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STATE & LOCAL POLICYMAKERS' BROADBAND PLANNING TOOL KIT

# Best Practices for Improving Broadband Adoption & Digital Literacy

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**Michael J. Santorelli, Director**  
**Alexander Karras, Senior Fellow**

The Advanced Communications Law & Policy Institute  
New York Law School

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- State and local policymakers have many roles to play when it comes to bolstering broadband adoption and enhancing digital literacy. The most impactful of these roles are as supporters and enablers of the efforts of expert entities with a demonstrated track-record in bringing people online and equipping them with a core set of skills.
- The follow identifies best practices that state and local policymakers can look to when developing strategies for increasing broadband adoption rates and promoting digital literacy skill development.

### What Best Practices Can Policymakers at the State and Local Levels Look to When Developing Strategies for Increasing Broadband Adoption Rates?

The following details best practices that state and local policymakers might use to inform strategies aimed at bolstering broadband adoption rates in their communities.

- **Seek to Understand Broadband Adoption Dynamics.** As a first step, state and local policymakers should endeavor to understand the complexities associated with the broadband adoption decision-making process. Once policymakers learn about the many different variables that influence adoption decisions, it will become clear that embracing the following best practices is the optimal way to improve adoption rates.
- **Understand that the Best Role for Policymakers is as a Supporter and Enabler of the Efforts of Others.** When it comes to increasing broadband adoption rates, the most impactful role for policymakers at the state and local levels is as a facilitator and promoter of the efforts of those working on the ground to connect the unconnected. This is not to say that state and local governments have no role to play. To the contrary, these entities can and should play lead roles in planning, identifying goals/objectives for maximizing adoption rates, allocating available funding to support adoption-oriented initiatives, and making sure expert entities have the resources needed to expand their efforts.
- **Appreciate the Hyperlocal & Community-Specific Nature of Broadband Adoption.** A core aspect of broadband adoption is that it is highly community-specific.<sup>1</sup> The barriers impacting older adults, for example, often differ in subtle but important ways from those impeding adoption among low-income households.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the challenges facing non-adopting households in rural areas usually differ in significant ways from those facing non-adopting households in urban areas. A key takeaway for policymakers is that the most effective adoption-related strategies reflect this essential dynamic and prioritize hyperlocal efforts aimed at bringing more people online.<sup>3</sup>

- **Harness the Local Social Infrastructure.** To effectively address adoption-related barriers at the hyperlocal level, it is necessary for policymakers to tap into local social infrastructures. These networks of expert programs and institutions are key inputs to any adoption- and skills-focused program. As such, it is essential to understand the characteristics of these local networks, including the capacities and limitations of component organizations. Developing this knowledge base is critical to effective programmatic responses. In the context of state-level digital equity grant programs, such an approach is specifically contemplated, underscoring the importance of policymakers seeking to understand the nuances of their local social infrastructures sooner rather than later.<sup>4</sup>
- **Empower Experts.** Over the last decade, a range of nonprofits and other organizations have established themselves as experts in helping to connect the unconnected. Policymakers should seek to collaborate with these groups in order to support and expand their offerings. Many of these programs focus on specific under-adopting user groups and tailor their offerings accordingly. For example, Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) is the preeminent organization for helping to raise the broadband adoption rate among senior citizens.<sup>5</sup> Other efforts focus on addressing specific needs in under-adopting neighborhoods. For example, a partnership in Chattanooga, TN, pairs adoption-oriented outreach services with a focus on promoting telehealth to improve health outcomes in a high poverty part of the city.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, it is up to policymakers to know who the broadband adoption experts are in their communities and proactively engage them to determine how a state or city can best support their work.
- **Make Funding Available.** A major need of expert entities working on broadband adoption issues is funding. Effective education and outreach initiatives tend to be very resource-intensive. Training programs are usually multi-week courses that are offered for free in community centers, libraries, and other community institutions.<sup>7</sup> As such, many programs can only scale their efforts incrementally after receiving adequate funding to support establishing programs in a new area. State and local policymakers are well positioned to help steer more resources to support continued expansion of proven programs. Funding from digital equity grant programs and BEAD will certainly help to jumpstart such expansion, but additional funding from states, localities, philanthropies, and other sources will be needed to scale and sustain these efforts over the long-term.
- **Leverage the “Bully Pulpit” to Raise Awareness of the Benefits of and Opportunities for Broadband Adoption.** State and local policymakers should seize every opportunity to promote the importance of and opportunities for broadband adoption. Hearing from officials on these issues can be powerful motivators, especially if an official identifies concrete steps that can be taken to get online. In New York, for example, Governor Kathy Hochul specifically highlighted the availability of monthly subsidies via the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) as part of a push focused on enhancing connectivity across the state. This helped to increase enrollment in the ACP by 100,000 households in just a few months.<sup>8</sup> Similar

efforts deployed across every state and locality could dramatically increase take-rates.

### What Best Practices Can Policymakers at the State and Local Levels Look to When Developing Strategies for Promoting Digital Literacy Skill Development?

State and local policymakers are also well positioned to support and further efforts focused on promoting digital literacy skill development. Digital literacy skills are essential to helping wary non-adopters and fledgling new adopters embrace broadband and equipping them with the tools needed to put their connections to meaningful uses.

The following identifies best practices that state and local policymakers might use to inform strategies aimed at enhancing digital literacy skill development in their communities.

- **Leverage the “Bully Pulpit” to Raise Awareness of the Benefits of and Opportunities for Digital Literacy Skill Development.** Like with promoting broadband adoption, state and local policymakers should seize every opportunity to highlight the importance of developing digital literacy skills and identify opportunities for doing so. Such opportunities will likely increase in number as federal digital equity grant programs are rolled out over the next few years. In the meantime, state and local officials should be sure to build a robust focus on digital literacy skill development into their broadband connectivity planning. To that end, NTIA encouraged states to engage concurrently in BEAD and digital equity planning so that they could develop a unified vision for bolstering broadband connectivity from both the supply-side and demand-side.<sup>9</sup>
- **Integrate Digital Literacy Skill Development into Educational Curricula.** In addition to promoting the importance of digital literacy skill development, state and local policymakers can begin the process of integrating those opportunities into school curricula. This can help to ensure that the next generation of broadband users are prepared to leverage their connections in a responsible and impactful way. Such was attempted on a national scale via the Common Core initiative that was launched in 2010.<sup>10</sup> Implementation, though, has not been consistent, with some states refusing to adopt the core standards outright and with others failing to develop comprehensive digital literacy requirements. Related efforts have been deployed at a more local level since then. In New York City, for example, a consortium of technology companies, nonprofits, philanthropies, and others launched CS4All, which focused on making available coding and related offerings in schools across the city.<sup>11</sup> That effort has since spread across the nation, helping equip teachers with the skills needed to teach students about responsible computer use.<sup>12</sup> State and local policymakers can advance these and similar efforts by formally integrating digital literacy standards and requirements into school curricula.
- **Link Broadband Adoption and Digital Literacy with Workforce Development Programs.** One way to raise awareness of the relevance of broadband and highlight how digital tools can be used to generate income is to link broadband adoption and digital literacy skills to workforce development programs. Creating pathways or

pipelines that connect a digital literacy program to a job placement initiative make explicit the practical importance of connectivity in today's digital economy. A number of such programs have already been developed by the private and nonprofits sectors. Many involve coding academies or bootcamps that are sponsored by tech companies, which then consider graduates for full-time employment.<sup>13</sup> Even for non-adopters, this approach has proven to work. OATS, for example, offers a range of workforce-related offerings to older adults, many of whom are interested in continuing to work or pursuing a second career.<sup>14</sup> This often translates into more sustainable broadband adoption. Increasingly, cities and states are seeking to coordinate these myriad offerings as part of overall digital inclusion and workforce development planning.<sup>15</sup> By continuing to serve as convenors and facilitators, state and local policymakers can greatly enhance the impact of these programs vis-à-vis broadband adoption and digital literacy skill development.

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Charles M. Davidson, Michael J. Santorelli & Thomas Kamber, *Broadband Adoption: Why it Matters & How it Works*, 19 Media L. & Policy (2009), [http://comms.nyls.edu/ACLP/Davidson\\_Santorelli\\_Kamber-BB-Adoption-Article-MLP-19.1.pdf](http://comms.nyls.edu/ACLP/Davidson_Santorelli_Kamber-BB-Adoption-Article-MLP-19.1.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., *Barriers to Broadband Adoption: A Report to the FCC*, ACLP at New York Law School (Dec. 2009), <http://comms.nyls.edu/ACLP/ACLP-Report-to-the-FCC-Barriers-to-BB-Adoption.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Charles M. Davidson, Michael J. Santorelli & Thomas Kamber, *Toward an Inclusive Measure of Broadband Adoption*, 6 International Journal of Communication 2555 (2012), <http://comms.nyls.edu/ACLP/Davidson-Santorelli-Kamber-Toward-an-Inclusive-Measure-of-Broadband-Adoption-IJOC-2012.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> IJJA § 60304(c)(1)(D)(i)-(xi).

<sup>5</sup> For more information, see <https://oats.org/>.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Michelle Hindmon, *Expanding Access to Create Connected Communities in Orchard Knob*, March 3, 2022, Chattanooga Pulse, <http://www.chattanoogapulse.com/citylife/science-technology/expanding-access-to-create-connected-communities-in-orchard-/>.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., *Connecting Rural Older Americans with Technology: Lessons From Senior Planet*, OATS (May 2020), <https://oats.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/noco-lessons-from-senior-planet-1.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> See *Governor Hochul Announced 100,000 Families Have Joined Federal Broadband Affordability Program*, March 16, 2022, Office of the Governor of the State of New York, <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-hochul-announces-100000-families-have-joined-federal-broadband-affordability-program>.

<sup>9</sup> BEAD NOFO at p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Monica Burns, *The Common Core and Digital Skills Development*, July 1, 2015, Edutopia, <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/common-core-digital-skills-development-monica-burns>.

<sup>11</sup> See CS4All, About, <https://www.csforall.org/about/csny/>.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Jessica Stillman, *This is How Coding Bootcamp Will Impact Your Career*, Inc, <https://www.inc.com/jessica-stillman/this-is-how-that-coding-bootcamp-will-impact-your-career.html>.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Paula J. Gardner, *Older Adults and OATS Computer Training Courses – A Social Impacts Analysis*, N.Y. Academy of Medicine (April 2010), [https://cdn-std.droplr.net/files/acc\\_695959/txMwZF?download&response-content-disposition=attachment%3B%20filename%3DNew-York-Academy-of-Medicine-study.pdf](https://cdn-std.droplr.net/files/acc_695959/txMwZF?download&response-content-disposition=attachment%3B%20filename%3DNew-York-Academy-of-Medicine-study.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Sydney Diavua, *Building Opportunities and Skills for a Growing Digital Workforce*, Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia (Winter 2016), <https://www.philadelphiafed.org/community-development/workforce-and-economic-development/building-opportunities-and-skills-for-a-growing-digital-workforce>.