



# FRANKLIN COUNTY DIGITAL EQUITY COALITION FRAMEWORK

March 2021







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# I. Introduction

In recent years, many Franklin County residents have effortlessly accessed the internet at home, work, school and throughout our communities. Yet, for a surprising percentage of our population, broadband access is elusive and not readily available in homes, apartments, shelters and other residential locations.

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic quickly laid bare the extent of the disparity and, specifically, the digital divide that exists between the “haves” and “have nots.” As schools closed for in-person instruction and businesses moved employees to work-at-home models in March 2020, the awareness and consequences of this long-time disparity became evident. Along with heat, electricity and water, in-home broadband access is the fourth utility that must be available for students to learn and thrive, businesses to remain nimble and competitive, seniors to take advantage of telehealth options, and a host of endless useful applications. Along with broadband adoption, many of our residents need devices, technical support and technology training to fully access internet services, educational resources, employment and the social aspects of the digital world.

In April 2020, a number of Franklin County organizations began participating in informal, virtual meetings to more closely examine the status of broadband challenges for area residents. Over time, this organic gathering has grown to include business, government, education, nonprofit and social sector representatives now known as the Franklin County Digital Equity Coalition. Thanks to the investment of The Columbus Foundation, an updated assessment of our region’s broadband assets and opportunities provided the Coalition with a guide for the short-, medium-, and long-term possibilities for increasing broadband adoption.

The Coalition continues to meet several times each month, and the momentum for this collective effort continues to increase. The shared digital equity challenges of 2020-21 created a determination to greatly reduce or eliminate the fixed broadband digital divide. This determination has permeated many communities and has captured the attention of local, state, and federal officials, who are proposing new funding for such efforts. The Coalition also recognizes and respects the significant investments made by numerous Internet Service Providers in our community. Internet Service Provider representatives have been engaged early and often to utilize their expertise and advice for Coalition activities on behalf of Franklin County residents.

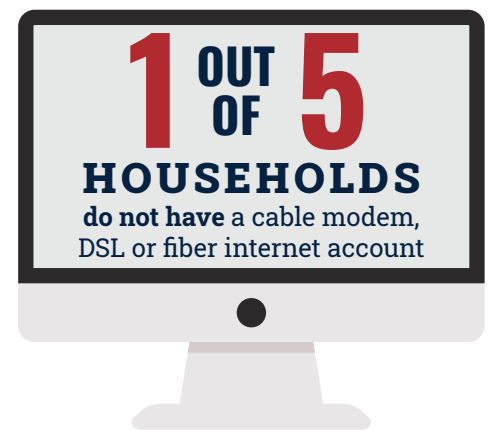
Together, the Franklin County Digital Equity Coalition has created the enclosed Digital Equity Framework for our community. This resource is meant to serve as a guide, and hopefully an inspiration, for digital equity efforts by Coalition members and any other groups or individuals in central Ohio working to create a more level digital playing field for all. The Coalition is committed to helping those in our community who exist without broadband today. And we stand ready to partner with those who share our passion.

*Franklin County Digital Equity Coalition, March 2021*

# II. Digital Equity Problem Statement

The internet has dramatically altered the ways in which people engage with the world around them, the way they communicate, learn, and access vital services and information on a daily basis. Over the past three decades, the speed and convenience in which individuals can exchange views, conduct business transactions, access healthcare and government services, and obtain other critical services has grown exponentially. For some the internet may feel like an ever-present resource, but a surprising number of Americans still do not have fixed broadband internet access.

Millions of Americans need support from digital equity programs to get connected with affordable home internet, find affordable computers and tablets, and learn basic digital skills. The Census' most recent American Community Survey (ACS) found that 108,000 of Franklin County's 522,000 households – one out of five – did not have a cable modem, digital subscriber line (DSL), or fiber Internet accounts in 2019. About 50,000 households – nearly 10% of all households in the county – had internet access only through a cellular data plan, and more than 48,000 Franklin County households had no home broadband subscriptions of any kind in 2019, including a cellular data plan.<sup>1</sup>



The lack of digital resources and connectivity is not evenly distributed, certain groups are more vulnerable and therefore negatively impacted by digital equity issues. Franklin County's unconnected households are disproportionately lower-income. Households with income below \$35,000 were about one-quarter of all Franklin County households in 2019, but they accounted for nearly 70% of those with no internet subscription.<sup>2</sup>

Older residents are especially likely to be unconnected. According to the ACS, about 12% of the county's "population in households" was 65 or older in 2019, but they accounted for nearly 30% of all residents who lacked a computer or home internet subscription.<sup>3</sup> In all, residents 65 and older were nearly three times more likely to lack a computer or home internet subscription than were residents under the age of 65.

There also are pronounced racial disparities in connectivity. Just 5.6% of White residents and 2.7% of Asian residents lived in households without a computer or home internet subscription, while 11.3% of Hispanic/Latino and 11.8% of Black/African American residents lack those resources.<sup>4</sup> The disparity is even more concerning among American Indian and Alaskan Native residents and those identifying as some other race – greater than 20% of residents in those two groups lack a computer or home internet subscription (24.6% and 22.7% respectively).<sup>5</sup>

**AGE 65+**  
account for nearly  
**30% OF ALL RESIDENTS**  
who lack computer or  
home internet subscription

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census, 2019 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, Table B28002  
<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census, 2019 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, Table B28004  
<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census, 2019 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, Table B28005  
<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census, 2019 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, Tables B28009A-I  
<sup>5</sup> U.S. Census, 2015-2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table B28009A-I.



The digital divide is often framed as a challenge faced primarily by rural areas, yet minorities in urban communities face similar challenges affording, obtaining, and maintaining residential broadband access. Minority communities are especially vulnerable to the impacts from a lack of broadband access, devices, digital literacy, and technical support. A 2016 study from the advocacy group Free Press found that systemic racial discrimination across multiple industries (including banking, housing, and credit) contributed to disparities in access and adoption.<sup>6</sup>

Other marginalized groups, such as immigrants, people with disabilities, those without stable housing and other historically underrepresented populations also suffer from digital inequities and the resulting lack of opportunities without residential broadband. These populations may face additional hurdles in accessing existing support networks and affordable, appropriate devices. In surveys, non-adopters of home internet cite multiple reasons for not adopting, with the most common reason being cost of internet and a computing device.<sup>7</sup> The additional reasons are interrelated – lack of digital skills and privacy concerns.



<sup>6</sup> Turner, S. Derek. Digital Denied: The Impact of Systemic Racial Discrimination on Home-Internet Adoption Free Press, December 2016. [https://www.freepress.net/sites/default/files/legacy-policy/digital\\_denied\\_free\\_press\\_report\\_december\\_2016.pdf](https://www.freepress.net/sites/default/files/legacy-policy/digital_denied_free_press_report_december_2016.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Horrigan, John. Measuring the Gap. National Digital Inclusion Alliance, February 2020, <https://www.digitalinclusion.org/measuring-the-gap/>.

# III. Collective Vision for Digital Equity

## *Franklin County Digital Equity Vision Statement*

To achieve digital equity through universal residential broadband adoption which includes **affordability**, **devices**, and **digital life skills training** and **technical support**, in order to ensure Franklin County residents have the tools necessary to support education, health, well-being, economic prosperity, and the ability to fully participate in society.

The Franklin County Digital Equity Coalition believes this vision can be achieved through a coordinated **community response and collaboration**, as well as an effective **advocacy** strategy.





# IV. Current State of Digital Equity in Franklin County

## 1. Broadband Affordability

Unlike many exurban and rural areas across Ohio, fixed, in-home broadband internet service is generally available to any resident living in Franklin County – meaning that the infrastructure and service offerings exist from one or more internet service providers (ISPs). In fact, a report commissioned by The Columbus Foundation on broadband access in the City of Columbus found that “even in economically challenged neighborhoods, one or more high-speed internet providers is available . . .”<sup>8</sup> While service is available to nearly every resident, ISP provider options can be quite limited, particularly in low-income areas. Two providers, AT&T and Spectrum, hold the vast majority of the residential broadband market in Franklin County, and WOW! is the only other ISP with a meaningful percent of market share.

Despite ubiquitous coverage, the cost of broadband service remains a barrier.

Despite ubiquitous coverage, the cost of broadband service remains a barrier for many households, particularly where provider options are limited. A 2019 blog post by the Benton Institute for Broadband and Society cites two separate studies that suggest ability to pay is a key factor in deciding on broadband adoption for those with a limited budget.<sup>9</sup> The standard price for broadband service throughout Franklin County ranges from about \$45 per month to over \$100 per month, not including taxes, fees, and equipment charges. Residents in multi-family units often are subject to exclusivity agreements enacted by the property owner also. These agreements limit the choice of the building’s residents to a single ISP, effectively eliminating competition and the ability to shop around for more affordable broadband options.

Standard price for broadband service

**\$45-\$100**

per month, not including taxes, fees and equipment charges.

Yet even the lower end of the market rate offerings from ISPs are unaffordable to a large number of Franklin County households. There only are a few discount broadband options available to qualified households based on income or participation in other government assistance programs. The discount offerings available to Franklin County residents are:

- Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Lifeline Program: offers a \$9.25 monthly discount on phone or internet service, including broadband service
- FCC Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) Program: while short-term in nature as a response to COVID-19, the EBB provides up to \$50 per month toward the cost of broadband service
- AT&T Access: provides up to 25 Mbps broadband service with in-home Wi-Fi for \$10 per month
- Spectrum Internet Assist: provides up to 30 Mbps broadband service for \$17.99 per month

<sup>8</sup> Broadband Access in City of Columbus, Ohio. The Columbus Foundation, June 2020. <https://columbusfoundation.org/umbraco-media/6661/broadband-access-in-city-of-columbus-2020-06-30.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> The Ability to Pay for Broadband. Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, June 2019. <https://www.benton.org/blog/ability-pay-broadband>

These are valuable programs that make home broadband attainable for many households that otherwise could not afford it. Unfortunately, they tend to be underutilized due to a combination of onerous eligibility and verification requirements and low levels of awareness among those who would benefit from them. During the COVID-19 pandemic, both AT&T and Spectrum have increased outreach efforts for their discount internet offerings.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the sudden need for remote work and education, several local initiatives have been developed in response to the increased urgency for broadband access.

- Central Ohio Broadband Access Pilot Program: A partnership between the Educational Service Center of Central Ohio, Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC), and PCs for People to offer hotspot devices and a one-year unlimited data plan to eligible central Ohio households with a K-12 student for a onetime cost of \$20.
- City of Columbus and Smart Columbus Pilot Projects: The pilots are developing two neighborhood-scale low-cost internet offerings to test service quality, economic viability, and scalability. Each pilot is in a different Columbus neighborhood (Near East and South Side), utilizes a different emerging technology, and partners with a different provider; both pilots are targeting to serve a minimum 100 households with 50 Mbps service for approximately \$15 per month.



While these programs are temporary in nature, they are providing affordable options for households that previously lacked service at a time when it is most needed. Equally important, they have elevated the affordability issue with policymakers and funders, pushed existing ISPs to improve their offerings, and have introduced new models for providing low-income residents with affordable broadband service. The City of Columbus and Smart Columbus pilot projects, in particular, represent exciting opportunities to introduce new, scalable, low-cost options into the market in Franklin County.

## 2. Device Access

The lowest cost option to provide computers to households in need is by using refurbished devices. PCs for People, a national nonprofit with an Ohio office in Cleveland, refurbishes used digital devices and makes them available to low-income families at very low cost – \$60-\$100 for desktop computers and \$100-\$250 for laptops. The computers are typically donated by local companies and public agencies, which has the added benefit of creating community partnerships and keeping technology waste out of landfills.

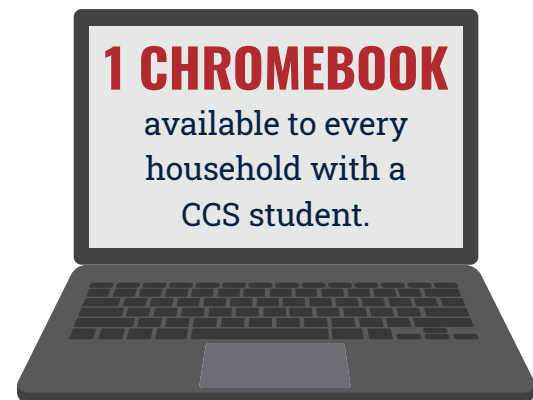




In response to the COVID-19 shutdowns in the spring of 2020, members of the 2020 Leadership Columbus class connected with PCs for People to provide refurbished computers to low-income families in central Ohio. Seeded with donated computers from Columbus Metropolitan Library, three computer distribution events were held in May and June through which approximately 500 computers were distributed. A grant from the Columbus Metropolitan Library Foundation reduced the \$80 cost of the computers to \$20 for eligible families.

Building on the partnership with PCs for People, the Central Ohio Broadband Access Pilot Program expanded the refurbished computer distribution effort. Grants from the City of Columbus, Franklin County, and multiple corporate funders made desktop computers available for \$20 and laptops available for \$50 to low-income families with K-12 students across central Ohio. The program has also expanded the corporate computer donation efforts, with approximately two dozen local organizations having donated computers to date.

With a separate grant from the City of Columbus, the Columbus City School (CCS) District obtained enough Chromebooks to make one available to every household with a CCS student. Similarly, several other school districts have developed one-to-one device strategies to provide every student with a digital device. While these school district programs are key to getting devices into the hands of students, they have to be returned to the schools and generally have restrictions on software and internet access, meaning they are limited in addressing the other digital access needs of the household. In addition to the limitations imposed due to the devices belonging to the school, because they were purchased with one-time funds makes it unlikely that plans are in place for funding a refresh of outdated devices in the future. This often is not a sustainable model beyond the lifecycle of the devices purchased during the pandemic.



There is not currently a digital device vendor or refurbisher located in Franklin County that caters to low-income residents, although PCs for People does offer online sales and ships nationwide. While Franklin County residents can purchase devices through this site, the lack of a physical presence is a barrier for many potential users, especially those lacking the skills or comfort to purchase a device online. Additionally, all devices donated by local partners are currently transported to Cleveland for refurbishing, which misses an opportunity to create new technology industry jobs for varying skill levels in Franklin County.

It is important to note that brand new laptops can be purchased for under \$200 at many retailers, which means the process of refurbishing and distributing an old device can ultimately add up to the equivalent cost of a new device. There is value in exploring the possibility of connecting with tech vendors to pursue partnerships that allow bulk purchases of new devices, which may result in receiving discounts at scale. Additionally, the lifecycle of the new technology will be longer than a refurbished device. Purchasing and distributing new devices in bulk also would help streamline technology skills training and support for fewer types of devices rather than supporting a patchwork of different donated equipment.

### ***3. Digital Life Skills and Technical Support***

Across Franklin County, myriad organizations offer a variety of digital life skills training. This training includes basic computer literacy and navigation courses, call-center assistance for operating a device, lessons on using Microsoft applications, and more. Moving forward, it will be necessary to include education on how to evaluate the credibility of the information encountered online to avoid scams, identify accurate resources, and prevent the spread of disinformation. Digital literacy training, specific skill-building classes, and technical support are currently provided by numerous libraries, nonprofits, educational institutions, and community-based organizations.

To date, these efforts have generally been disjointed, with each provider offering services that align with their expertise and capacity, or focusing on the specific needs of their clientele. There has not yet been an effort made to systematically inventory the types of digital life skills and technical support services that are offered by different types of organizations across different sectors in Franklin County. Without such an inventory, it is difficult to know if there are redundant efforts across organizations or if certain needs are going unmet, and it is impossible to create an efficient and coordinated network of support services.

For residents seeking support, it is unclear where to go. Many turn to trusted resources such as CML or the 2-1-1 system for referrals, but without an inventory of available resources, any referrals from someone serving as a system navigator is likely to be based on that individual's first-hand knowledge or resources, which may be limited.

### ***4. Community Response and Collaboration***

The issue of digital equity has been a growing one for numerous organizations in Franklin County for the past several years, and many have been working to close the digital divide even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite recognition of the issue, efforts toward a coordinated



community approach have only begun to develop recently. In August 2019, as part of The Columbus Foundation's Big Table event, MORPC and the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) hosted a conversation about digital equity in Central Ohio. Attendees included CML, Smart Columbus, Goodwill Columbus, the Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center, and Ice Miller. Several points of consensus emerged from that initial discussion:

- Digital equity is a significant and growing priority for each of the participating organizations.
- There was little, if any, coordination happening across organizations.
- There was an appetite to meet on a regular basis to discuss needs, share strategies, and begin building a digital equity coalition.

Following the Big Table discussion, several members of the 2020 Leadership Columbus program partnered with NDIA to address digital equity as a community impact project. The project began in January 2020 with a pair of gatherings designed to spur broad community conversation about digital equity. In all, more than 50 attendees representing more than 40 different organizations participated in the two gatherings. Input was then analyzed and categorized into a set of needs and opportunities to be addressed by the newly formed Columbus Digital Inclusion Coalition. It was at this time the COVID-19 shutdowns went into effect and in-person meetings were cancelled. An active email listserv was maintained for a time (and remains available), but activity tapered.

The subsequent closure of public libraries across Franklin County substantially reduced public access to computers and free Wi-Fi as the need was growing exponentially. The transition to virtual home learning for students combined with the increase in employees working from home quickly escalated the digital equity challenges even further. Primarily initiated by CML and The Columbus Foundation, several organizations began holding weekly calls in April 2020 to gather information and discuss the need for a community response to the digital equity needs being exacerbated by COVID-19. Loosely referred to as the Franklin County Broadband Working Group, this group continued to meet throughout 2020, growing to nearly 40 participants and more than 20 organizations. Over the course of 2020, the group's focus evolved beyond just the COVID-19 response and towards addressing the longer-term digital equity needs that existed in the community prior to the pandemic – and that will persist after it is over.



There is clear recognition of the need for organized and sustained efforts to develop the systems, human capital, and infrastructure investment necessary to achieve digital equity. The commitment to ongoing participation from so many organizations also is a clear demonstration



that there are willing partners to engage in this work. While the collaboration efforts to date have developed organically, the Franklin County Digital Equity Coalition (renamed from the Franklin County Broadband Working Group) is well-positioned to drive the work forward through its newly defined organizational structure, agreed-upon goals, and digital equity vision.

## ***5. Effective Advocacy for Broadband Funding and Policy***

Many Franklin County organizations are currently involved in local, state, and federal advocacy efforts around broadband access, affordability, and funding. However, as with digital life skills and tech support programs, most of this work has been ad hoc and siloed to date, with little coordination among organizations. At best, this creates disjointed messaging to policymakers, and at worst it leads to competition for scarce resources and contradictory advocacy work.

Currently, ISPs dominate the conversation with state and federal legislators regarding broadband policy and digital equity. While ISPs are important partners in this work, they represent a singular perspective. National organizations such as NDIA and the Schools, Health & Libraries Broadband Coalition advocate for digital equity at the federal level, but there is currently no unified voice representing the digital equity interests of Franklin County residents. Work is underway to brief elected officials and key staff members at all levels of government around the projects and initiatives taking place in Central Ohio. Structuring these individual efforts into an effective and unified advocacy strategy is key to achieving the vision and goals outlined in this framework.



# V. Implementation

## 1. Broadband Affordability

Without home internet, many people are forced to employ a patchwork approach to accessing the online resources they need. Public Wi-Fi at libraries, community-based organizations and businesses, or borrowing access at a friend's, neighbor's, or family member's home, are often the best available options. However, these solutions have serious drawbacks: it can be time-consuming and challenging to arrange, availability is restricted to certain hours and time limits may apply, and these options lack the privacy and dignity that those with home internet take for granted. The COVID-19 pandemic also has demonstrated the impracticality of using public Wi-Fi or other alternative options for critical uses such as remote education and work, both of which can have high bandwidth needs and require prolonged access. Affordable, reliable home broadband for every Franklin County household is imperative in order to achieve digital equity.

**GOAL: Expand the affordable, reliable, high-speed home internet options for Franklin County residents at all income levels.** This includes increasing the use and quality of internet service provider (ISP) discount offerings, turning municipal and neighborhood-scale pilots into scalable solutions, and continuing to pursue new technology and policy innovations.

### STRATEGIES:

- Gather more accurate and granular data on broadband coverage and adoption rates throughout Franklin County. A combination of technical solutions, such as crowdsourced speed test data, and community surveys will provide a clearer understanding of broadband coverage and service, and the experiences and priorities of Franklin County residents.
- Work with ISPs to increase enrollment in the existing discount broadband offerings available to low-income residents through concerted efforts to improve the availability, awareness, and quality of these offerings.
- Evaluate the current neighborhood scale pilot projects initiated by the City of Columbus and Smart Columbus for economic viability and scalability, and, as appropriate, develop a plan to extend service to new areas of Franklin County.
- Increase the number of provider options available to residential broadband customers in Franklin County by actively encouraging new providers to enter the market. This should include a range of provider models and scales, including for-profit providers offering service across Franklin County as well as nonprofit and community-based groups developing neighborhood scale services.

## 2. Device Access

Having an appropriate device to access the internet is as important as the access itself. Rather than “making do” with the most readily or only available device, all residents should have access to a device that meets their needs.

Low-income residents are much more likely to rely upon a mobile phone as their only computing device.<sup>10</sup> While mobile devices offer convenience and are useful for intermittent internet access, they generally do not meet the needs of remote work or school, and relying on them as the sole source of access can significantly limit a person’s ability to engage with digital resources.

The cost of a desktop, laptop, or even a tablet is a substantial expense for many low-income households. This often means that when a device is purchased, it must last for several years, often beyond the point of becoming obsolete. The inability to maintain hardware and software at the pace of advancing technology can also severely constrain digital access.

Many households also rely on using devices issued through school or work as a means of accessing digital resources. While they may functionally be the “right tool for the job,” the lack of ownership comes with drawbacks as well, including usage and access restrictions, lack of privacy and ability to store content, and personal risk or liability for misuse of the device. As with broadband service, it is critical to provide every household members with the ability to obtain devices that meet their specific digital needs.

**GOAL: Create a sustainable stream of high-quality digital devices that are available at low-cost to Franklin County residents at all income levels.** This should include a combination of new and refurbished devices. The device refurbishing strategy should emphasize sourcing from local public and private sector partners, and local job creation.

### STRATEGIES:

- Convert the strong corporate and public sector emergency computer donation response during COVID-19 into a reliable stream of devices for refurbishing through commitments to ongoing donations as a part of organizational technology refresh policies.
- Establish a computer refurbishing program in Franklin County that focuses on sourcing devices locally and creating tech industry jobs for Franklin County residents. This program could be an expansion of services provided by an existing partner like PCs for People or a new social enterprise.
- Pursue partnerships with technology companies that may provide for bulk purchasing of new devices and receiving a discount at scale.

<sup>10</sup> Anderson, Monica. Mobile Technology and Home Broadband 2019. Pew Research Center, June 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2019/06/13/mobile-technology-and-home-broadband-2019/>.



### 3. Digital Life Skills and Technical Support

Without users having the skills necessary to leverage digital devices and high-speed internet, access to these resources means little and progress toward digital equity will remain elusive. As previously noted, low digital literacy and a lack of comfort with using technology can contribute to low broadband adoption rates, particularly among certain groups such as older adults.<sup>11</sup> A variety of skill-building and technical support resources are key to digital equity efforts; from basic supports like troubleshooting, internet searching, and establishing an email account to technical training and professional development support for those interested in tech careers.

It is also important to recognize the fact that, as other goals are achieved, more Franklin County households will need support. As more households receive home internet service and computers, they also will need digital literacy training and technical support. These services are labor intensive. Apps alone cannot solve the digital literacy divide. One-on-one support (in-person or virtual) can lead to a community member then being able to take advantage of online digital literacy classes and tutorials. Now, more than ever before, trust is essential to digital inclusion work. Digital navigators are needed to provide guidance, and must be from trusted organizations.

**GOAL: Implement an integrated digital life skills/technical support network to assist individuals across the digital literacy spectrum, with specific programming for users with unique support needs.**

#### STRATEGIES:

- Undertake a systematic asset mapping approach to develop an inventory of digital life skills and technical support services being offered by various providers throughout Franklin County. The inventory should be developed and organized such that it encompasses training and support service offerings across the range technology skill levels and across sectors. Beyond an assessment of existing service offerings, the inventory should be an evolving resource that is maintained as an online database and mapping system, and that serves as a reference for residents, service providers, and system navigators.
- Once the asset inventory is complete, a gap and equity analysis should be conducted to identify what support needs and populations are being underserved and where redundancies and opportunities for collaboration might exist. This will serve as a first step in moving from individual organizations working in siloes to a coordinated service delivery approach.
- Develop an integrated service delivery model that optimizes the strengths and offerings of different providers and that utilizes system navigators to connect residents to the digital life skills and technical support resources for their needs. A robust inventory and ongoing coordination between different service providers make it possible to reduce inefficiencies and develop complementary offerings across multiple organizations. This strategy also enables a stepped approach to digital skill building that goes from the most basic digital literacy to tech sector career development training, and that includes multiple entry points and credentialing opportunities along the way.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson, Monica and Andrew Perrin. Tech Adoption Climbs Among Older Adults. Pew Research Center, May 2017. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2017/05/17/tech-adoption-climbs-among-older-adults/>

## 4. Community Response and Collaboration

Similar to other community priorities, addressing digital equity is complex and intersectional. However, in recent years access to digital resources, high-speed internet in particular, has become uniquely integral to most aspects of our lives in a way that few other resources are; a fact that has been made even more clear during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our employment, education, access to key services, and social connections all are increasingly reliant on having fast and reliable internet service.

Beyond the importance of digital access in our daily lives, the digital equity work itself requires broad diversity of skills and expertise, including infrastructure planning and development, telecommunications, public-private partnerships, device procurement and distribution, direct service provision, education and technical support, policymaking, and funding development, among others. As such, a multi-faceted community response is necessary in order for digital equity efforts to succeed. A range of community partners working collaboratively toward the shared goals outlined in this plan will leverage the strengths of various partners, extend organizational capacities, and make efficient use of available resources.

**GOAL: Establish an organized and sustained Franklin County Digital Inclusion Coalition.**

### **STRATEGIES:**

- Identify a small group of lead organizations to form a steering committee responsible for outlining the coalition structure and managing ongoing logistics. While the Coalition should be as inclusive as possible, organizational elements such as bylaws, guidelines for membership, and agenda-setting for meetings are necessary to provide clarity and ensure progress toward the shared goals outlined in this framework. Additionally, there will need to be a process for updating and refining this framework as the work of the Coalition evolves.
- Establish a cadence and structure for future Coalition meetings, and establish Working Groups to make progress on each of the framework goals. As this is intended to be a broad Coalition, thought should be given to how organizations with varying expertise and individuals in different roles can meaningfully participate in the Coalition and its working groups.
- Produce consistent messaging and conduct outreach to potential Coalition members. Given the increased focus on digital equity and the number of recent initiatives, it will be important to have clear and consistent messaging about the purpose of the Coalition and how it builds on or relates to other efforts that are underway. Outreach should begin with organizations that have been engaged in the recent digital equity efforts.
- Develop strategies to ensure the Franklin County Digital Equity Coalition and its Working Groups proactively engage those most affected by digital equity issues in discussions that inform and influence the Coalition's work. This work will be most successful when it is shaped by diverse voices and perspectives, and when strategies are directly informed by the residents for whom they are intended. This requires proactive identification and outreach to groups that may not currently be engaged in the Coalition's work, and ongoing assessment of who is missing from the conversation.

## 5. Effective Advocacy for Broadband Funding and Policy

A shared set of digital equity goals is important to ensure aligned efforts among the partner organizations. In addition to supporting collaboration, the way these are articulated throughout the community and to external audiences is key to making progress. As the digital equity work in Franklin County evolves, it will be necessary to clearly communicate the needs and priorities to community members, decision makers, and potential partners. It also is critical to ensure a unified voice before local, state, and federal policymakers and funders about the digital equity needs in Franklin County.

**GOAL: Develop a unified advocacy strategy** to educate partners on gaps and opportunities in digital equity and broadband access, and to advocate collectively for effective broadband policy and government, philanthropic, and private funding support that will enable the Coalition to develop innovative solutions to serve Franklin County.

### STRATEGIES:

- Engage the Columbus Region Coalition to include broadband as a consistent messaging point in meetings with elected officials.
- Identify and leverage the existing policy positions and established organizational goals for digital equity work among partner organizations. Examples include the MORPC Regional Public Policy and Regional Data Agendas, the YWCA of Central Ohio advocacy agenda, and the state of Ohio Broadband Strategy.
- Align advocacy efforts with NDIA and the Schools, Health & Libraries Broadband Coalition.
- Actively monitor state and federal policy proposals and funding opportunities, particularly new opportunities under the Biden administration and the Federal Communications Commission. It will be critical to maintain a list of priority projects and programs that may be eligible for new funding opportunities.
- Utilize local policymakers to help ensure broadband is a priority with state and national organizations. Examples include the U.S. Conference of Mayors, National League of Cities, Ohio Municipal League, National Association of Counties, Ohio Association of Regional Councils, and National Association of Regional Councils.



# VI. Evaluation

Achieving the vision of universal broadband adoption in Franklin County is an ambitious and complex undertaking, and in most cases progress will occur incrementally. To help align and contextualize the work of the Coalition members and various other partners, it is important to maintain an understanding of where we've been, where we are, and where we're going.

The five goals outlined in this framework provide organization for the work by breaking the broad challenge of digital equity into defined issues that can be addressed by the Working Groups through various strategies. However, these goals are too broad to meaningfully track impact in a way that can inform ongoing work and strategy development. Therefore, it is important to establish a set of agreed-upon outcomes that can be used to evaluate progress through specific metrics.

The Working Groups assigned to pursue each goal will be responsible for defining how impact will be measured and establishing a set of indicators to track progress. While the Working Groups will develop the impact metrics for their goal and strategies, they will ideally be developed in a way that allows for an overall evaluation of outcomes as well. For example, two separate strategies could simply track the number of K-12 households that gain broadband service through a program and the number to whom computers are distributed. While these are useful output measures, an outcome-oriented metric, such as the percent of K-12 students in Franklin County who are able to engage with digital education resources, is a more meaningful measure of success. This level of deeper evaluation is the only way to truly understand the impacts of the Coalition's work, and will require coordination across multiple goals and strategies.



# FRANKLIN COUNTY DIGITAL EQUITY COALITION

(as of March 1, 2021)

## Steering Committee

Columbus Metropolitan Library, co-chair  
Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission, co-chair  
City of Columbus  
Columbus State Community College  
Jewish Family Services  
National Digital Inclusion Alliance  
Partners Achieving Community Transformation (PACT)/OSU Wexner Medical Center  
Smart Columbus  
The Columbus Foundation  
YWCA Columbus

## Member Organizations

AECOM  
Affordable Housing Alliance of Central Ohio  
Broadband Ohio  
Central Ohio Primary Care  
Central Ohio Transit Authority  
City of Dublin  
Columbus City Council  
Columbus City Schools  
Columbus Metropolitan Housing Association  
Franklin County Board of Commissioners  
Franklin County Department of Jobs and Family Services  
Goodwill Columbus  
Heartland Bank  
OhioMeansJobs  
One Columbus  
Renter Mentor  
The Ohio State University  
The Wells Foundation  
Workforce Development Board of Central Ohio