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STATE & LOCAL POLICYMAKERS' BROADBAND PLANNING TOOL KIT

Deploying an Effective Digital Equity Framework

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Over the next few years, state and local policymakers will have to grapple with digital equity issues if they wish to leverage federal funding that has been earmarked for addressing supply-side and demand-side broadband issues.
- The following sets forth a framework that can be used to guide equity-related planning by state and local policymakers. Using this framework from the outset can help to jumpstart the planning process by focusing attention on the aspects of equity planning that matter the most.

How Can Policymakers at the State and Local Levels Enhance Digital Equity in Their Communities?

Digital equity has become a major focus and driver of broadband-related efforts in recent years. Digital equity encompasses core notions related to ensuring that every person, regardless of demography, geography, or socioeconomic status, has the same opportunity to access and benefit from broadband services. Over the next few years, state and local policymakers will have to grapple with these issues if they wish to leverage federal funding that has been earmarked for addressing digital equity from both the supply-side and demand-side.

To access federal broadband funding, state policymakers will have to collaborate with their counterparts at the local level, as well as stakeholders across the private and nonprofit sectors, to develop and deploy plans that detail how resources will be used to enhance digital equity and promote more robust broadband connectivity. Indeed, the IIJA positions equity as a primary consideration that must inform how BEAD funding is allocated – the statute requires states to ensure that whatever funding is distributed in support of broadband expansion is done in an “equitable and non-discriminatory manner.”¹ Similarly, securing digital equity grant funding via the IIJA will require states to work with local counterparts to develop digital equity plans that cover the full range of broadband connectivity issues – *i.e.*, those on both the supply-side and demand-side.²

This document sets forth a framework to help guide equity-related planning by state and local policymakers. Using this framework from the outset can help to jumpstart the planning process by focusing attention on the aspects of equity planning that matter the most.

What are the Key Elements that Should be Included in a Digital Equity Framework?

The Digital Equity Framework includes the following elements:

- **Availability Assessment.** As a threshold matter, officials should undertake a comprehensive inventory of broadband availability in the city/county/region. This should encompass all forms of broadband regardless of technology and catalog available speeds, price points, and service offerings. If the area is served – *i.e.*, if

residents can readily subscribe to a broadband connection of some kind – then officials should continue forward with the framework. If the area is deemed unserved, then different remedies are appropriate.

- **Adoption Assessment.** In served areas, the next step is to evaluate broadband adoption in the community. What are the adoption rates across relevant demographic and socioeconomic groups? What kinds of services and speeds are consumers using? Who isn't online?
- **Barriers Assessment.** For those who aren't online, understanding specifically why they have not adopted broadband is essential. What are the major barriers impeding their adoption? Is it the cost of a broadband connection? The lack of a computing device? A hesitance or fear of going online? A lack of appreciation for how broadband can positively impact one's life? General disinterest? A granular understanding of these issues within each under-adopting user group will increase the chances that policy responses are impactful.
- **Partnership Assessment.** Once the nuanced landscape of broadband connectivity is fully understood, the next step is to identify potential partners for bringing more people online. ISPs are natural partners given their presence in the locality. Partnerships with them could yield greater promotion of existing low-cost offerings, the availability of federal subsidies, additional Wi-Fi deployments, or other appropriate responses to connectivity challenges facing certain communities. Currently, there appears to be a significant gap in awareness of the availability of low-cost broadband programs and subsidies among users who might qualify. Closing that gap should be a priority for policymakers and other stakeholders. On the demand-side, partners might include anchor institutions, nonprofits, foundations, healthcare associations, community groups, senior centers, and other stakeholders in the local social infrastructure that have established roots in the community and have demonstrated bona fides vis-à-vis bringing people online and delivering targeted digital literacy training.
- **Strategy Development.** After the data has been gathered and assessed; the issues identified; and resources marshaled, local officials will then be in a better position to begin aligning these myriad assets to address the challenges at hand. An inclusive process that brings all stakeholders to the table for collaborative, solution-focused discussions will be best vis-à-vis generating workable strategies.
- **Solution Deployment.** Once strategies have been developed, officials, in tandem with the network of partners convened to assist, can focus on the tactical deployment of actual solutions, including the securing and allocating of available grant funding. Priority should be assigned to those communities where broadband adoption rates are lowest.

¹ IJJA § 60102(g)(2)(B).

² IJJA § 60304(c)(1).