

RECOMMENDATION 3

Ensure Digital Equity for Older Adults

The societal shift from the use of analog or mechanical technology to digital technology has drastically changed the way we learn, work, seek services, and establish community. Today, 93% of American adults report using the internet, and 77% report having a broadband connection at home.¹⁶⁰ However, despite the incredible expansion of information technology, some communities and locales have been underserved, especially in regard to broadband internet access. Those who are Black or Hispanic, those with lower incomes, and those who live in rural areas are less likely to report having a broadband connection at home.¹⁶⁰

This digital divide can have devastating consequences for those without access to or the ability to use internet-enabled technology, which is a necessity for much of modern everyday life. Today, people use the internet to search for and apply for jobs. Many adults work from home using the internet. Some apply for government assistance online. Local governments and news organizations also use the internet to communicate important or urgent information to community members. For example, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, multiple government entities kept Americans updated about preventive health behaviors, community spread, and vaccination through their websites and social media pages. Since the pandemic, many health providers have maintained telehealth services, which require an internet connection, for their patients.

Older adults have experienced a rapidly innovating technological landscape, from the introduction of the home computer in the 1970s to the ubiquity of smartphone ownership today. It is imperative that members of this population are supported in their right to access and use information technology.

Digital Equity, Literacy, and Inclusion

Digital equity is defined as “a condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy, and economy.”¹⁶¹ Digital literacy is defined as “the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information,” which requires both cognitive and technical skills.¹⁶¹ There are established gaps in internet access and use by age group. Digital technologies may also present accessibility challenges to older adults (e.g., small text sizes, few accessibility settings, reliance on touchscreens).¹⁶²

Beyond the practical economic and educational impacts, providing older adults with opportunities to access and use information technology can support social connection. In 2020, AARP reported evidence of this after providing technology access, devices, and training to 10,000 older adults living in New York City public housing.¹⁶³ More than half of participants in that program reported less frequent feelings of loneliness.¹⁶³

FEDERAL SUPPORT FOR DIGITAL EQUITY GOALS

Bipartisan Infrastructure Law

In 2021, President Joe Biden signed the Bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which included the \$2.75 billion Digital Equity Act, into law.¹⁶⁴ This act seeks to ensure that all communities have access to high-speed internet through three federal grant programs.¹⁶⁵ These programs focus on expanding coverage to the following covered populations:

- individuals who live in covered households (household income is not more than 150% of the federal poverty level)
- individuals aged 60 years and older
- incarcerated individuals
- veterans
- individuals with disabilities
- individuals with language barriers
- individuals who are members of a racial or ethnic minority group
- individuals who primarily reside in a rural area¹⁶⁶

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Act also funded the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program – a \$42.45 billion investment to expand high-speed internet access through planning, infrastructure deployment, equity, and adoption programs.¹⁶⁶ The BEAD Program’s primary objective is to provide broadband services to locations unserved or underserved by broadband access.¹⁶⁶

Consolidated Appropriations Act

The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 included various provisions to “increase broadband availability and accessibility for underserved areas and populations of the United States.”¹⁶⁷ The act also required the establishment of an Office of Minority Broadband Initiatives within the National Telecommunications and Information Administration to collaborate with many government and local partners to promote initiatives related to broadband connectivity and access.¹⁶⁷

Both the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Consolidated Appropriations Act created the Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program – a \$3 billion program to support tribal governments in “bringing high-speed Internet to Tribal lands, including telehealth, distance learning, affordability, and digital inclusion initiatives.”¹⁶⁸



FEDERAL GRANT ALLOCATIONS TO NORTH CAROLINA

Program	Total Amount Awarded
Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program	\$1,532,999,481.15
State Digital Equity Planning Grant	\$1,415,614.32
Broadband Infrastructure Program	\$29,985,800
Connecting Minority Communities Pilot Program	\$27,108,724
Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program	\$500,000

Source: Internet for All. Funding by State/Territory. https://internetforall.gov/funding-recipients?program_status=0&state=NC&form_build_id=form-eiGjCAvSoG10CGQvZJCW5D83htwbijdA0YQltKkmQ4E&form_id=ntia_interactive_map_state_and_program_selection. Accessed July 15, 2023.

STATE ACTIONS FOR DIGITAL EQUITY

Approximately 1.1 million North Carolina households lack access to high-speed internet, cannot afford high-speed internet, or do not have the skills to engage with the digital economy.¹⁶⁹ A variety of state initiatives are leveraging the challenges and resources posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to address this key issue.

In 2021, the NC Department of Information and Technology created the Division of Broadband and Digital Equity to support Governor Roy Cooper's plan to address the digital divide in North Carolina. This division strives to address digital equity by expanding affordable high-speed internet and broadband access across the state and increasing digital literacy among North Carolinians.¹⁷⁰

Governor Cooper's plan includes using \$1 billion in federal American Rescue Plan Act funds and \$30 million in state funds to address crucial broadband infrastructure and access, digital literacy, and internet affordability.¹⁶⁹ It also established the NC Digital Equity and Inclusion Collaborative – a partnership of equity and inclusion-focused state and local agencies, nonprofit organizations, coalitions, and individuals that provide feedback to policymakers, design digital equity strategies, and educate residents on the digital divide and the importance of digital equity.¹⁷¹

While digital equity is important for all North Carolinians, it is particularly important that we include an aging lens in our actions. Older adults have seen technology progress throughout their lifetimes, and they, like all people, would benefit by taking full advantage of information and communication innovations. With appropriate strategies to address broadband access and digital literacy, older adults can have full participation and engagement in the digital sphere.