

STRATEGY 9

Increase Access to Broadband Internet across the State

In developing and implementing digital inclusion plans, local governments should work with community partners – including senior centers, libraries, faith-based groups, health care providers, and university and community college facilities (among other possible partners) – to ensure community members and smaller organizations serving older adults have access to reliable and affordable broadband internet service. Strategies may include increasing uptake of subsidized internet services and expanding programs that provide low-cost access to internet services and devices that are appropriate for the needs and abilities of older adults.

Desired Result – More older adults will have access to the internet to increase opportunities related to health, employment, continuing education, needed services, and social connection.

Why does the task force recommend this strategy? –

The Federal Communications Commission describes broadband access as a “super” determinant of health, which means it plays a large role in health care outcomes and influences the more recognizable drivers of health, such as education and health care access.¹⁷² Older adults are the largest group in the United States without connection to the internet. This limitation presents barriers to accessing health information and leads to decreased rates of social support and higher rates of social isolation.¹⁷³ The presence of community partners to help older adults access free or affordable internet service will allow them to better participate in meaningful life activities.

Context – There are public and private assistance programs for those who live in places with broadband internet connections but have financial restraints on accessing the service. The Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) is a federal program that offers a discount of up to \$30 for eligible older adults.¹⁷⁴ It also includes a discount of up to \$100 for a laptop, tablet, or desktop computer. Participants enrolled in SNAP or Medicaid are eligible. Companies like Comcast have programs like Xfinity Internet Essentials, which offers internet services for free or low cost for qualified older adults, such as those who participate in SNAP or Medicaid and have enrolled in the Affordable Connectivity Program.

Pairing an older adult with the correct device is an important part of technological adaptation. Accommodating the unique needs of older adults leads to higher usage.¹⁷⁵ As of 2021, 30% of older adults owned a cell phone but not a smartphone, many citing problems with understanding how to use a smartphone.¹⁷⁶ Health-related problems such as arthritis may affect a person’s ability to use smaller screens.¹⁷⁷ Laptops and tablets may be easier to navigate, especially with the creation of tablets designed for older adults that have larger screens and fewer applications.¹⁷⁸ Older-adult friendly features such as adjustable font size and voice assistant technology also increase confidence.¹⁷⁹ Resources in North Carolina for access to devices include the Kramden Institute and E2D, nonprofits that provide low-cost refurbished computers for adults with lower incomes.

The North Carolina Division of Broadband and Digital Equity was created in 2021 within the North Carolina Department of Information Technology (NCDIT) to help close the digital divide and serve as a resource for broadband access and digital inclusion. Part of Governor Roy Cooper’s plan for digital equity includes \$50 million to be spent by the end of 2026 to support digital literacy and skills training. NCDIT is partnering with state library systems to develop a scalable model to equip libraries with broadband access and digital literacy training.¹⁸⁰

Access to and Adoption of Internet Services in North Carolina

Two measures illustrate the geographic differences in North Carolina in terms of access to and adoption of internet service. See Figures 4 and 5 on next page that illustrate which counties in North Carolina may experience the greatest challenges to ensuring digital equity.

- **Broadband Availability Index (Figure 4)** - A higher score indicates better availability and quality of services. Factors that are considered for the score include percent of population with access to broadband and fiber service, speed of services, population density, and the age of homes.
- **Broadband Adoption Index (Figure 5)** - A higher score indicates greater potential for adoption. Factors that are considered for the score include percent of households with subscription to internet service, population age, education level, disability status, limited English proficiency, presence of children, prevalence of people working from home, and access to internet service and devices.

How would this impact the health of older adults?



Home-based exercise, aided by digital technology for online classes, 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.



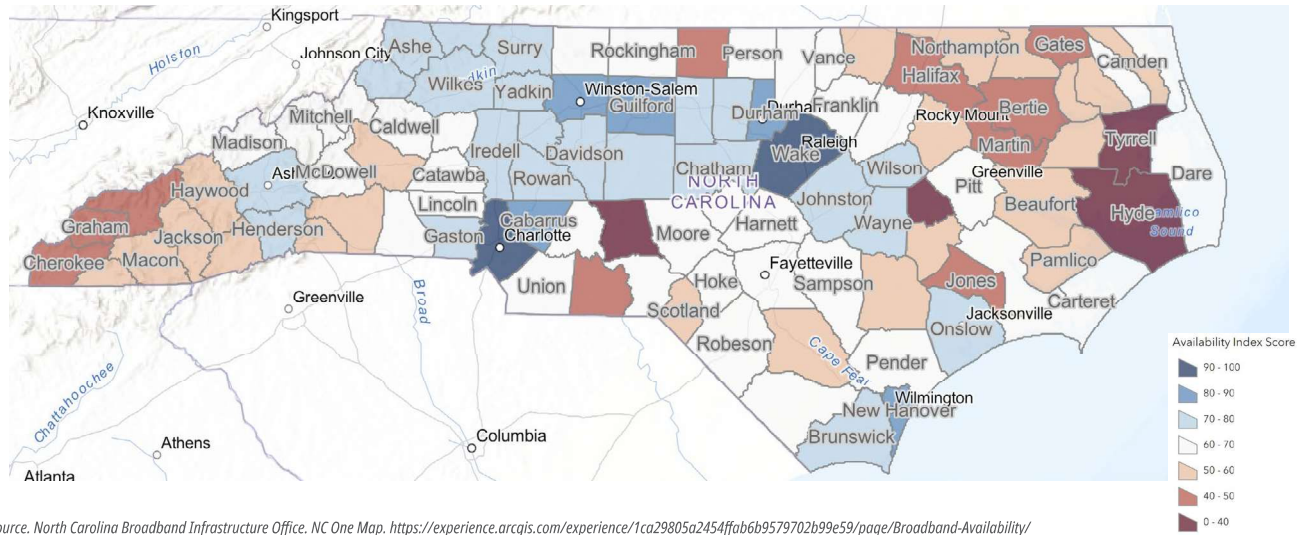
Older adults can use internet-based applications that help them shop for groceries, a resource that can be important for those who are unable or prefer not to leave their homes to shop.



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

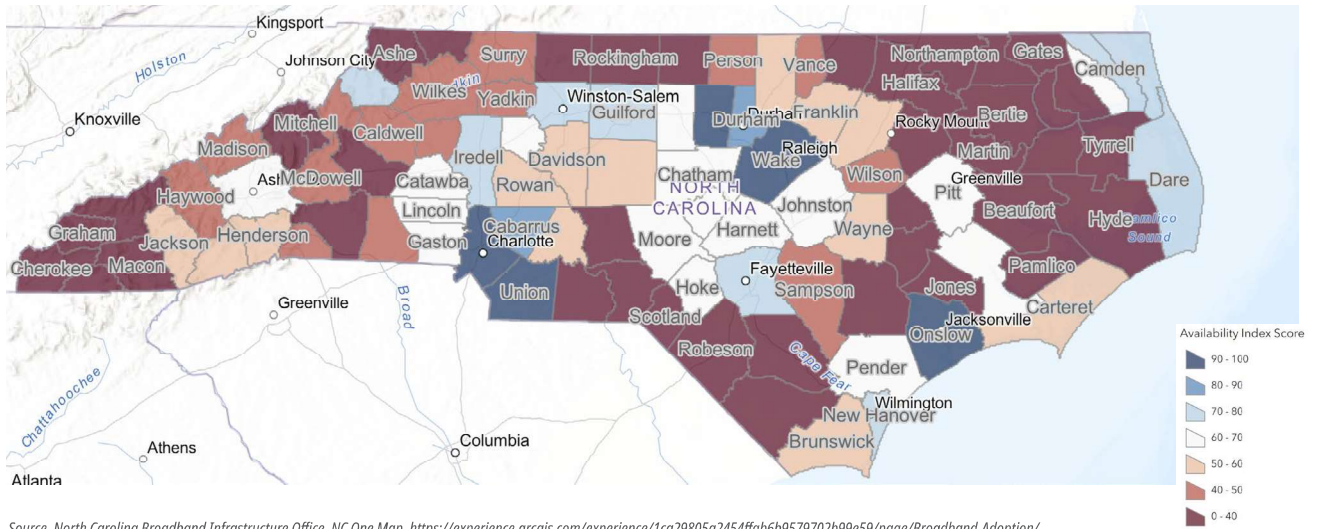


FIGURE 4. North Carolina Broadband Availability Index



Source. North Carolina Broadband Infrastructure Office. NC One Map. <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/1ca29805a2454ffab6b9579702b99e59/page/Broadband-Availability/>

FIGURE 5. North Carolina Broadband Adoption Index



Source. North Carolina Broadband Infrastructure Office. NC One Map. <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/1ca29805a2454ffab6b9579702b99e59/page/Broadband-Adoption/>