

STRATEGY 10

Increase Digital Literacy for Older Adults

The North Carolina Division of Aging and Adult Services should work with aging services partners and funders to:

- a. Identify opportunities to sustain the work that will be done through the digital literacy grant along with other grantees of the North Carolina Department of Information Technology's Division of Broadband and Digital Equity.
- b. Increase awareness of digital literacy services offered at various community locations (e.g., senior centers, libraries, cooperative extension, local school systems, and community colleges, programs that pair youth with older adults for mutual mentorships).

Desired Result – More older adults will have the skills to access and navigate information and services available on the internet.

Why does the task force recommend this strategy? – Digital literacy is the “ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills.”^{181,182} Digital inclusion relies on individual and community access to high-speed internet, access to devices that meet technological and internet needs and accommodate sensory differences (e.g., vision or hearing), and the skills necessary to take part in the digital world. Technology can facilitate aging in place through access to health information and social inclusion, but that capability is only beneficial if the individual knows how to access and effectively use those resources.¹⁸²

For those able to take advantage of telehealth, digital platforms can provide access to remote medical help or education and assist with managing illness. Social connections can be improved through networking online and video calls with family and friends. Virtual exercise regimens can increase physical function. Internet use has also been shown to reduce the likelihood of depression and loneliness in older adults. Digital skills can be used to actively contribute to the community and participate in the workforce.

Context – The North Carolina Department of Information Technology's Office of Digital Equity has granted funds to state agencies to support digital equity solutions that “positively impact target populations identified in the Digital Equity Act,” including older adults.¹⁸³ With funds from the American Rescue Plan Act, the grant will help fund distribution of digital devices, workforce development programs, and digital literacy training. Of the \$9.9 million in awarded dollars, approximately \$1.1 million was given to the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Aging and Adult Services (DAAS). Other grantees include the Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Rural Health, and NC State University Institute for Emerging Issues.¹⁸⁴

Resources for Digital Literacy

Senior centers around the state offer opportunities for digital learning in group classes taught by volunteers. Libraries are also a common resource for digital literacy training, sometimes targeted to older adults. One example is the Blue Ridge Literacy Council's partnership with Carolina Village in Hendersonville. This initiative offers a six-week digital literacy course that covers differences between a laptop and PC, setting up email, navigating the internet, online purchases, using a smartphone, accessing health care information, and avoiding risks and scams.¹⁸⁵

Other independent organizations and businesses work to address digital literacy for older adults as well. Raleigh Senior TechEd is an all-volunteer organization that educates older adults on computer technology. Workshops are held twice a week throughout the Raleigh area. Since its 1996 inception, it has provided technological education to more than 4,700 students. Aging Connected, a nationwide campaign to get older adults across the country connected with the internet, was founded in 2018. Established by Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) and Humana, Aging Connected seeks to improve social connections through technology classes designed for older learners and provides an online search tool for low-cost internet services.

Intergenerational digital literacy programs that pair youth with older adults can engage this population on a more personalized level. Outcomes include reduced fear of technology, increased interest in technology, and better health literacy.¹⁸⁶ Programs such as Cyber Seniors provide older adults with training in the use of various devices with the assistance of younger adult volunteers. Benefits are seen for both age groups, such as increased self-esteem and reduced anxiety.¹⁸⁷

How would this impact the health of older adults?



Home-based exercise, aided by digital technology, can be instrumental in preventing falls.



Older adults can use internet-based applications for ride-hailing and other services that improve their ability to move around the community and to access health services through telehealth and telepsychiatry.



Older adults can use internet-based applications that help them shop for groceries, a resource that can be important for those who are unable or prefer not to leave their homes to shop.



Access to digital technology will allow older adults to stay in communication with loved ones and health care providers, reducing social isolation.