

DIGITAL EQUITY PLAN FOR BERKS COUNTY, PA

July, 2024

Background

In fall 2020 the Wyomissing Foundation began organizing what was then called The Broadband Expansion / Digital Divide Workgroup. Representatives from a variety of Berks County non-profit and educational organizations came together to develop a coordinated, multi-project plan for Berks County with the goals of:

- (1) expanding the infrastructure that delivers affordable and reliable high-speed broadband Internet access, including fiber, cable, and 5G.
- (2) increasing the number of individuals connected to providers of these services as well as having the appropriate devices and training to utilize them.

While access to reliable, affordable broadband service had been a concern for a while, the advent of Covid brought this issue to the front. As employers, schools and other organizations moved to remote operations, the importance of access became even more evident. Schools were among the first to attempt to address these challenges. The Reading School District, the poorest school district in Pennsylvania, moved to online educational programming. But they found that nearly one in four of their students did not have access to internet services, the equipment that was needed to learn online and the requisite skills to use these services. They bought Chromebooks and distributed them to their students. They acquired hotspots that would enable students to access the Internet. And they collaborated with partners, such as the Olivet Boys and Girls Clubs, Reading Recreation Commission and the YMCA of Reading & Berks to offer training how to effectively use these resources.

At roughly the same time, a group was formed under the leadership of the County Chief Information Officer, to develop a strategic plan to expand access to affordable, reliable broadband service throughout Berks County. That strategic plan, which was funded by the Wyomissing Foundation, the United Way, the Berks Alliance and County of Berks, was intended to identify those areas where service was either missing or inadequate. An ancillary element of this plan also suggested that there was a need to provide residents with the equipment and skills needed to make effective use of the Internet.

In July 2021, the two groups began to collaborate under the umbrella of the Broadband Expansion/Digital Divide Workgroup. With the Berks Alliance as the lead fiscal agent for the non-profit partners, the County in December 2021 hired Lit Communities Broadband LLC.

The Workgroup's frame of reference for this effort was reinforced by a community forum organized by the Berks Alliance in which the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Federal Communications Commission emphasized that access to reliable high speed Internet service is a significant social determinant of health. 100 MBPS

(Mega Bits Per Second) for download and 10 MBPS upload speeds are considered fast and necessary for working and schooling from home. A slow 25 MBPS is considered the bare minimum speed.

From the beginning there was an emphasis on collecting data from multiple sources including that available from public entities as well as various carriers. The intent was to document the location of gaps in various service types, a necessary step in evaluating the most cost-effective and fastest ways to expand needed infrastructure. This data can be used to match and identify Berks County specific needs with available State, Federal and County dollars. This includes ARPA and Infrastructure dollars earmarked for broadband needs.

Lit conducted an analysis of the existing broadband capabilities through constituent surveys as well as analysis of existing infrastructure. Community surveys were available in both English and Spanish. Respondents were asked to identify the ways they use the Internet as well as their level of satisfaction with speed, reliability, and cost. Each respondent was then asked to run a speed test from the location and with the device used to complete the survey. Responses were plotted on a county map to show where surveys were completed. 2,504 constituent surveys were completed which was considered a robust response rate. The surveys clearly indicated that the traditional method of identifying gaps in service did not adequately capture the challenge.

In addition to individual surveys Lit conducted Zoom small focus groups organized by employment sector with staff knowledgeable about IT issues and challenges. The sectors were education, government, healthcare, and business.

The final Lit Communities report was submitted to the Berks County Commissioners on November 29, 2022. Critical points from the report included:

- According to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) data, most of Berks County has access to Internet service of at least 25 MBPS download and 3 MBPS upload speed.
- Having access in this context means that at least one facility in the census block has access to the service.
- Most of the northern tier of Berks County has limited options for 100/10 MBPS service.
- There are areas in Berks County where the predominant Internet provider is a satellite service. This is true not only in rural areas but also in areas in and around the City of Reading, especially the Mount Penn area.
- Of the 2504 community respondents 64% had fixed service and 21% had wireless service. 14% did not know the type of Internet service they had.

- 2,050 respondents took the speed test which was a separate part of the community survey. Based on these results 68% had no service or service speeds less than 100/10 MBPS.

This report also included a recommendation for the County to make a funding commitment of \$5.7 million for technical expansion projects and \$600,000 to support pilot digital literacy projects over two years. The recommendation was approved by the Commissioners and the following pilot digital literacy projects are currently underway as a result:

1. The Berks County Intermediate Unit (BCIU) is overseeing the work of a Digital Navigation Specialist who is working with residents with assistance from the Hamburg School District and the Hamburg Public Library. The Digital Navigator is currently helping residents access Internet service, providing devices, and teaching users digital skills tied directly to their needs.
2. The Berks Community Health Center (BCHC) has expanded its patient blood pressure monitoring and education effort.
3. With remaining County digital literacy funds, Connections Work was approved in spring 2024 to hire a fulltime digital navigator to assist its formerly justice-involved clients gain the digital skills they need to gain employment and function effectively after incarceration.

In addition, City of Reading ARPA funds were awarded in spring, 2023 to the Reading Public Library to add a full-time, bilingual Digital Navigator to its staff. This Digital Navigator provides similar services as those in the BCIU project for senior citizens.

Tec Centro Berks is a grantee in Rounds 1, 3, and the recent Round 5 of the Digital Literacy and Workforce Development Grant, awarded by the Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry. This grant has been instrumental in supporting both standalone digital literacy instruction and its integration within the Adult Basic Education curriculum. The recent award in Round 5, amounting to \$100,000, marks a notable expansion in partnership with The Literacy Council of Reading-Berks.

All projects are collecting demographic information on those being assisted as well as data to measure user satisfaction and overall effectiveness of these efforts.

In fall 2023 the Broadband Expansion / Digital Divide Workgroup was re-named the Berks County Digital Equity Coalition. Participating organizations currently include: Alvernia University, Berks Alliance, Berks County Community Foundation, Berks County Intermediate Unit, Berks Encore, Berks Latino Workforce Development Corp./ Tec Centro Berks, City of Reading, Connections Work, County of Berks, Literacy Council of Reading – Berks, Reading Public Library, Reading School District, Threshold, United Way of Berks County, and the Wyomissing Foundation.

Community Commitment

The Berks Digital Equity Plan incorporates key definitions from the *National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA)*.

The Digital Divide is the gap between those who have affordable access, skills, and support to effectively engage online and those who do not. As technology constantly evolves, the digital divide prevents equal participation and opportunity in all parts of life.

Digital Equity occurs when residents have equal opportunity for the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy, and economy. Digital equity is necessary for civic and cultural participation, family-sustaining employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services.

Digital Inclusion results from intentional activities necessary to ensure that all individuals and communities, including the disadvantaged, have access to and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT's).

A hallmark of the Berks County plan is its underlying belief that every resident should have equal access to participate in our increasingly connected society. Each Berks County resident, business, school or other organization, should have access to reliable, affordable, high speed Internet service and the resources that they need to make effective use of this service.

Because of that belief there are three essential elements addressed in the County plan:

- Access – the ability to connect to reliable high-speed internet.
- Affordability – the ability to pay for access to the internet.
- Adoption – the ability to secure the devices and skills needed to make full use of the internet.

This Berks Digital Equity Plan utilizes the strength of cooperating partners who are part of the Berks County Digital Equity Coalition and who specifically agree to assist residents who face specific challenges. The targets of these efforts include the populations identified in Federal and State digital equity programs, but are not limited only to those populations.

Older Adults

Physical limitations and inexperience can make technology harder to use. People who do not grow up using technology, particularly those age 60 and above may devalue the benefits and usefulness or see the barriers as greater than the benefits. Fear of breaking a device and fear for their safety and security are just two of these barriers.

Justice Impacted Individuals

Incarcerated people are disadvantaged by a lack of access to digital skills training otherwise available to the public. They struggle to regain stability after re-entry without support for access and skill building.

Residents of Rural Communities

Rural areas are underserved for many reasons including fewer customers, decreased rural adoption rates, and difficult terrain compared to urban and suburban areas. Even when the Internet is available, less competition among limited providers can result in higher prices and limited speed options for residents. Long distances mean finding technology help and skill building classes can be an additional challenge. In addition, there are geographic barriers that can limit access as well.

Low-Income Household Residents

Poverty contributes to poor housing and health conditions, unemployment, high crime, and greatly reduces the opportunities for individuals to improve their circumstances. They struggle with the cost of Internet which can vary widely and can be a burden.

Residents with Language Barriers Including Low Literacy Individuals

English remains the dominant language use by Berks County businesses and services, and those with limited English proficiency face additional barriers. They struggle with understanding what choices are available and locating assistance in their preferred language.

Racial and Ethnic Minorities

These residents are historically impacted by underinvestment in their schools and neighborhoods, and often face unequal treatment and expectations.

Veterans

The FCC states that barriers to broadband adoption among veterans include insufficient digital literacy, perception of irrelevance, price, and lack of deployment where they live. At a Pennsylvania veterans focus group there was a lengthy discussion about health and mental health challenges faced by this population. Many residents shared challenges related to affordability and limited incomes. Residents shared they feel overlooked and left out.

Individuals with Disabilities

People living with a disability can find it harder to find a job limiting their income, access to technology, and opportunities to develop digital skills. Individuals with disabilities are a diverse population, and they experience many types of challenges based on the specifics of their condition. For these residents, access to services online can be a critical way to connect to resources and access services online can be a critical way to connect to resources and assistance, if the right tools and training are provided.

Of special interest in Berks County are:

Individuals with Chronic Illnesses

People living with chronic illnesses, such as diabetes, asthma, cancer and heart disease need access to technology to connect with their healthcare provider. Telemedicine is especially important for rural residents and those with transportation challenges and the governor recently signed legislation authorizing insurance payments for this form of healthcare access.

Individuals with Behavioral Health Challenges

According to the U. S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) one in five adults have a clinically significant mental health or substance use disorder. And the prevalence and severity of mental health challenges among teens has increased sharply post COVID. Assisting these individuals to access virtual services can foster more immediate essential care.

Goals of the Berks County Digital Equity Plan

Goal 1: Connectivity - Berks County residents and businesses can access and afford the internet connectivity they need.

- Establish sustainable household-based models for internet subsidies.
- Facilitate sustainable community-based networks to increase public WiFi and free or low-cost broadband.
- Encourage the expansion of high-quality, reliable, low-cost broadband subscription options by commercial Internet Service Providers and wireless providers operating in Berks County.
- Expand access to Internet service to those residents and businesses that face geographic challenges.

Goal 2: Devices - Berks County residents can access appropriate and affordable technology devices.

- Prioritize grants and bulk purchasing for devices.
- Develop and support a network of Public Computer Centers in libraries and service organizations as digital inclusion hubs.
- Develop a system of computer recycling, refurbishing, and community tech support.

Goal 3: Online Safety and Security - Online and cyber security is important for Berks County residents of all ages and abilities.

- Provide information and training about the importance of privacy and security.
- Recognize scams and the importance of regularly updating security software.
- Setting strong passwords with multifactor authentication.
- The ability to discern real, safe, and secure websites from fraudulent ones.

- Protect users' mental health and self-esteem.

Goal 4: Ecosystem - Berks County grows and sustains the capacity and infrastructure required to increase digital equity.

- Build the capacity of local governments to advance digital equity.
- Seed capacity of community partners and anchor institutions to advance digital equity.
- Establish consistent benchmarks and data collection to inform strategic planning.
- Establish and promote best practices around software applications and tools.

Goal 5: Training, Education and Workforce Development - Berks County residents develop the skills necessary for work and life.

- Provide community based Digital Navigation services across the county.
- Build a coordinated network of Digital Literacy Navigators with clear pathways into adult education and workforce programs.
- Standardize digital literacy assessments, curriculum, and training.
- Ensure multi-lingual outreach and programs are available to residents.
- Incorporate digital literacy course information into numerous web-based and community outlets that include mechanisms for community-based organization course referrals.
- Identify the resources that can provide hardware and software technical support assistance.

Emphasis on Increasing Digital Literacy

Digital literacy is the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, create, and communicate information requiring both cognitive and technical skills. This plan emphasizes the importance of Digital Navigators defined as trusted and trained guides who assist community members obtain affordable Internet service and teach them how to use safely various devices such as tablets, PCs, and smartphones as well as technology applications of interest.

This Plan emphasizes the use of trained Digital Navigators: Digital Navigators are trusted guides who assist community members with ongoing, individualized support for accessing affordable and appropriate connectivity, devices, and digital skills. Digital Navigators teach specific foundational skills so users can:

- Turn on their devices.
- Use the available controls on their devices.
- Make use of accessibility tools on their devices to make it easier to use.
- Interact with the home screen on their devices.
- Understand the Internet allows them to access information and content by connecting their devices through Wi-Fi.
- Connect their devices to a safe and secure Wi-Fi network.

- Recognize that their personal information has value to others requiring them to keep their passwords secure.
- Update and change their passwords when prompted to do so.
- Recognize and avoid scams and attempts to access personal information

Role of the Berks County Digital Equity Coalition

The Coalition provides a mechanism for organizations to share information, ideas, training, and, where feasible, resources related to maximizing digital literacy efforts in Berks County. Because the Coalition is committed to ensuring the quality of projects that it endorses and the ongoing cooperation among organizations engaged in this work, it will only provide a Letter of Consistency for funding applications for projects that demonstrate ongoing commitment to the goal of inclusion articulated in the Berks County Digital Equity Plan. Collaboration will be the key to success.

In terms of digital literacy, a formal Coalition Letter of Consistency will also be dependent on the applicant's clearly stated intention to:

- a) Identify clear project outcomes and the means to measure them.
- b) Collect minimum data elements agreed upon by the Coalition Steering Committee.
- c) Specify the measures it will undertake to secure participants' personal data.
- d) Share aggregate data on its participants and its planned activities' ultimate effectiveness to assist the Coalition in tracking that projects are reaching all segments of Berks County.
- e) Deliver instruction that is consistent with the core digital navigation skills defined by the Coalition Steering Committee.
- f) Include a budget adequate to cover staffing, materials, travel, and devices with an indirect charge back to the organization of not more than 10% percent or whatever is allowed by the funding source of the total project cost.
- g) Identify project management that will consistently provide oversight to all project activities.
- h) Provide project quarterly reports, as well as a final report, in a timely manner to the Coalition in addition to other reports that may be required by the funding source.

Priority support will be given to those projects that specify that participants are members of at least one of the target population groups listed in the Berks County plan.

Request for Formal Coalition Support of Funding Applications

The Coalition Steering Committee is made up of one (1) representative from each participating nonprofit or educational organization. The Steering Committee will appoint five (5) of its members, whose organizations are not seeking funding, to serve on its Application Review Committee.

Organizations seeking a formal Letter of Consistency from the Coalition for their funding proposals must submit a “notice of intent to apply” to the Coalition, as soon as possible, but no later than one month in advance of the application due date. No less than two weeks in advance of the application date, a draft proposal must be submitted to the Coalition for review by the Review Committee. Submissions must be via email to the Wyomissing Foundation. The Review Committee will determine if the proposal meets the criteria listed above then submit its report to the full Steering Committee. The vote of a majority of the Steering Committee members will determine if the proposal can be submitted to potential funders with its endorsement.

Note: though at least one month in advance is ideal – there are some funding sources that may not provide that lead time.

Conclusion

The Berks County Digital Equity Coalition will play a key role in advancing digital inclusion and closing the digital divide in Berks County. We want to ensure that every resident can thrive in today’s digital world and is empowered to engage in and benefit from digital opportunities. Investments in connectivity will continue to grow our modern economy and support a high quality of life and increased economic prosperity.

Coalition Members (as of July, 2024):

Alvernia University - Glynis Fitzgerald
Berks Alliance - Dave Myers
Berks County Community Foundation -
Cindy Milian
Berks County Intermediate Unit - Scott
Major, Glen Espinal
Berks Encore - LuAnn Oatman
Connections Work - Peggy Kershner,
Nikki Schnovel
County of Berks - Pam Menet, Brad
Shirey
Literacy Council Reading/Berks - Ryan
Breisch

Reading Public Library - Melissa Adams,
Jennifer Bressler, Mike Najarian (retired),
Cid Espinal
Reading School District - Camil
Culbreath
Tec Centro Berks - Violet Emory, Sally
Blondet
Threshold Rehabilitation Services -
Justin Loose
United Way of Berks County - Ashley
Chambers
Weidenhammer Systems - John
Weidenhammer
Wyomissing Foundation - Pat Giles,
Bronwen Gamble, Anna Weitz (volunteer)

July 11, 2024