WASHINGTON STATE
CONNECTING DIGITAL EQUITY COMMUNITIES STATEWIDE

2025 REGIONAL DIGITAL EQUITY COORDINATION SESSIONS

**WASHINGTON FOR ALL
BRIDGING DIGITAL DIVIDES**

WASHINGTON STATE OFFICE OF EQUITY

REGIONAL DIGITAL EQUITY COORDINATION SESSION HIGHLIGHTS & STORIES

Over 260+ community members met regionally across the state to discuss their digital equity needs and share resources in this 9-session series hosted by the Washington State Office of Equity. We culminated with a statewide session dedicated to community presentations and resource sharing.

This document captures the highlights, needs, successes, and stories shared by those passionate about digital equity during the sessions.

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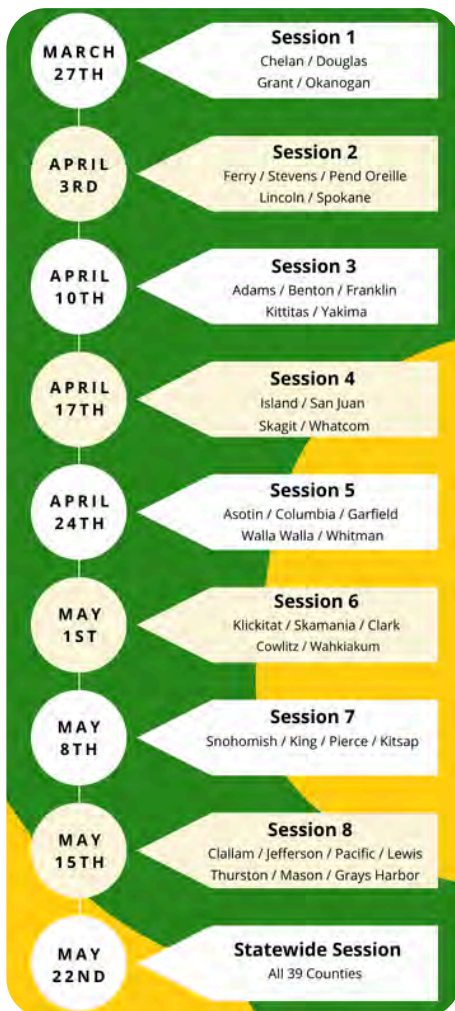
2025 REGIONAL DIGITAL EQUITY COORDINATION SESSIONS

CONNECTING DIGITAL EQUITY COMMUNITIES STATEWIDE

Project Overview

The Washington State Office of Equity's **2025 Regional Digital Equity Coordination Sessions** took place on Thursdays, March 27th through May 22nd, 2025 and **consisted of eight regional sessions and one statewide session.**

MARCH 27TH
Session 1
Chelan / Douglas
Grant / Okanogan

APRIL 3RD
Session 2
Ferry / Stevens / Pend Oreille
Lincoln / Spokane

APRIL 10TH
Session 3
Adams / Benton / Franklin
Kittitas / Yakima

APRIL 17TH
Session 4
Island / San Juan
Skagit / Whatcom

APRIL 24TH
Session 5
Asotin / Columbia / Garfield
Walla Walla / Whitman

MAY 1ST
Session 6
Klickitat / Skamania / Clark
Cowlitz / Wahkiakum

MAY 8TH
Session 7
Snohomish / King / Pierce / Kitsap

MAY 15TH
Session 8
Clallam / Jefferson / Pacific / Lewis
Thurston / Mason / Grays Harbor

MAY 22ND
Statewide Session
All 39 Counties

Together We...

- Co-created nine virtual sessions to support coordinated collective impact!
  - 300+ people reached from all 39 counties
  - 100+ organizations
  - 40+ community presentations

- Compiled regional highlights and community stories to inform the Digital Equity Forum's report to the Legislature and the Governor

- Empowered and strengthened Digital Equity Forum and community coordination, developing infrastructure for credible outreach and resource sharing

- Identified working models and resources to share, gathering data for ecosystem mapping

- Expanded who considers themselves part of digital equity work, building new relationships with trusted messengers and encouraging new coalition development

- Created a platform for local digital equity programs and resources to be shared in hard-to-reach communities

- Captured and uplifted stories on social media and newsletters

- Provided information about the Digital Equity Forum and local digital equity programs and resources, like the federal lifeline programs

REGIONAL DIGITAL EQUITY COORDINATION SESSIONS

Connecting Digital Equity Communities Statewide

SESSION 1 HIGHLIGHTS: CHELAN / DOUGLAS /GRANT / OKANOGAN

We kicked off our first Regional Digital Equity Coordination Session in partnership with the NCW Digital Access Coalition. More than 60 participants joined us, all bringing valuable energy and passion for advancing digital equity in their communities.

What community members said during the session….

"**Grant County PUD has finished building out our broadband network to every last home, farm, ranch, and shop on the line.** Following our heritage value—just like when we built out the electrification of Grant County—we now have broadband everywhere. And it's super exciting. **We've been working on this build-out for the last 25 years."**
-Annette Lovitt, Grant PUD

"It **takes time and manpower** to go out and even become aware of government funds. **Overall, most people aren't aware of what's available, whether they're part of a tribe, a city, a power co-op, a utility, or a service provider**. People are so caught up **in the day-to-day, just trying to keep things running with the limited resources they have."**
-Diane Garcia, Ziply

"The historical **models are really built for more urban areas and not working in rural areas. The digital navigator model is one** of them. You cannot employ a digital navigator and ask them to either stay in one place and have everyone come to them or send that one person out. **The model needs to be different. We need to embed digital navigators in our communitie**s—places where people actually go, where they feel comfortable, and **where trust is already built."**
-Wendy Brzezny, Senior Director of Programs, Thriving Together NCW

Session One Highlights

Community Wins

- Grant County Public Utility District (PUD) completed a **25-year broadband infrastructure buildout** which provides fiber access to every home, farm, and business in the county. With infrastructure complete in Grant County, focus now turns to digital literacy, increasing adoption rates and addressing barriers.
- The **North Central Washington (NCW) Tech Alliance** has run **nine digital literacy cohorts** over 18 months, training over **200 participants** in foundational tech skills.
- Data from participants show:
  - **75%** say skills help maintain their job.
  - **67%** say it helps with hiring employees.
  - **57%** plan to start a business.
  - **61%** say it will help expand an existing business.
- These insights link digital skills training to **economic and workforce development**, helping build a compelling narrative for future funding.
- **Inchelium Cultural Resource Center:** focuses on digital tools for generational and language preservation
- **Spanish-Language Weekly Skills Class:** 15-minute sessions for small business owners covering online business profiles, local internet providers, and resources like Evergreen BizLink, with live Q&A.

Okanogan County Digital Equity Implementation

- **Action-Oriented Approach**: Rather than letting their state-mandated digital equity plan sit unused, their Broadband Action Team (BAT) has committed to **actively implementing** its recommendations.
- **Student Collaboration**: Partnered with **Washington State University (WSU) students** to conduct **business interviews** and produce videos for a new **Digital Discovery Series**.
- **Identified Needs:** Community input highlighted concerns around cybersecurity and comfort with online banking/medical record access.
- **First Training Launched** in partnership with **Wheatland Bank, Confluence Health, WSU Extension**, and **NCW Tech Alliance**.

What community members said during the session....

"So **our data is telling us that nearly a quarter of our community is being held back by some kind of barrier—whether it's connectivity, devices, or digital skills.** If you **unlocked the potential of that 25% of people**, I see it leading to **an incredible economic lif**t. I see it as an opportunity to create more connection."
-Sue Kane, Executive Director, NCW Tech Alliance

"**Tribal communities deserve just as much support as anyone,** but we also know that some tribes face unique challenges—such as large land bases, widely dispersed populations, and complex infrastructure needs. **When it comes to tribal communities, equal distribution of resources doesn't mean equitable support.**"
-Ernie Rasmussen, Executive Director, Bigfoot Telecommunications of the Colville Tribes

"I think it's important to differentiate between **digital equity and affordable digital equity**. One thing that would really make a difference for the **hard-to-reach populations we serve is having access that's truly affordable**. That would help us better ensure **their day-to-day safety, even when they're facing resource deficits or scarcity in housing and other areas**. We understand there will always be some individuals we can't reach in time, **but I believe that number would be significantly reduced if affordable digital access were a part of our communities.**"
-Sai Samineni, Dream Investment Strategies

"**It's harder for rural residents to get that assistance.** There really **isn't anywhere to go** around here if you want to learn how **to use a computer**—maybe a WorkSource office, if there's one nearby. But for many, **that's not an option—especially in rural counties where it could be a long drive, and you might not have a vehicle to get there.**"
-Jaelyn McMahan, Program Manager, Central Washington Disability Resources

Methow at Home supports older adults in aging independently by enhancing digital literacy.

- Collaborated with **North Central Washington (NCW) Tech** to host "Tech Cafés"
- Secured a **microgrant** to purchase training devices
- **Program Launch**: Completed a 5-week "Train the Trainers" program with **Senior Planet**, training 5 volunteers and 1 staff member.
- **Tech Tuesdays**: Launching weekly tech sessions for older **adults starting late April.**

Central Washington Disability Resources (CWDR)

- **Goal**: Provide basic digital skills training for individuals with disabilities in rural areas.
- **Grant:** Funded to purchase laptops and offer monthly classes in Kittitas, Yakima, Grant, Chelan, and Douglas Counties.
- **Training:** Covers basic computer use, internet navigation, digital accessibility tools, and future sessions on internet safety.
- **Open to**: Anyone who self-identifies as disabled.

Key Digital Equity Needs Across Communities

- **Rural & Tribal Challenges**: Federal land holdings limit funding for services like libraries. Creative partnerships need to integrate digital equity.
- **Lifeline Programs**: Many carriers no longer provide free phones, hindering access to services for those who can't afford them.
- **Awareness Gap**: Over 50% are unaware of available funding, particularly in tribal areas, leading to service closures.
- **Outreach Needs:** Consistent, cost-effective outreach is vital to raise awareness about funding opportunities.
- **Connectivity Barriers**: 25% of the community faces barriers to connectivity and skills, limiting economic growth and community connections.
- **Affordable Digital Equity**: Access to affordable digital services is essential for safety and well-being, especially for underserved populations.
- **State Government Role**: Digital equity should be integrated across all state programs, not just libraries, to improve access and support.
- **Communication Impact:** Easy, free communication reduces isolation and improves long-term outcomes.

REGIONAL DIGITAL EQUITY COORDINATION SESSIONS

Connecting Digital Equity Communities Statewide

SESSION 2 HIGHLIGHTS: FERRY / STEVENS / PEND OREILLE / LINCOLN / SPOKANE

Session 2 of Regional Digital Equity Coordination brought together 20 folks working to bridge the digital divide across Ferry, Stevens, Pend Oreille, Lincoln, and Spokane counties. The session was a strong step forward in our collective digital equity efforts. Here are some highlights from the discussion:

What community members said during the session....

"**We don't get consistent funding to do the kind of work Washingtonians need**...it's not just lack of funding, but an actual difference in what you see accessible to other areas of the state...We need more opportunities for **localized funding that's directed specifically to community-based organizations**, r**ather than overarching state entities**. It needs to go to the **folks who live and work in those communities.** They likely have **better access to addressing the problem and allocating funds in the most meaningful way**—because they're there."
-Debra Hansen, Director WSU Extension and BAT Model Co-founder

"**We spent 10 years trying to get better internet in our very rural county, which has a large senior population**. The county did receive federal funds to build broadband networks in eight communities. So **now, we're seeing a need for people to have the ability to use this new technology. I mean, we're going from snail to rocket speed. And we do have a lot of seniors who are afraid of the technology or don't understand it. We need digital literacy**—not just the skills to navigate, but also access to devices themselves, like through library lending. It's exciting."
-Margie Hall, Lincoln Co. Broadband Office

Session Two Highlights

Key Digital Equity Needs Across Communities

- Persistent **infrastructure gaps** and **affordability barriers**, especially in rural areas.
- Need for **devices, digital skills training, and accessible programs** for seniors and people with disabilities.
- Lack of **consistent and adequate funding,** especially following the end of several key programs in June 2023 (e.g., geographically diverse Washington State Broadband Office Digital Navigator Grant Program funding led by local decision makers ended in 2023, E-Rate funding for schools and libraries to distribute Wi-Fi hotspots).

Rural Equity Gaps

- **One-size-fits-all** and **urban-centered** approaches don't work in rural regions.
- **Rural communities are under-resourced**, with funding often favoring Seattle/Tacoma-based organizations.
- Statewide agencies frequently fail to **effectively reach or support rural areas.**
- Participants emphasized the importance of **naming rural areas as underserved in official messaging and planning.**

Local Leadership & Community-Based Solutions

- Local organizations are better equipped to meet community-specific needs and build trust.
- Need for **localized funding and resources** directed to **community-based** organizations.
- Libraries and community orgs are trusted hubs already doing this work but need **stable, long-term support.**

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What community members said during the session....

"The state **government needs to understand what it is like in the rural northeast corner of the state**. We don't have a high enough population to warrant private companies to improve and increase infrastructure, but **our population is too high for our current infrastructure to support**. Our infrastructure is **not setup for the needs of this region**."
-Erin Ferrier, Program Manager, Disability Action Center Northeast Washington

"There are a lot of programs available, but you end up spending so much time calling different entities to ask if the training is available. **It would be helpful if there were a map of Washington where you could click on your county or specific community, and it would give you a list of programs**. Something filterable by program—**so if you're looking for digital navigation training, you could filter for that and see which entities offer that type of training in your area.** We need tools like this."
-Jim Cupples, Business Support Contractor Tri County Economic Development District

"**Behind every digital equity statistic is a real person. It's a parent, it's a student, it's a neighbor. Someone with just a dream trying to navigate the complexities of modern life.**"
-Leslie Hardwick, Spqni Broadband Services-Spokane Tribe of Indians, WA State Digital Equity Forum member

"A common **misconception about digital equity is** that a lot of people think it has to do **with social class or race—and those are important components, for sure**. But **rural is also a component** that I think many people in the state of Washington don't realize they're a part of. **Digital equity impacts so many people,** and they don't even include themselves in it."
-Amanda Six, Director, Libraries of Stevens County

- Participants warned that **burnout is rising, especially when communities are repeatedly asked to share stories and data without seeing systemic change or results.**

Coordination & Collaboration
- **Broadband Action Teams** (BATs) are effective coordination tools when **supported by local partners.**
- Suggested the **state host quarterly regional check-ins to better align efforts and identify support needs.**
- Strong support for **replicating successful regional models**, such as the partnership between NCW Digital Access and Equity Coalition and Accountable Communities of Health Thriving Together NCW **to encourage shared infrastructure, regional collaboration, and equity.**

Messaging, Outreach & Storytelling
- Effective messaging **must feel inclusive and reflect local experiences.**
- **Storytelling is essential** for advocacy, fundraising, and building understanding—but **must lead to action.**
- **Outreach is happening through social media, schools, libraries, and trusted partners.**
- Participants **want clearer communication and visibility of programs, including a map or tool** showing available services by community.

Recommendations for State Action
- **Invest in regional models** that support infrastructure and coordination **across counties.**
- **Prioritize local capacity-building grants, especially for rural and underserved communities**
- Provide **consistent funding for proven programs** and avoid short-term pilot-only support.
- Ensure **equitable funding distribution across the state, with intentional inclusion of rural voices.**

REGIONAL DIGITAL EQUITY COORDINATION SESSIONS

Connecting Digital Equity Communities Statewide

SESSION 3 HIGHLIGHTS: ADAMS / BENTON / FRANKLIN / KITTITAS / YAKIMA

Session 3 of Regional Digital Equity Coordination was a success, bringing together 20 dedicated individuals advancing digital equity efforts across Adams, Benton, Franklin, Kittitas, and Yakima counties.

Here are some highlights from the discussion:

What community members said during the session....

"There is need for **digital literacy at both a basic and an intermediate level.** People ask, 'I'm looking to pay my bills online, but I don't know how to access this. I want to do my timecard for this new job I have, but I've never done this before. Where's my punch machine that I'm used to?' **Teaching people how to access technology efficiently and safely is a big focus that I see in our communities.**"

-Michael Del Haro, Goodwill Industries of the Columbia-Southeastern Washington Counties

"How great it would be to get **seed funding but not be reliant on grant funding** anymore because it can be so volatile. But now, we are at this point where even seed funding isn't there. So, it's taking **a little bit longer to get that ecosystem of sustainability that we were talking about.**"

-Sonee Kulaga Wilson, Goodwill Industries of the Columbia

"**Biggest gaps = Legislature seems to think that because broadband is available, this equals digital equity**"

-Will Booth, Executive Director, Creating Pathways, Digital equity Forum member

Session Three Highlights

Key Digital Equity Needs Across Communities

- **Lack of Basic Digital Skills**: Many struggle with every day-to-day task like paying bills, submitting timecards, or accessing healthcare and job resources online.
- **Limited Mobility & Transportation**: People in transitional housing or rural areas can't always travel to larger towns like Yakima or Sunnyside for in-person classes due to lack of transportation.
- **Funding Gaps**: The ability to start or expand programs is often limited by a lack of consistent funding.
- **High Cost & Limited Internet Access**: Reliable, affordable internet is often unavailable.
- **Device Shortages & Lack of Tech Support**: Many residents don't have up-to-date devices or help with setup and maintenance.
- **Online Safety Risks**: Many community members are hesitant to use technology due to concerns about scams, misinformation, and data breaches —risks that are heightened by low digital literacy.
- **Language & Accessibility Challenges**: Few digital resources are available for non-English speakers or people with disabilities.
- **Information Access & Community Engagement**: Communities—especially immigrants—need trusted, centralized sources for news, resources, and local opportunities.
- There is **over-reliance on nonprofits** and the need to engage private sector partners and expand outside metro/Western WA.
- Many areas are **overlooked by state/federal initiatives** due to regional placement— "in the desert" between more resourced areas. Residents aren't able to travel to larger towns for support, but it's assumed they can.

Digital Equity Misconceptions

- People often wrongly assume they have to pay for **digital equity classes** or that it's limited to certain demographics but **it's for everyone.**
- A common misconception is that everyone is digitally connected simply because they own a phone. That is not the case.

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REGIONAL DIGITAL EQUITY COORDINATION SESSIONS

Connecting Digital Equity Communities Statewide

SESSION 4 HIGHLIGHTS: ISLAND / SAN JUAN / SKAGIT / WHATCOM

Session 4 of Regional Digital Equity Coordination was a success, bringing together 16 dedicated individuals advancing digital equity efforts across Island, Saun Juan, Skagit, and Whatcom counties.
Here are some highlights from the discussion:

What community members said during the session....

"I do think there's **a lack of awareness about how digital equity is connected to so many other needs**...the connection between access to health care and digital equity [is] really illuminating and profound. And I think a lot of folks aren't thinking — **digital equity also means access to health care, access to economic opportunities — all job applications are all online- access to education. It means so many things**. So just drawing that connection for folks through narratives, through storytelling, I think is critical."
-Deborah Bineza, Strategic Initiatives Manager for Equity and Belonging, the City of Bellingham

"We just recently started up a **financial literacy and renters education program in cooperation with our Northwest Workforce Council**, **with some support from Opportunity Council. It's all done online because that's how families can do it.** It takes away the transportation barrier, it takes away the time barrier, and it makes it much more accessible. **So having digital access and digital literacy helps them save money and access a resource that's focused on improving their economic well-being. And now, we're beginning to see some of those outcomes**—like improved financial well-being, improved credit, improved savings—and it's **all because they've been able to get on remotely**."
-Sandi Phinney, Chief Strategy Officer at Community Action of Skagit County

Session Four Highlights

Local Innovation & National Advocacy
- Sno-Isle Libraries is playing a role in both local and national digital equity efforts. Their initiatives include **device lending, digital navigator support, and federal policy advocacy**. Their 2024 community report highlights 1.7 million Wi-Fi connections and over 4,100 devices loaned, supported by $1.5M in county funding. The library emphasized the **importance of sustainable funding and alignment across counties and states.**

Equity Through Workforce Development
- Sno-Isle TECH Skill Center's Fiber OpTIC Path Program, developed with the Fiber Broadband Association and Whidbey Telecom, **provides high school students with certifications and real-world job readiness in broadband infrastructure**. This initiative responds to the lack of workforce strategy accompanying large-scale broadband funding. The program is now **being seen as a replicable model across Washington's 14 regional Skills Centers for students ages 18 - 21**.

Misinformation & Public Education
- A barrier to broadband adoption is misinformation about fiber optics technology. To address this, **a myth-busting FAQ page is being developed in Island County** to help build trust and combat misinformation.

Access as a Public Health and Equity Imperative
- In **rural areas** like Island County, **broadband access is critical for telehealth, education, and economic stability**. Lack of access disproportionately affects underserved populations. Digital equity efforts in these regions began with a healthcare focus but expanded to include **broader infrastructure needs** for daily life.

Digital Accessibility & Government Services
- Cities like Bellingham are grappling with **new federal ADA compliance requirements for digital accessibility**, particularly concerning **inaccessible PDFs, untranslatable websites, and forms that screen readers cannot process**. There is a growing interest in **cross-agency collaboration to address these accessibility gaps and share best practices.**

What community members said during the session....

"We are more **aware that [digital equity] is becoming more of a human righ**t. So, this is something that should be **consistent in terms of funding**."
-Vanesa Gutierrez, Government Relations and Regional Partnerships Manager Sno-Isle Libraries

"There's still **a lot of misinformation going around about technology in general.** And sometimes, **before you can get people that physical access or give them the skills to do anything—you have to bring them to the point where they understand that the technology is there to support them.** I've had conversations that remind me of stories I've **heard about how 150 years ago, when they were starting to introduce electricity, people were afraid to use it. N**ow it's in everything we use. **Broadband internet access is definitely going along that same route**. So, we need to make sure that **people are not only able to access it and use it for things like telehealth and education, but also willing to. It's scary if they don't know anything about it...**
The greatest digital equity needs currently facing the community are recognizing broadband as a utility** and that it needs to be connected when a house is being built or when a building is being refurbished, and the utilities are being updated. **Currently, Washington State law acknowledges broadband as vital, but doesn't classify it as a utility. So that's just a fundamental issue we have overall.** We do have a law on the books that says broadband has to be mentioned for real estate purposes—like when a purchase is happening—but otherwise, there's nothing. There's no requirement. **There's no broader mention of it. And I think that contributes to a lot of the ignorance we see."**
-Cody Bakken, Island County Broadband Coordinator

Cross-Agency and Sector Collaboration
- The **Developmental Disabilities Administration** (DDA) has created a role for accessible content and training, **leading to a cultural shift** in the state. **Collaboration is increasing across state, local, and tribal governments to address accessibility gaps**, with shared resources and updated Department of Justice guidance.

Broadband as Essential Infrastructure
- Broadband is **not yet classified as a utility** in Washington, creating **gaps in policy alignment and housing development**. Current laws require disclosure of broadband availability in real estate, but there are n**o implementation standards in place**.

Barriers for Service Organizations
- Service organizations, like Community Action of Skagit County, face challenges due to **lack of tech infrastructure, needing support in areas such as funding, technical assistance, and scalable digital literacy models** beyond small-group sessions.

Language & Platform Accessibility Gaps
- Non-English speakers face **significant barriers in navigating digital-only systems**, such as online medical scheduling. These barriers are influencing service design and fostering **collaboration to improve accessibility.**

Power of Storytelling
- **Storytelling is emerging as a strategic priority** for many agencies in 2025. There is a strong emphasis on **using success stories to demonstrate how digital access positively impacts lives**, such as financial literacy programs that help improve savings and credit scores.

Data Visualization & Impact Reporting
- Agencies are **adopting tools like Power BI and Tableau** to make equity **data more interactive and transparent**. Visual storytelling, such as **journey maps and infographics**, is helping to engage communities and foster buy-in.

Intersectionality of Digital Equity
- Digital access is **fundamental to health, economic opportunity, education, and civic engagement**. However, there remains a **lack of awareness about the cross-sector connections of digital equity**, and **storytelling is seen as a powerful tool** to bridge this gap.

Statewide Collaboration Praised
- The meeting highlighted the **importance of ongoing collaboration and shared insights across various sectors and agencies**. Leadership and continued engagement are crucial to **keeping the digital equity conversation grounded and advancing forward**.

REGIONAL DIGITAL EQUITY COORDINATION SESSIONS

Connecting Digital Equity Communities Statewide

SESSION 5 HIGHLIGHTS: ASOTIN / COLUMBIA / GARFIELD / WALLA WALLA / WHITMAN

Session 5 of the Regional Digital Equity Coordination was a success, bringing together 16 dedicated individuals advancing digital equity efforts across Asotin, Columbia, Garfield, Walla Walla, and Whitman counties.
Here are some highlights from the discussion:

What community members said during the session....

"We have a **hard time defining digital equity**, but to us, it means not only free internet for everyone, but **access through infrastructure that gives everyone a chance and, hopefully, affordable connectivity**."
-Brian Shinn, Asotin County Commissioner and member of local BAT

"**This is just the reality.** We have organizations doing good work, but we're looking at fixing this problem on a 15-year time horizon—from today going forward. At that point, we'll likely have to stop, restart, and basically do it all over again. So, **if we aren't building sustainable networks, we're just going to end up back in the same hole in 15 years.**"
-Nick Pappin, Washington State University

"One of our **biggest needs is affordability**, which is something that is of great interest to our volunteers and to the Broadband Action Team (BAT). We are discussing how to go about addressing that, such as **working with broadband providers to provide lower packages for low- to moderate-income households and researching other models** being used elsewhere."
-Laura Prado, Community Council

" Federal dollars can help us get started, but our **sustainability and scalability are rooted in the people, the partnerships, and the shared ownership of this coalition**."
-Sonee Kulaga Wilson, Goodwill Industries of the Columbia

Session Five Highlights

Critical Gaps in Rural Infrastructure
- **Asotin County (Anatone):** Ongoing broadband challenges; relies on temporary hotspots.
- **Agriculture Impact:** Broadband deficits limit use of precision tools, affecting farm productivity.
- **Satellite Concerns:** Services like Starlink are unreliable and costly for low-income residents.

Key Digital Equity Needs Across Communities
- **Affordability:** Households forced to choose between basic needs and internet/device access.
- **Funding Gaps:** Programs are grant-dependent; sustainability drops when funds end.
- **Volunteer Burnout:** Digital equity often runs on in-kind labor and multi-role staff.
- **Device Access:** Low-income families often rely on outdated phones or tech; libraries and schools fill the gap where possible.
- **Digital Skills Gaps:** Older adults and immigrant populations face barriers in confidence and training; loss of digital navigators deepens the divide.

Barriers in State Support
- **Disconnected Coalitions:** Some state-funded groups fail to engage local communities.
- **Unfunded Roles:** Key digital positions (e.g., at Washington State University Extension) lack stable funding.
- **Oversight Needed:** Calls for public broadband funds to be tied to affordability & reliability as opposed to funding unreliable providers

What community members said during the session….

"**Many rural households are still experiencing unreliable or non-existent interne**t. And when you think about that, it **limits access to telehealth, it limits online learning, it limits access to public services**. It really is the whole gamut of what we're talking about when we talk about the **digital divide**.

I also want to call out that in today's economy, **our asset-limited, income-constrained families are definitely struggling**. Sometimes they're forced to decide: am I going to get this prescription for a family member, or am I going to buy an updated device? These are the tough decisions they have to make.

Sometimes **it's a lack of an up-to-date digital device, or it's relying on a smartphone to meet all the technology needs at home**. I think the stopgap for that has been creating spaces in the community—like computer labs—where people can go. And then, of course, **community-based organizations have stepped in to teach and support. But now, there's a threat to those community-based organizations as well**."

-Sonee Kulaga Wilson, Goodwill Industries of the Columbia

"**The port district reluctantly got into the broadband game. The only reason we did is because the private sector often can't deliver affordable, reliable internet to rural communities—because it doesn't pay.** There's no financial benefit..."**In the past, entities that received federal funds to serve unserved areas in our state didn't always provide great service. And with this new BEAD funding, it would help if they made sure that doesn't happen again—really verify things**. I guess the jury is still out, but we just don't want to see a repeat of that. T**he dollars are too precious, and there's just not enough to go around**.

I'd rather see them do a great job in a smaller project area than try to meet a lofty goal of serving everyone, only to end up delivering something that's not much better than what people already have."

-Jennie Dickinson, Port of Columbia

Local Collaboration Models
- **Columbia Connects:** 30+ orgs addressing digital equity across SE WA/NE OR.
- **Walla Walla "Internet for All":** Grassroots, data-informed advocacy through 2027.
- **Port of Columbia (Dayton):** City-wide fiber with 60%+ rural adoption despite costs.

Storytelling & Awareness Gaps
- **Underused Tool:** Local success stories are not widely known or documented.

Examples: Neighbors sharing Wi-Fi during COVID for school access.

Messaging & Language Concerns
- **Terminology Barriers:** Words like "equity" and "literacy" can alienate some rural audiences.
- **Reframing Suggestions:** "Digital Opportunity" and "Digital Justice" seen as inclusive.
- **Inclusive Messaging:** Avoid deficit framing and adapt language to local context.

Opportunities Ahead
- **Grants & Support:** Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction digital navigation grants available—minimal regional uptake so far.
- **Cross-Sector Models:** Shared navigator training across community partners is promising.
- **Digital Equity Days (Oct 2025):** Walla Walla & Columbia Counties to host regional events.

REGIONAL DIGITAL EQUITY COORDINATION SESSIONS

Washington State
OFFICE OF EQUITY

Connecting Digital Equity Communities Statewide

SESSION 6 HIGHLIGHTS: KLICKITAT / SKAMANIA / CLARK / COWLITZ / WAHKIAKUM

Session 6 of Regional Digital Equity Coordination was a success, bringing together dedicated individuals advancing digital equity efforts across Klickitat, Skamania, Clark, Cowlitz, and Wahkiakum counties.
Here are some highlights from the discussion:

What community members said during the session….

"We're doing a lot of different things with **smart technologies**, trying to **help individuals have more independence.**"
-Molly Hamstreet Edmon, Housing Program Manager, Home & Community Living Administration

"I would say perhaps some of t**he greatest digital equity needs that we're seeing are access and knowledge to technology and equipment.** Both the access of n**eeding the phone or laptop and then the knowledge of how to utilize the phone and laptop efficiently, specifically in the job search fields**. One group of **community members we see pretty heavily impacted are immigrants and refugees**. They face similar challenges when it comes to access to equipment and the knowledge of how to use that equipment. **It can be very overwhelming —especially when you add language barriers or limited English proficiency to the mix.** That demographic often experiences those challenges on top of existing technology barriers. **If we can focus on the end goal— that digital equity is possible and that it's a fundamental need and resource for Washingtonians—I think that's incredibly helpful. Any way y'all can empower regions to keep moving forward, region to region, is important."**
-Mando Antonio, Program Manager, Workforce SW Washington

Session Six Highlights

Digital Literacy & Public Access
- **Peer 360** is creating a **digital literacy curriculum for older adults, justice-involved individuals, and people with disabilities**, but **lacks formal partnerships or funding**.
- **Workforce Southwest Washington (WSW)** offers r**esume/job skills training, public Wi-Fi, computer access, and device lending**, funded through Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (**WIOA),** Basic Food Employment & Training (**BFET), and** Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (**EcSA).**
- **Peer Kent** and **Goodwill** provide **localized device support and digital skills** in King and Cowlitz Counties **via library and nonprofit partnerships.**

Scalable Navigation Support
- **Link to Care WA** operates a **multilingual, statewide hotline offering personalized support for telehealth, email, and tech troubleshooting**. Staff spend hours per call to meet user needs.
- **North Central WA Coalition (40+ orgs)** cross-trains **frontline workers for digital navigation** across sectors.

Assistive Tech & Reentry Innovation
- $800K in state funds is **backing 25 smart homes** with tools like **GrandCare** and **Safe and Home,** including **200 iPads** for priority populations.
- **Digital access** is becoming **central to reentry efforts**, with early training efforts coordinated by **Peer 360** and the **Department of Corrections.**

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What community members said during the session....

"I think the **smallest stories have the greatest impact**—because no problem is bigger than another. Each problem is catered and tailored to an individual, and **we don't always know the full impact it has**. As you all know, **digital access really affects not only healthcare, but also education, jobs, social connections, and so many other aspects of life**. **So even something as simple as helping an individual apply for a Lifeline program, for example, can snowball into other connectivity opportunities they may not have had otherwise**...We spend as much time as we can with an individual—sometimes even up to four hours—just to really guide the person, meet them where they are in their environment, and see how we can help. **Going out into the community and experiencing that firsthand through outreach events shows just how big the need is when it comes to digital navigation**."
-Hannah Balbon, Project Manager, Link to Care WA

"**Some folks coming out of jail lose everything when they go in. And then to come out and have to start over again**... **having access to a phone and the internet is critical.** I mean, you really can't do much of anything without those things these days... **A phone is one of the first things that we try to support people in obtaining when they either come out of incarceration or out of a long-term stay in a hospital setting.** You know, how to get the phone, how to pay for the phone. W**e look at [getting connected after incarceration] like it is basic need...**There was a time when **it was easy to support folks in getting free phones and free access, but maybe six or nine months ago, some of the funding for that stopped— so now it's much harder. If I could wave a magic wand, we'd have clear supply lines and distribution systems to help folks get access—especially to mobile phones.** "
-Sarah Bowens, Position Coach - Employment, Peer 360

Gaps, Challenges & Structural Barriers
- **Lifeline** is the primary **ongoing federal subsidy for phone/internet, but application requires a device—creating an access paradox**.
- Barriers include:
  - **Shame or fear** of falling behind, especially for older adults.
  - **Lack of digital literacy and confidence**.
  - **Inconsistent or discontinued funding** for promising projects.
  - **Limited staff capacity** for one-on-one digital skills coaching.
- Participants stressed the **need for empathetic, inclusive training and outreach—especially for immigrants, refugees, and underserved rural populations**.

Misconceptions & Communication Barriers
- **Digital equity is equal to broadband access.** Access, affordability, safety, and usability are all critical dimensions.
- A **common misconception is that infrastructure alone solves digital equity.**
- Need for **more nuanced messaging** and **common language** around digital equity concepts **to avoid fragmentation**.

Promising Practices & Shared Resources
- Asset maps from **Workforce Development Council of Seattle– King County and Washington State University Extension's drive-in Wi-Fi map** are useful tools, though some are outdated.
- **Pop-up events offering free/low-cost phones** still occur but **are underfunded.**
- **Outreach partnerships** with local libraries are **working well (e.g., Fort Vancouver Regional Libraries)**.
- **Creative models like mobile tiny homes** are being explored to **make device access more interactive and localized**.

Empowering Regional Collaboration and Sustained Coordination
- The importance of **reviving regional coordination groups like Broadband Action Teams.**
- Need for **sustained funding, regional empowerment, and ongoing community-driven solutions.**
- **Invest in trusted navigators and culturally responsive outreach.**
- **Prioritize inclusive data tools** like the Equity Dashboard (using **Results-Based Accountability).**
- Amplify **community stories** to **increase legislative and public awareness.**

REGIONAL DIGITAL EQUITY COORDINATION SESSIONS

Connecting Digital Equity Communities Statewide

SESSION 7 HIGHLIGHTS: SNOHOMISH / KING / PIERCE / KITSAP

Session 7 of Regional Digital Equity Coordination was a success, bringing together 60+ dedicated individuals advancing digital equity efforts across Snohomish, King, Pierce, and Kitsap counties.
Here are some highlights from the discussion:

What community members said during the session....

"We know that **it's our responsibility—we're stewards of a community resource**, so we **have to address the inequities we perpetuate**."
-Nadiyah Browne, Seattle Public Library

"For the first time, **we have a statewide plan that lays out strategies to remove barriers to digital equity.** It exists, and **we need to find ways to get behind and support** it — not only t**hrough funding** but by **fully implementing the report**."
-Darryl Hunt , King County IT, Digital Equity Forum Member

"We're **pursuing every funding opportunity we can**—from federal grants to ARPA to E-rate—because **sustainability can't depend on unpredictable congressional appropriations**."
Karissa Richards, Community Engagement Specialist, Sno-Isle Libraries

"We're **leaning into art as a way to collect qualitative data**—because surveys alone don't always **tell the full story**."
Jamie Robbins, King County Housing Authority

Session Seven Highlights

Statewide and Regional Initiatives
Washington State Telehealth Collaborative & University of Washington Medicine
- **Operating since 2016** as a hub for **digital health policy, public education, and collaboration.**
- **Developed resources** in partnership **with the Northwest Regional Telehealth Resource Center.**
- The **collaborative ends June 2025,** though materials will remain online through 2026.

Digital Equity Learning Network (DELN)
- A **coalition of 150+ community-based organizations** in King County for **sharing programming and advocacy**.
- **Supports the digital equity ecosystem** with information sharing, resources, and **coordination opportunities**.

County and Local Government Efforts
King County IT
- **Leads institutional broadband efforts** through **Institutional Network (I-NET),** providing **low-cost internet to public entities.**
- Invested **$4.2M in America Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA)** funds **in digital inclusion via local Community Based Organizations**.
- Played a central role in convening post-COVID coalitions and shaping the state equity plan.
- Internet access in King County has improved (dropping from 16% without home internet in 2020 to ~8%).

Snohomish County Government
- Completed a **broadband and equity gap analysis**, identifying **affordability and device reliance as major barriers.**
- Investing **$10M in ARPA** for **rural broadband infrastructure.**
- Hosts a **quarterly Broadband Action Team** and partners with **Sno-Isle** Libraries on digital equity programming.

What community members said during the session....

"What we've really learned—and are **continuing to learn through partnership—** is how to e**ffectively implement a whole-human approach and apply a digital justice lens to our work**. That represents a significant shift in how we're thinking about this work and the strategies we're developing. **These insights have really pushed us to think differently—not just about what we offer, but how we offer it, and how we can show up as a consistent collaborative partner to truly amplify larger digital inclusion efforts in the county."**
-Alison Eckes, Pierce County Library

"**We need access to technology, affordable/reliable internet, digital literacy for elders, and representation in AI technology**. I think some of our **elders definitely needs some more digital literacy** training so they're familiar with how to use devices that they may get."
-Scott Pinkham (Nimiipuu) Equity Program Director, United Indians of All Tribes Foundation

"**There are specific areas within the city with larger populations of households without devices and with limited/no connectivity.**"
-Julie David, IT Business Operations and Fiscal Manager, the City of Bellevue

"We also heard from folks about **the importance of the internet as infrastructure—for connection, for building support systems and foundations for power, possibility, resources, and information sharin**g. People emphasized that it's e**ssential to make participation easy and accessible**, especially for those who are undocumented, unstably housed, immunocompromised, disabled, or navigating transitional moments.
-Nadiyah Browne, Seattle Public Library

City of Bellevue – Inclusive Innovation Forum
- Focused on **digital equity, policy, and inclusive innovation**
- **Housing of Urban Development (HUD) funded digital equity project** pending final environmental review.
- Exploring **device refurbishing, free tech access, and culturally relevant support**.

Libraries as Digital Equity Hubs
King County Library System (KCLS)
- Hired a **Digital Equity Coordinator** and is seeking **local partnerships**.
- Committed to **aligning their resources with community needs**.

Pierce County Library System
- Pivoted to a **digital justice framework informed by Community Based Organization (CBO) feedback.**
- Emphasizes **digital literacy, culturally competent training, and wraparound services including helplines.**

Sno-Isle Libraries
- Reported **1.7M Wi-Fi connections, 4,100 device checkouts, and over 5M digital checkouts** in 2024.
- Runs a personalized **"Book a Librarian"** Digital Navigator Program.
- Manages **robust device lending** (laptops, Chromebooks, hotspots) and **partners on major funding proposals**.

Seattle Public Library
- Operates a **250-device hotspot program** for community partners (shelters, tiny house villages, etc.).
- Lending periods range from 3 months to 1 year; **focused on privacy, accessibility, and co-design with users.**
- **Community feedback shaped updated engagement and success metrics**.

Kitsap Regional Library & Kitsap PUD (KPUD)
- Entered an **interlocal agreement** to **deliver fiber internet to library branches** via KPUD.
- Offers Wi-Fi, Chromebook **lending, and homebound e-reader services**.
- Partners with **Goodwill** for **digital navigation services** and plans to **hire full-time navigators pending levy passage.**

Housing, Workforce, and Education
King County Housing Authority
- Early-stage **digital inclusion for 22,000+** residents.
- **Partnering with HUD's ConnectHomeUSA**; uses creative engagement like art-based surveys.

Evergreen Goodwill
- **Serves 6,000+** annually in 5 counties.
- Offers **device lending, mobile classrooms** (e.g., rural Snohomish).
- **Warned of impact from Affordable Connectivity (ACP) sunset**—many **clients can't afford internet** without subsidies.

Renton Technical College
- Facing **budget cuts**; digital literacy **programs discontinued**.
- **Limited tech access** on campus only; no external services for non-credit learners.
- **Urged state-level action for support**.

What community members said during the session....

"We need free or low-cost internet, foundational digital skills, and access to up to date computers. Most of our students are refugees and immigrants and are also navigating a language barrier. Our mission is employment, so most of our participants are experiencing very low income and are unemployed. We coordinate with local institutions like libraries and housing authorities, Community Based Organizations, and companies to build partnerships that enable us to provide direct services to thousands of individuals each year, as well as leverage each others' services."
-Lily Istrate, Grants Manager, Evergreen Goodwill

"Our language learners need instruction in their first or second languages. Especially elderly populations."
-Amy Diehr, Tacoma Community House, Adult Refugees and Immigrants

"I work for Renton Technical College how we respond to digital equity is a little different. We really have nothing, to be quite frank. In the past, we had a grant where we hired some of our upper level ESL students that worked out really well and they were working at a library and helping students but it got cut because we're having major cuts to higher education right now. And so, we basically stopped loaning technology to students unless people are in the workforce education programs like BFET, LEP. We really don't have anything...we're very limited in what support we can provide."
-Samantha Nelson, Associate Dean, English Language Acquisition and I-BEST, Renton Technical College

Key Digital Equity Needs Across Communities

Affordable, Consistent Internet
- **ACP sunset** is a major setback; **cost remains top barrier.**
- **Rural areas** face infrastructure challenges—**hotspots often ineffective**.
- **Needed**: Subsidized broadband, long-term affordability programs, and fiber investment.

Access to Internet-Enabled Devices
- **Laptops, tablets, webcams, and printers** are **lacking**.
- Libraries and nonprofits **provide devices, but supply is grant-dependent**.
- **Needed**: Sustainable device gifting/lending programs with multi-year funding.

Digital Skills & Navigation Support
- **High demand** for basic tech skills, job readiness, and access to services.
- Programs like **"Book a Librarian" and Goodwill's Navigators** help but are under-resourced.
- **Needed**: Long-term staffing, peer educators (e.g., bilingual ESL learners).

Culturally & Linguistically Relevant Services
- **Immigrant, refugee, and non-English-speaking communities** need multilingual and **culturally competent support**.
- **Needed**: Translated materials, diverse staff, and trusted community partnerships.

Targeted Outreach to Vulnerable Populations
- **Groups at risk**: older adults, people with disabilities, public housing residents, rural and English as a Second Language communities.
- **Needed**: Mobile units, flexible service hours, and services in familiar public spaces.

Barriers to Progress

Lack of Sustainable Funding
- **ARPA and short-term grants** launched programs, but many are **at risk without renewal**.
- **Higher education institutions** have **cut digital equity services** due to budget pressures.

Rural Infrastructure Gaps
- **Hotspots fail** in areas with poor cell service.
- Fiber **expansion is slow**; projects need community input and state matching funds.

Fragmentation & Silos
- **Many stakeholders met for the first time during this session.**
- **Needed**: Regular convenings, shared metrics, and data-sharing to align efforts.

Staff & Organizational Burnout
- **Digital navigation programs lack staffing**.
- Libraries, schools, and nonprofits **overwhelmed by unfunded mandates**.

Institutional Policy Gaps
- **Education systems** often **have limited resources** for credit/workforce students.
- **Housing authorities** are **new to digital inclusion** efforts and **lack clear pathways**.

SESSION 8 HIGHLIGHTS: CLALLAM / JEFFERSON / PACIFIC / LEWIS / THURSTON / MASON / GRAYS HARBOR

Session 8 of Regional Digital Equity Coordination was a success, bringing together 19 dedicated individuals advancing digital equity efforts across Clallam, Jefferson, Pacific, Lewis, Thurston, Mason, and Grays Harbor counties.
Here are some highlights from the discussion:

What community members said during the session....

"**Seven out of every 10 households in Lewis County did not have access to broadband**. Everybody gets one gigabit symmetrical... We want to be sure that everybody has really high-speed internet, no matter what their barriers may be. **How can we leverage these really good strategic partnerships and identify organizations that are doing a fantastic job** and then over time figure out how we develop these partnerships all in an effort **to make sure that communities are served in the best way that we can**."
-Willie Painter, Lewis County PUD

"When people hear the term '**digital literacy**,' **it sounds very formal** and... a deterrent for a lot of folks. **We need plain, clear language: This is for you. It's probably free.** Don't let the title put you off."
-Lauren Howard, Sensory Tool House

"So much of [**people's] livelihood is online and is being targeted by people who are far more digitally literate**... It's not just about success, **it's about staying safe**."
-Jeremy Winn, Grays Harbor College

Session Eight Highlights

Broadband & Infrastructure Expansion
- **Lewis County PUD** secured **$56M** in grants to deploy rural broadband.
- Transitioned from a traditional electric utility to broadband provider after a 2020 study revealed **70% of residents lacked reliable access.**
- Offers **discounted broadband plans** for low-income households, aiming to meet the **$30/month target under BEAD.**
- Launched the **Lewis County Broadband Action Team,** now a **regional model** for digital equity coordination.

Libraries as Digital Equity Hubs
Timberland Regional Library (serving five counties) provides:
- Free public Wi-Fi (6 a.m.–midnight), **mobile libraries**, and **extended hours in rural areas.**
- Deep partnerships with **schools, tribes, legal aid, and healthcare providers.**
- A 2025–2028 strategy focused on **digital literacy, youth, and community storytelling.**

Jefferson County/Port Townsend/North Olympic Library System:
- Serves **seniors, rural areas,** and tribal communities including **Makah and Jamestown S'Klallam.**
- Delivered **40,000+ computer sessions** and **100,000+ print jobs** last year.
- Provide **tech help, digital literacy classes,** and **device access**.

Higher Ed & Youth Digital Programs
- **Grays Harbor College:**
  - Many students **lack digital basics** and **internet access**.
  - One misconception is that all **students** are "digital natives"; many **struggle with tasks like college applications**.
  - Faces **widening equity gaps with technologies like AI;** limited device lending programs.
- **WSU Extension – Grays Harbor:**
  - Runs a **Digital Navigator Program with therapeutic courts** and family services.
  - **Youth-led 4-H Tech Changemakers teach** digital skills, including **dementia-friendly content**.

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What community members said during the session....

"We have noticed that we **connect more with the communities we serve when we're doing digital skills training in a more unstructured way**. So, on the one hand, we have like the classes which are very interactive. But then on the other hand, we also have **drop-in technology support where anyone can come by with any random technology issue** that's actually coming up in their day-to-day life. And for those services, **we actually connect with the individual people a lot** more. Like we have regulars who always come back and know each other's name and that has **built like a better long-term relationship**. So that's something we've noticed about connecting with the participants more."
-Azure Sensabaugh, Program Coordinator, Triceratops Technology Resources

"**We lead with getting to know people, we have conversations, meals together**... we **build a relationship before we educate**. It's not because we have a grant. It's because **we actually care about you and our community**."
-Dan Teuteberg, WSU Extension

"We can teach the skills, we can provide the broadband, but, **until we decrease the barriers to actually getting to those locations or utilizing those tools... we don't have access still**."
-Katie McMurray, Sensory Tool House

"There's this notion that students are just digital natives... but **so many young people don't have access, or are limited** to one type of tech like mobile devices, which don't translate to desktop success."
-Jeremy Winn, Grays Harbor College

Assistive Technology & Accessibility
- **Sensory Tool House:**
  - Supports individuals with disabilities or under **300% Federal Poverty Level.**
  - Offers **adaptive technology** (e.g., one-handed keyboards) and **personalized navigation support**.
  - Advocates for **standardized digital literacy frameworks and sustainable long-term funding.**
  - Notes **insurance rarely covers devices or training** for people with disabilities

Identified Needs & Barriers
- Gaps in **digital skills training** for **immigrants, refugees, the homeless, and seniors.**
- **Bilingual navigators are lacking** across many communities.
- Transitioning from Chromebooks to PCs is challenging due to unfamiliarity with non-Google tools like Microsoft Office and desktop systems.
- Barriers include **capacity issues, cybersecurity threats, and inconsistent or insufficient funding.**
- Ongoing **need for state-level support and cross-sector collaboration.**

Coordination & Collaboration
- Current coordination is **limited regionally; Lewis County** leads with **monthly meetings.**
- Proposal to launch **quarterly coordination meetings** across five counties.
- Strong consensus on the need for **collaborative models** involving **education, legal aid, healthcare, libraries, and Internet Service Providers (ISP).**

Program Insights & Effective Practices
- Broad agreement on the importance of **1:1 digital support** over formal classes.
- **Successful models** include:
  - **Teen Tech Tutors**
  - **Digital navigation** in supportive housing
  - **Community-based toolkits** and flexible learning approaches
  - **Timberland Regional Library** digital upskilling partnerships with local governments without professional development budgets

Outreach, Storytelling & Messaging
- Call for stronger **digital equity storytelling** and **community engagement.**
- Perception that **state-level leaders overlook real digital equity needs.**
- Local terms like **"tech help"** resonate more than formal jargon.
- Minimal exposure to state programs unless **actively sought out** by local partners.

Innovation & Emerging Technologies
- **AI pilots:**
  - **Choice Regional Health Network** is testing AI-powered tools for navigating human services.
  - **Emerald City Beacon** in Seattle using AI + community engagement to guide equitable innovations.

Next Steps
- **Form a regional digital equity coalition.**
- Promote **shared leadership across** libraries, chambers, and nonprofits.
- Enhance **inter-agency communication, outreach strategies, and resource visibility.**
- Avoid duplication by **mapping and connecting existing programs.**
- Leverage **2023 Broadband and Digital Equity Community Action Plans as a** roadmap—while recognizing their lack of enforceability.

REGIONAL DIGITAL EQUITY COORDINATION SESSIONS

Connecting Digital Equity Communities Statewide

SESSION 9 HIGHLIGHTS: STATEWIDE SESSION - ALL 39 COUNTIES

Session 9 brought together a diverse group of stakeholders to discuss ongoing and emerging efforts to bridge the digital divide across Washington State. The presentations reflected a unified commitment to **community-driven, sustainable, and inclusive digital equity strategies**.
Here are some highlights from the discussion:

What community members said during the session....

"As a country w**e are really failing to accurately measure poverty, and to define affordability**. We really **need a better method for assessing affordability** in order to enable more informed and targeted digital equity interventions, fairer eligibility thresholds, [and] better resource allocation for communities that is really based on... **an actual modern measure**."
-Annie Kuklik, Director of Research and Impact at University of Washington

"We are really **focused on partnerships and creating... an innovation ecosystem** that addresses not only equity, policy, but also partnerships — whether that's nonprofits, local businesses, community members..."
-Molly Bendel, City of Bellevue

"We're **not just solely interested in measurements of bodies moving through the system**, but we want to know: **Are people better off** because they've come to us?"
-Jeremy Warren, Workforce Development Council

Session Nine Highlights

Regional and Community Coalitions
Walla Walla Community Council / Columbia Connects Coalition
- **Initiative:** Internet for All, a multi-year broadband access campaign.
- **Coalition:** Columbia Connects, with ~40 partners including nonprofits, schools, and government.
- **Notable Project:** Goodwill tech refurbishment and job training center.
- **Funding**: Submitted a $21M NTIA Digital Equity grant proposal (awarded and then cancelled).

Thriving Together NCW & NCW Tech Alliance
- **Region:** Chelan, Douglas, Grant, and Okanogan Counties.
- **Coalition:** NCW Digital Access and Equity Coalition with 50+ partners.
- **Focus:** Digital literacy, telehealth, infrastructure, and local advocacy**.**
- **Innovation:** Installed access points in senior centers and cafes.

Broadlinc (Broadband Public Development Authority)
- **Scope:** Spokane County
- **Approach:** Combines infrastructure with community-based digital support.
- **Philosophy:** Treats broadband as essential as utilities and food.

Assistive Technology and Disability-Focused Programs
Sensory Tool House (Lacey)
- **Grant Funded:** Washington Department of Commerce.
- **Focus:** Digital literacy and assistive tech for people with disabilities.
- **Goal:** Serve 1,200+ participants with ~$1,800 in AT per person by 2026.
- **Partners:** Timberland Regional Library and Thurston County Chamber.

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What community members said during the session....

"You **do need to have the infrastructure in place**. But that **doesn't mean that the access issues go away.**"
-Arianne Schmidt, Broadlinc PDA

"We may have the authority and resources to act, but r**eal impact happens at the local level — where the rubber meets the road. Places like libraries, WorkSource offices, Goodwill centers, and county health departments** — these are the spaces that have real credibility with the community. That **local trust is crucial when we're trying to create meaningful points of connectivity** — whether it's to serve veterans, like in our case, or any community we're trying to reach."
-Mark Sullivan, Program Director, Transition Readiness and Family Services, Washington Department of Veterans Affairs

"**Great work** that we're doing is **from a really collective impact model** of how do we create that shared agenda, and then recognize where everyone is at, and how can they **achieve it from the resources and the strengths that they have themselves**."
-Wendy Brzezny, Senior Director of Programs, Thriving Together NCW

"Our next step right now, **coming out of the Regional Digital Equity Coordination Session 8 session last wee**k, is to **start meeting with a regional coordination of this five-county region**. We're very fortunate in this region that we have so many other entities that cover the same region that **we're going to be able to lift off really, really quickly**."
-Cheryl Heywood, Director, Timberland Regional Library

Northwest Center for Assistive Technology Training (NW-CATT Program)
- **Scope:** K–12 support across Northwest region.
- **Model**: "Train the Trainer" for educators and parents.
- **Funding**: American Printing House for the Blind.

Public Institutions & Local Government
City of Bellevue
- **Initiative:** Inclusive Innovation Forum to build an inclusive digital ecosystem.
- **Focus:** Digital equity in housing, community engagement, and smart city policy.
- **Strategy:** Co-design with residents through public forums.

King County Housing Authority (KCHA)
- **Initiative:** Internal digital inclusion programs under ConnectHomeUSA.
- **Community Engagement:** Hosting participatory art workshops to inform digital planning.

Academic and Policy Organizations
University of Washington – Center for Women's Welfare
- **Tool:** Self-Sufficiency Standard for accurate affordability metrics.
- **Impact:** Better targeting of digital equity efforts vs. outdated poverty measures.

University of Washington Medicine – WA State Telehealth Collaborative
- **Status:** Ending June 30 due to budget constraints.
- **Legacy:** Provided digital health policy guidance and educational tools.
- **Continuity:** Support to be maintained via the Northwest Regional Telehealth Resource Center.

Workforce and Veterans Support
Workforce Development Council of Seattle–King County
- **Methodology:** Uses Self-Sufficiency Standard for planning and program eligibility.
- **Goal:** Serve individuals overlooked by federal poverty measures through inclusive, digitally enabled workforce programs.

WA Department of Veterans Affairs
- **Pilot Program:** Digital Navigators—delivered devices, training, and access to 1,200+ veterans.
- **Next Steps:** Transitioning to equipment lending, expanding through libraries and WorkSource offices.

Libraries as Equity Anchors
Timberland Regional Library (TRL)
- **Services:** Free Wi-Fi, extended access hours, iPads, printing, and digital literacy support.
- **Reach**: 5-county coverage, partnerships with 42 of 44 school districts.
- **Collaborations:** Tribal, city, and county efforts supporting FAFSA, legal aid, and workforce readiness**.**
- **Plan:** Lead regional coordination for future digital inclusion.

Key Cross-Cutting Themes
- **Localized Solutions:** Tailored strategies reflecting regional demographics and economic realities.
- **Cross-Sector Collaboration:** Broad partnerships spanning health, housing, education, libraries, nonprofits, and government.
- **Community-Centered Design:** Programs rooted in resident engagement and real-world affordability data.
- **Sustainability:** Emphasis on flexible, scalable models as funding landscapes shift.
- **Equity & Access as Essentials:** Framing broadband and digital skills as vital household needs.

Washington State
OFFICE OF EQUITY

COMMUNITY MEMBER STORY SHARING

Throughout the Regional Digital Equity Coordination Sessions, we heard directly from community members across a wide range of counties. They shared personal stories that highlight the challenges and opportunities surrounding digital equity in their lives.
Here are some of their experiences.

Ardith Bell-Bshara

Community Advocate

"As a member of a 55+ manufactured home community with about 75 homes, we face a wide range of abilities and inabilities when it comes to understanding digital services. Internet, cable, landlines, mobile phone plans, GHz and megabytes—that's a foreign language to most of us. We are the last generation that may or may not have become computer literate. **For many, a computer was always too expensive, and now, a cell phone is often the only access to the internet.**

Trying to navigate DISH, Xfinity, or other systems is overwhelming. Contracts, fees, and service terms change constantly. Xfinity and Comcast are especially expensive, and **many don't know how—or even where—to look for cheaper, basic packages**. A couple of public libraries—Oak Harbor and Coupeville—offer free digital literacy classes through Sno-Isle Libraries, and they are absolute gems. But too few people know about them or use them.

The biggest challenge? The people selling these services are fast-talking tech folks with little patience. **On Whidbey Island, we have to drive off-island to Mt. Vernon just to speak to someone in person. That's a huge effort—especially for elders without cars, in wheelchairs, or recovering from strokes**. Some have to arrange transit just to make the trip. Others are charged $90 for a service call—if they're already customers. That's outrageous. **I dream of every island in Island County having its own digital equity hub with real staff from Xfinity, DISH, and others to help us locally.**

Digital services are a gift—but they were designed to be bought and paid for. The companies made fortunes, while individuals and older couples like us live on fixed incomes. We didn't come here to play golf and shop. **We are mostly in our 70s and up, many in poor health. Some are full-time caregivers for spouses who might otherwise need memory care. Others live with or rely on their adult children. We're here because we sold our homes elsewhere and could only afford these manufactured homes**."
-Ardith Bell-Bshara

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COMMUNITY MEMBER STORY SHARING

Paige Dillard
Associate Librarian, Port Townsend

"I feel like every day **my work has a significant impact, even if it's just for one individual**. Today, for example, a 91-year-old woman came into the library with a brand-new Kindle her grandson had bought for her. She didn't know how to use it, so she turned to the library for help. I was able to set her up with an Amazon account, a library account, and a Libby account so she could borrow eBooks and audiobooks for free and read them on her Kindle. She called me "an expert" and said I "made it look so easy." She also shared that she used to be great with technology, but ever since her stroke she felt she had become "stupid." I gently told her that wasn't the case—her mind just worked differently now—and I was glad I could help. She left the library smiling and empowered.

Due to a lack of funding, I'm the only full-time staff member on our team. Right now, we offer one day of Tech Help, which makes a difference—but adding a second day would be even more impactful. **Unfortunately, with the many other "hats" I wear and limited staffing, my schedule doesn't allow for it.**

One of the biggest misconceptions about digital equity is the idea that people who "don't work well" with technology can't learn. Often, they assume it's too hard and just want someone to "do it for them." But unless someone is physically unable to follow steps, I take the time to teach them—step by step—how to use the tools themselves. That's where real confidence begins. **Promoting Tech Help and other digital equity services in the area is important and currently lacking. Affordability is another huge barrier**. For example, I pay $280 a month for high-speed internet where I live in Port Hadlock. I'm not even sure if I qualify for a more affordable option because of where my home is located and the limited-service providers available."
-Paige Dillard

Dr. Trevor Lane
Washington State University Extension, Digital Equity Dorum

"I have been in the technology adoption and digital divide arena professionally for 24 years. While I do not work on digital equity full time, it remains a significant part of my programs and service offerings. As a first-generation college graduate from a family that left the farm in search of new opportunities, I'm inspired to fight for digital equity.

To me, **digital equity means bridging the digital divide by improving access to devices, expanding broadband, and helping people understand digital service offerings**.

Some success in this space has come through **securing grant funding for digital navigators, tech changemakers, and upskilling initiatives—efforts that have made a real impact in tribal and rural communities.** Still, **funding remains a challenge, and greater transparency around where broadband expansion dollars** are being spent would be incredibly helpful."
-Dr. Trevor Lane

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Connecting Digital Equity Communities Statewide

COMMUNITY MEMBER STORY SHARING

Hanna Kliegman
President of the Board of the Okanogan Highlands Alliance

"Growing up in a rural, remote community, we faced major gaps in access to information and resources. **I believed that technology could level the playing field—if we could just increase access to people**.

Since the 1990s, I've been engaged in digital equity work, advocating for rural communities and helping secure K20 network access for our school district. Though now retired, I stay involved by working with my community and through the various boards I serve on.

One success story was bringing internet access to the Tonasket School District, a rural area in North Central Washington roughly the size of Rhode Island. We built out infrastructure, leveraging resources for workstations and eventually tablets and wireless. **Watching students and their families, faculty and staff share the resources which provided a springboard for them going forward.**

Initially, we were at the end of a one-way connection, so when service went down, there was no backup. Since then, a redundant ring has been built to improve network resiliency. The only provider serving my area—18 miles from Tonasket, adjacent to the National Forest on the edge of a farming hamlet—was satellite internet, which was poor quality, expensive, and limited. Recently, we secured Starlink, **which is a vast improvement but remains costly. Cell service is also limited; many homes lack cellular coverage, and vast stretches of roads have no service from any provider**."
-Hanna Kliegman

Teresa Barry
Project Coordinator for Adult Education, Northwest Community Action Center (NCAC)

"I began working on digital equity two years ago when NCAC partnered with Yakima Valley College to help our English as a Second Language (ESL) students—many of whom are Hispanic migrant farm workers living in poverty—attend YVC at no cost. We quickly encountered a barrier: an email address was required to enroll. Many students, even those with mobile phones, didn't have one or didn't know how to create one. **It was clear they were being excluded from opportunities that others with digital access take for granted.**

Through our adult education programs—including ESL and Citizenship classes—**we help students establish email accounts, which is often their first step toward broader access.** Once they gain basic English skills, they can move into our Citizenship class. I'm proud that many have become U.S. citizens and full members of our community—but many others still face barriers.

According to the **Digital Divide Index, over one-fifth of our community has no internet access, and nearly the same percentage lack a computer device**. In Yakima's Lower Valley, **high poverty levels mean that food and housing insecurities greatly overshadow digital inequalities. As a result, there is no active programming—or even a sense of urgency—to address this issue**."
-Teresa Barry

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BRIDGING
DIGITAL DIVIDES