unreliable home internet at least weekly and (50%) cite a lack of alternative options and speed as their biggest issues. Residents will often have to travel to a library or other community anchor institution to access reliable broadband. In many rural communities, a lack of public transportation or walkable community infrastructure – like sidewalks and well-lit paths – make travel difficult for residents who do live in more remote areas. This makes accessing community institutions for digital skills training or devices difficult as well. Without large retailers or organizations that refurbish devices, the high cost of devices has residents relying on device lending programs at these locations.

Alternative connectivity solutions, when deployed in rural communities, have limitations as well. Satellite and wireless technologies are unreliable and often cost prohibitive. Residents have described having access to service only in the fall or winter months when leaves can't interfere with signals.

Individuals with Disabilities

Assistive technology is revolutionizing life for individuals with disabilities. Without broadband infrastructure and affordable home subscriptions, these technologies cannot be utilized in the home. Where infrastructure does exist, reliability – ensuring, in turn, that devices are connected and working properly – remains a concern. Medicaid waivers and other affordability programs help offset costs for technologies, but do not help with the home internet subscriptions required to use them.

Digital skills are often a significant barrier to individuals with disabilities seeking jobs and educational opportunities. There are also concerns about digital safety and preventing online scams and other threats among this population.

Website and device accessibility is also a major factor—color, size and layout of text, incompatibility with screen readers, and lack of interpretations for media can make websites inaccessible for individuals with visual or auditory disabilities. Other individuals with disabilities may have difficulty holding a mouse, using keyboards, or sitting at a device for long periods of time. Furthermore, access to the technology and hardware that addresses these barriers is often hindered by their costs.[30]

Having a reliable, home internet connection, digital skills, and access to devices allow individuals with disabilities to obtain work opportunities, education, and healthcare and live on their own more independently.

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[30] Doing Digital Inclusion: Disability handbook, Good Things Foundation

Veterans

Veterans often struggle with a lack of awareness of and skills to navigate available veteran services. Most applications and benefits have migrated online and require digital skills to navigate.

Internet access is particularly challenging for houseless or housing unstable veterans. Supporting housing for veterans is a top priority for many veteran-serving organizations. These organizations often provide support with rent and utilities by request, but rarely, if ever, get requests to support internet bills. This may indicate that many veterans are for going home internet subscriptions.

Justice-Involved Individuals

Recent initiatives have improved access to broadband and devices in state prisons, but many incarcerated individuals outside of state facilities or those who had limited access previously, struggle with digital skills upon reentry. The rapid pace of technological change is most apparent for those who have spent years isolated from it in institutions without these initiatives.

Apps like JPay offer correctional services – money transfer, e-mail, videos, and music – to connect incarcerated individuals to their families. While facilities may offer connectivity, these apps rely on families to have reliable connections as well, which is not always available. Additionally, apps are often expensive, and people worry about the online safety and security of their personal information.

Upon reentry, the availability of and access to community spaces with public internet can be a challenge and may be unreliable where it is available. The cost of home internet subscriptions is often significant, given the other basic needs and priorities of returning citizens.

Racial and Ethnic Minorities

Racial and ethnic minorities tend to live in and around Ohio's urban centers, where affordability is a key barrier to access and devices. In a 2020 analysis by the Brookings Institution, the "average broadband adoption rate for households in Cleveland's majority-white neighborhoods is 81.2 percent," whereas "the average is just 63 percent in Black-majority neighborhoods", highlighting the broadband racial disparity in Ohio's second largest city[31].

The lack of competition among internet service providers is often cited as a reason for high costs. Thirty-six percent of African American residents cite price and one third-cite

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[31] How Cleveland is bridging both digital and racial divides, Brookings Institute, 2020

the lack of alternate options as their biggest issues. Where services are available, they are often unreliable or otherwise of low quality. Thirty-six percent of African American residents experience unreliable home internet at least weekly. Many individuals who have devices say they are old or unreliable, but they are unable to afford to upgrade them.

Another concern is access to public spaces that provide broadband, devices, digital skills training, and tech support. Many locations closed during the pandemic and have either remained closed or have been slow to reopen or have consolidated locations, so there are fewer resources available across communities.

Additionally, marketing these spaces and services to these specific populations is crucial. Ohio is increasingly home to more racial and ethnic diversity who may use different communication channels and methods for outreach to connect.

English Language Learners

English language learners include Ohio's New American population. Statewide, 5% of Ohio residents are foreign-born, with greater concentrations in and around Ohio's larger urban centers. For these individuals, language barriers often exacerbate the digital divide.

Many English language learners have limited English language proficiency, which is a barrier to accessing some devices, resources, benefits, and technical support. These residents feel uncomfortable going to places for support that don't speak their language. During and after the pandemic, many physical locations that provided support to these communities closed and have been slow to reopen. Without these spaces, residents don't have anywhere to go if they are digitally excluded. 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 these communities.

Compared to 66% of all survey respondents who believe they have sufficient device access, only 48% of English Language Learners believe they have sufficient device access in their households. English Language Learners are also least confident with adjusting privacy settings on social media, adjusting privacy settings on social media, and accessing government services in comparison to other tasks related to internet usage.

3.2.2   Broadband Adoption

Overall, home internet subscriptions in Ohio have steadily increased since 1998[32]. The household adoption rate for broadband of any type in Ohio is 86% -- 72% have high-speed fixed broadband; 77% of households have a cellular data plan; and 6% have satellite internet service[33].

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[32] NTIA Current Population Survey – Computer and Internet Use, 2021
[33] ACS 2021 5-year Estimates, S2801

Subscription rates to home broadband are highest in counties with large population centers. Less populated counties, especially those in Ohio's Appalachian Region, have the lowest subscription rates. Ohio's 32 Appalachian counties have 22% of households that lack broadband subscriptions, though they represent just 17% of total households.

Most households that do not have home subscriptions are concentrated in large counties with relatively high subscription rates. Ten counties across the state have more than 30,000 households without a home subscription: Mahoning, Butler, Lorain, Stark, Lucas, Summit, Montgomery, Hamilton, Franklin, and Cuyahoga. These 10 counties account for 50% of households without subscriptions in Ohio, despite having relatively high availability.

Adoption gaps are disproportionate in low-income households and among aging individuals and those with disabilities.

Ohio's Internet Access Survey results suggest that the majority of Ohioans use the internet daily at home, work, and school. They also regularly use the internet at family or friends' homes and local businesses.

3.2.3 Broadband Affordability

The link between household income and broadband adoption in Ohio is clear – 27% of state households with an annual income under $20,000 do not have home broadband, compared to 12% of households with annual incomes between $20,000 and $75,000 and 4% of those earning above $75,000 annually[34]. According to the 2021 NTIA Internet Use Survey, 22% of residents in Ohio households without any home broadband cite affordability of subscriptions as the primary reason they do not subscribe to high-speed internet[35]. Additionally, stakeholders across Ohio repeatedly cited the affordability of subscriptions as the primary obstacle to closing the adoption gap.

Approximately 95% of respondents to Ohio's Internet Access Survey cite the need for home internet as important and approximately 66% believe that home internet is a top priority alongside rent, food, and transportation. Yet, the majority of Ohioans find it difficult to afford their internet bill.

Approximately 75% of residents pay $51 or more for their home internet monthly, but only 45% are willing to pay this much for the speed and reliability they require. In fact, 38% of respondents experience unreliable home internet at least weekly, and nearly half cite price and the lack of alternative options as their biggest issues with their current home internet.

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[34] US Census Data, 2021 American Community Survey One-Year Estimates
[35] 2021 NTIA Internet Use Survey

4 Collaboration and Stakeholder Engagement

4.1 Coordination and Outreach Strategy

BroadbandOhio has built a broad network of partners across local government, other state agencies, internet service providers, and community-based nonprofits since it was established in March 2020. These public and private sector stakeholders share a common interest in working together collaboratively to help close the digital divide in Ohio.

To develop Ohio's Digital Opportunity Plan, BroadbandOhio took a comprehensive, multi-layered approach to collaboration and stakeholder engagement. BroadbandOhio leveraged existing stakeholders, developed new relationships, and used multiple outreach channels. This approach ensures that Ohio's Digital Opportunity Plan represents all Ohioans, with a special focus on covered populations.

This section describes the groups and strategies leveraged for outreach and engagement through the State Digital Equity Planning Grant process and accomplishments where relevant. These groups and strategies will continue to be utilized through the implementation process.

BroadbandOhio Alliance

The BroadbandOhio Alliance provided the first opportunity to connect with BroadbandOhio's network of stakeholders. Since the office was established in March 2020, the Alliance has grown to more than 500 members. The Alliance convenes quarterly to provide updates on BroadbandOhio's efforts and an opportunity for best practice sharing from stakeholders to inform Ohio's digital ecosystem.

Broadband Working Group

BroadbandOhio facilitates the Broadband Working Group, which convenes various state government agencies to enable cross-agency cooperation and collaboration on broadband-related efforts. Monthly meetings allow the Working Group to regularly align on priorities and existing state efforts to improve outcomes across Ohio. The Working Group consists of

InnovateOhio, Department of Development (Office of Workforce Transformation, Governor's Office of Appalachia), Department of Education, Department of Administrative Services, Department of Higher Education, OARnet, and the Ohio Education Computer Network Management Council.

Regional Digital Inclusion Alliances

As part of the State Digital Equity Planning Grant Program, BroadbandOhio established Regional Digital Inclusion Alliances (RDIAs), dividing the state into five commonly recognized regions (Northwest, Northeast, Central, Southeast, Southwest). Each RDIA is led by one organization, supported by a steering committee of representatives from across the region with experience serving the covered populations. RDIA lead organizations are existing community leaders that serve as collaborative partners to BroadbandOhio, facilitating local and regional outreach and engagement efforts to best inform Ohio's Digital Opportunity Plan.

In Fall 2022, BroadbandOhio released a stakeholder engagement survey to gauge statewide interest in participating in the regional planning process. Of over 100 responses to the survey, 18 organizations indicated their interest in leading planning efforts in their RDIA region. Through a competitive process that evaluated existing experience and readiness, the following organizations were selected and awarded planning grant funds to lead their RDIA:

Northwest Ohio – Toledo Lucas County Public Library

The Toledo Lucas County Public Library convenes the Greater Toledo Digital Equity Coalition[36], a cross-sector alliance composed of 50+ individuals representing various community and processional sectors. The Coalition commissioned the Bowling Green State University Center for Regional Development to conduct a Lucas County digital equity gap analysis of the region and has built priorities, strategic goals, and an action plan from its findings. The Coalition also maintains a digital equity fund through the library's 501(c)3 to support its work in connecting community members with technology and digital skills training.

Northeast Ohio – The Cleveland Foundation

The Cleveland Foundation convenes the Greater Cleveland Digital Equity Coalition, a group of more than 70 organizations across different sectors and fields dedicated to building a stronger, more equitable and resilient digital community in the region. The Coalition is working to ensure all households have adequate computing devices, competitive internet coverage available through Cuyahoga County, and digital skills classes. Prior to the Coalition, the Foundation established its Digital Excellence Initiative, a collaborative effort to ensure successful participation in the digital world and economy among residents. In partnership with Cuyahoga County, the Foundation helped to launch and continues to support the Greater Cleveland Digital Equity fund, a funding

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[36] Toledo Lucas County Public Library - Digital Equity and Inclusion

collaborative of organizations to support high-speed internet access during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, that continues today.

Central Ohio – Smart Columbus

Smart Columbus convenes the Franklin County Digital Equity Coalition[37] (DEC), a dedicated group of over 30 Franklin County and regional organizations representing government, education, healthcare, social service, private sectors, and institutions. Smart Columbus facilitated a county-wide planning process to develop the Franklin County Digital Equity Action Agenda, which includes interrelated priorities and key initiatives to address the digital divide across Central Ohio. As part of the Franklin County DEC, Smart Columbus has also funded affordable high-speed internet pilots and neighborhood outreach efforts.

Southeast Ohio – Buckeye Hills Regional Council

Buckeye Hills Regional Council convenes the region's Broadband Coalition[38] and has been working with local, state, and federal partners to address broadband issues for over a decade. From what was first a primary focus on mapping and infrastructure, Buckeye Hills now views broadband as a holistic issue through the lens of digital equity.

Southwest Ohio – United Way of Greater Cincinnati

The United Way of Greater Cincinnati has an extensive network of public and private partners, as well as non-traditional partners like faith-based organizations and other grassroots groups in the region, and expertise in convening stakeholders to improve outcomes across the organization's key impact areas. As a newcomer to the digital inclusion space, the United Way is working to deploy its resources in support of digital inclusion, building a coalition, and establishing itself as a key voice in these efforts.

In total, RDIA lead organizations hosted 32 in-person listening sessions, six virtual listening sessions, 20 stakeholder interviews, and ten community pop-up events, reaching over 600 Ohioans from March-June 2023. Regional outreach and engagement by RDIA lead organizations continues today and will continue through implementation.

Organizations that had completed the stakeholder engagement survey but were not ultimately selected to lead, were contacted by RDIA lead organizations to participate in stakeholder engagement efforts and included in the BroadbandOhio Alliance.

Ohio's Digital Opportunity Summit

BroadbandOhio and the National Digital Inclusion Alliance cohosted a statewide kick-off event for the State Digital Equity Planning Grant in February 2023 at the Columbus Metropolitan Library's Main Branch. The event featured presentations from local, state, and national leaders in

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[37] Franklin County Digital Equity Coalition
[38] Buckeye Hills Regional Council - Broadband

the digital inclusion space, offering best practices, key insights, and helpful resources for implementing change-driving programs.

The event offered an opportunity to engage nearly 300 stakeholders representing government, education, healthcare, social services, nonprofits, private sector, and internet service providers, among others. In addition to registered attendees, the event took place in an open area of the library where members of the public were able to engage as well. All registered attendees and interested members of the public who shared contact information were then added to the BroadbandOhio Alliance to receive BroadbandOhio updates moving forward.

BroadbandOhio Statewide Listening Sessions

In addition to RDIA lead efforts, BroadbandOhio hosted 32 in-person listening sessions across the five RDIA regions and six virtual sessions to support stakeholder outreach and engagement for both the Broadband Equity Access and Deployment (BEAD) and State Digital Equity Planning Grant Programs. Sessions were tailored to specific stakeholder groups (business and internet service providers, local government, nonprofits and community organizations, Ohio residents) but open to all to attend.

Key Stakeholder Interviews

BroadbandOhio also interviewed key state agencies and partners that serve the covered populations. This group of agencies includes, but is not limited to, agencies responsible for workforce development, transportation, economic development, education, health, family services, agriculture, and natural resources. The objective of each interview was to capture insight into each agency's priorities and potential synergies with BroadbandOhio, specifically:

- Agency overview, including mission and responsibilities;
- Goals, strategies, and priorities;
- Barriers to access and adoption of broadband, digital devices, and digital skills;
- Existing programs and partners;
- Potential solutions and areas for collaboration;

Internet Access Survey

BroadbandOhio, with support from RDIA leads and their networks, also deployed an Internet Access Survey, available for stakeholders to complete online or in-person at community anchor institutions across the state from April-June 2023. Additional surveys were mailed with stamped return envelopes to 10,000 households in unserved communities across the state. The resident survey included 21 questions total, with 16 across six topics and five on location and demographics. Topic areas are listed below:

- County;
- Internet access & willingness to pay;
- Issues with internet access;
- Affordable Connectivity Program
- Perception of internet importance and access;

- Internet usage;
- Support from Ohio;
- Demographic Information;

 BroadbandOhio received 5,188 valid resident responses across all forms of the survey from across the state's 88 counties, representing each of the covered populations.

5 Implementation

5.1 Implementation Strategy & Key Activities

Ohio has taken a decentralized approach to closing the digital divide. Statewide initiatives have primarily focused on bringing reliable, affordable, high-speed internet to all Ohioans; promoting the creation of world-class broadband networks; and enabling participation in the modern economy. The state often looks to regional and local organizations to implement programming and services to empower Ohioans through training, device access, and digital skills. Often these local organizations have a sense of community needs and desires and can best direct state and federal resources to meet the needs of Ohioans.

Ohio's key strategy for implementing the Digital Opportunity Plan and for closing the digital divide, is continued support to regional and local partners as they establish new and expand existing proven programs and resources. BroadbandOhio will prioritize grant programs to ensure access to state and federal resources for these organizations.

As part of the State Digital Equity Planning Grant program, Ohio budgeted for Digital Inclusion Pilot Projects to support regional and local partners. The grant program and awardees are described below.

Digital Inclusion Pilot Project Grant Program

BroadbandOhio announced more than $650,000 in funding to support local efforts to advance digital opportunity in communities across the state. Organizations were eligible for up to $100,000 for projects serving least one of the covered populations and meet an existing,

identified digital inclusion need in the area served[39]. Projects are intended to provide an innovative approach or a scalable solution to addressing the digital divide.

A total of $654,590 was awarded to help nine community-based, non-profit organizations address barriers in digital access due to factors such as cost, race, location, age, and language barriers. Awardees and projects are described below.

- **Central Community House** will receive $92,800 in grants for a technology access project to expand existing programming, including technology-oriented classes, workshops, and one-on-one assistance for seniors. Participants in the programs will receive devices and adaptive accessories for those with physical limitations.
- **The Ashtabula County Farm Bureau** will receive $23,200 in grants for a rural connectivity project. The project is a partnership between the Ashtabula, Geauga, Lake, and Trumbull Counties' Farm Bureaus to bridge the digital divide in rural northeast Ohio by providing tech support and digital skills training for agri-businesses and residents.
- **Hocking Athens Perry Community Action** (HAPCAP) will receive $100,000 in grants to add a second digital navigator role to the office in order to increase capacity for technical support and device distribution to covered populations. The first digital navigator has seen success in meeting the region's growing need for digital skills and tech support. This role has been crucial to HAPCAP's partnership with PCs for People's Cleveland office to support the distribution of refurbished devices in the community.
- **The Ohio University – Office of Digital Accessibility** will receive $26,758 in grants to improve document accessibility on the university's website for people with disabilities. The project will remediate existing documents, provide training for key faculty and staff to create accessible content, and ensure the sustainability of accessible document practices going forward.
- **Accompanying Returning Citizens with Hope** (ARCH) will receive $100,000 in grants to distribute devices, provide digital literacy support, and encourage enrollment in the Grow with Google program to justice-involved individuals, returning citizens and those participating in Café Overlook's workforce development program.
- **The Spanish American Committee** will receive $100,000 in grants to support the Families First Program, which will provide Latino/Hispanic individuals and families with a caseworker specifically focused on supporting digital access and literacy. Case managers will help connect clients to high-speed internet, access devices, and gain digital skills.
- **Mercy Health – Toledo** will receive $100,000 in grants to advance the Get Your Business Rolling (GYBR) program. The project will allow the organization to expand the program to

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[39] Digital inclusion needs categories mirrored the State Digital Equity Planning Grant measurable objective outlined in Section 2.3 above.

additional zip codes in the Toledo area to support a greater population of diverse and female entrepreneurs. The program includes an entrepreneurial training class, strategic support, device access, and additional opportunities for growth and training through the Toledo-Lucas County Public Library upon completion.

- **National Church Residences** will receive $43,450 in grants to promote Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) enrollment events at senior housing communities throughout the state. Events will be staffed to support one-on-one enrollment and internet service sign-up assistance for participating residents. This initiative will be used to develop an ACP Enrollment Guide for Senior Affordable Housing that can be used across the National Church Residences network.
- **Goodwill Columbus** will receive $68,382 in grants to create a donation, refurbishment, and distribution process to meet the region's need for high-quality, low-cost digital devices. Residents will be able to purchase refurbished devices at Goodwill Columbus retail store locations across Franklin County. The project will also create a device bank facilitated by a digital platform to identify and distribute devices to community-based organizations.

Just these nine of 113 projects were funded through the grant, offering a glimpse into the enthusiasm among digital inclusion practitioners for future funding opportunities. BroadbandOhio plans to remain in contact with applicants via the Broadband Alliance and other avenues to make them aware of upcoming funding opportunities.

Additional Opportunities

Beyond the nine funded projects, a number of additional innovative strategies and partnerships and scalable solutions that did not reach the funding threshold emerged through this process. These projects are described below.

- **Ashbury Senior Computer Community Center** (ASC3) was established to implement technology resources to empower greater Cleveland residents. ASC3 addresses residents' needs by providing digital skills training and access to technology, and other tech resources, in a nurturing atmosphere conducive for clients to learn and thrive, regardless of educational and/or financial barriers.
- **Columbus Metropolitan Housing Authority** (CMHA) services over 13,800 households and nearly 33,000 individuals in Franklin County. CMHA's Making Connections initiative aims to close the digital divide through projects that include: a partnership with Spectrum to provide no-cost broadband to residents of 22 subsidized housing communities; a partnership with the Columbus Metropolitan Library to provide digital literacy support to all residents; on-site computer labs at eight CMHA communities; and a partnership with PCs for People to distribute laptops and hotspots.

- **Community Action Committee of Pike County** hosts an AmeriCorps member through the American Connection Corps program. Members train and mobilize community members in rural and emerging communities to coordinate broadband development and digital inclusion. At the Community Action Committee of Pike County, this role serves as a digital navigator, supporting individuals and will support an outreach campaign to the community households with connectivity, securing devices, and digital skills training. Supporting connectivity and digital inclusion activities will ensure that persons with limited means, transportation, or mobility are offered the same opportunities as the broader community.
- **Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority** (CMHA) provides affordable housing for over 55,000 low-income residents living in Cuyahoga County. The agency owns and manages 10,500 public housing units. CMHA partners with DigitalC, PCs for People, Spectrum, and AT&T to support residents access affordable, fixed and wireless broadband technology, and also hosts digital skills training provided by community partners like ASC3, DigitalC, Olivet, Housing and Community Development, and the Cleveland Foundation. Digital skills training includes general support, as well as MyChart and internet safety and scam identification training. CMHA's Digital Inclusion team is present at 14 properties across CMHA's footprint to provide technical support to all residents.
- **Great Lakes Community Action Partnership** currently has trained staff and volunteers as Digital Navigators. The Digital Navigator provides individualized or small group assistance to community members who need affordable home internet service, affordable internet-capable devices, and/or coaching in introductory foundational digital literacy skills to become effective home internet users. Of the staff and volunteers trained, some are Financial Opportunity Center (FOC) Coaches. The Coaches provide one-on-one client-driven financial, homeownership, and comprehensive career coaching, focusing on three primary services: Financial Counseling, Workforce Development and Income Supports. The Coaches develop and maintain cooperative working relationships with social service providers, educational institutions, employment agencies, and employers to assist participants in meeting their basic needs, education, training, and employment needs. They recruit, screen, and regularly assess the needs of participants, implement job training and job placement activities, and provide case management and follow-up services.
- **Oak Hill Collaborative** (OHC) serves Ohio's northern Appalachian counties, including Mahoning and Trumbull counties. OHC's Digital Advantage Initiative provides critical resources for closing the digital divide in a one-stop shop in this otherwise under resourced region. OHC offers a Makerspace/Hackerspace, technical support, free computer classes and workshops, discounted refurbished devices, ACP enrollment support and Digital Navigator services.

- **Smart Columbus** convenes the Franklin County Digital Equity Coalition (DEC), a group of local and regional government and organizations dedicated to closing the digital divide in Central Ohio. One essential priority for the region is Digital Skills – the expansion and increase of access to digital skills training for residents. Smart Columbus and members of the Franklin County DEC are working to provide a decentralized and scalable digital skills training model that is unified through common curriculum and assessment and can be tailored to each organization's unique population. Through this work, two formal ten-hour courses will be created and piloted for four partner organizations (Columbus Metropolitan Library, Educational Service Center of Central Ohio, Goodwill Columbus, Jewish Family Services) with evaluation.

Ohio will utilize State Digital Equity Capacity Grant funding to support additional statewide competitive grant opportunities for organizations working to close the digital divide. Additional grant opportunities will require organizations to develop new or expand existing effective programming, resources, and services with a focus on sustainability.

In addition to competitive grants, Ohio plans to continue funding RDIA lead organizations to support ongoing stakeholder outreach and engagement, data collection, plan updates, and guiding Ohio's vision for digital opportunity at the regional and local level.

5.2 Timeline

Ohio has proposed the timeline below for implementing the activities described throughout the plan, recognizing that the availability and timing of digital equity funding will significantly impact this timeline.

Year/Stage	Activities
2023	• Develop and finalize Ohio's Digital Opportunity Plan based on stakeholder engagement efforts and public feedback • Collect initial and final reports from Digital Inclusion Pilot Project grantees for inclusion in Ohio's Digital Opportunity Plan • Continue regular meetings of Ohio's Regional Digital Inclusion Alliance lead organizations
2024	• Apply for State Digital Equity Capacity Grant funding • Continue developing state asset inventory & mapping tool • Release statewide competitive grant opportunity & select grantees • Develop tracking mechanisms for measurable progress • Continue regular meetings of Ohio's RDIA lead organizations
2025	• Continue developing state asset inventory & mapping tool • Continue regular meetings of Ohio's RDIA lead organizations • Host Ohio Digital Opportunity Summit • Collect reporting from grantees
2026	• Continue developing state asset inventory & mapping tool

	• Continue regular meetings of Ohio's RDIA lead organizations • Host Ohio Digital Opportunity Summit • Collect reporting from grantees
2027	• Continue developing state asset inventory & mapping tool • Continue regular meetings of Ohio's RDIA lead organizations • Host Ohio Digital Opportunity Summit • Collect reporting from grantees
2028	• Continue developing state asset inventory & mapping tool • Continue regular meetings of Ohio's Regional Digital Inclusion Alliance lead organizations • Host Ohio Digital Opportunity Summit • Collect reporting from grantees
2029	• Continue developing state asset inventory & mapping tool • Continue regular meetings of Ohio's Regional Digital Inclusion Alliance lead organizations • Host Ohio Digital Opportunity Summit • Collect final reporting from grantees
2030	• Evaluate impact & publish report • Host Ohio Digital Opportunity Summit

Many of the activities listed in the timeline will be ongoing over the course of plan implementation. Ohio plans to host a Digital Opportunity Summit annually; the first annual event was held in February 2023, which began the stakeholder outreach and engagement process that contributed to this plan.

Regular meetings with Regional Digital Inclusion Alliance (RDIA) lead organizations will allow for progress monitoring, plan updating, and discussion around continuous improvement of plan implementation strategies.

6 Conclusion

Ohio's journey to closing the digital divide requires collaborative partnership and relies on empowering communities across the state to accomplish goals. As the state works to bring reliable, affordable, high-speed internet to every Ohioan, local government, nonprofits, and other organizations will be working to provide access to affordable internet, internet-enabled devices, and digital skills training and technical support. BroadbandOhio will support these entities to bring the vision of a more digitally equitable Ohio to life with funding, networking opportunities, and other resources. Together, Ohio will ensure that residents have equal opportunity to access

quality education, healthcare, job opportunities, government services, and cultural resources online to support a thriving, resilient, and forward-looking Ohio that maximizes the potential of its residents.