



Monroe County Digital Inclusion Plan



Digital Inclusion Plan

Summary

Monroe County is positioned well to accelerate its digital inclusivity thanks to committed stakeholders, community leadership, and a digital infrastructure that offers, generally speaking, broad internet coverage. However, there is still room for improvement with access to broadband, as well as a great need for better affordability and digital skills. The following goals and strategies have been identified as priorities for advancing digital inclusion in Monroe County. This is a living document and should be reviewed regularly in light of rapidly changing policies and industry innovations.

In addition to the list below, the county plan should complement and support the City of Bloomington's Digital Equity Strategic Plan Recommendations. These plans can work in tandem, particularly where there is overlap in goals such as coalition building, devices, and training.

This plan will be spearheaded by a Digital Inclusion Coordinator through Regional Opportunity Initiatives. The Coordinator will partner with key stakeholders mentioned below and members of the County Digital Advisory Team as needed to achieve the outlined goals and strategies.

Goals & Strategies

Goal 1: Strive to establish and sustain a digital equity ecosystem (Note: digital equity ecosystems are defined as the interactions between individuals, populations, and their larger socioeconomic and technical environments that play a role in shaping digital inclusion work).

See the City of Bloomington's Digital Equity Strategic Plan to complement and coordinate on this strategy.

Strategy 1a) Establish a permanent community partnership of digital inclusion stakeholders. A durable organization is needed to engage with individuals and potential partners to advance digital inclusion, maintain momentum, and support initiative implementation. Identify coalition organization(s) who can support funding a paid coordinator position to facilitate. Consider social service organizations, the Trades District, Tech Center, and the Monroe County Public Library as potential housing organizations.

Strategy 1b) As a subgroup of the permanent community coalition, create a County broadband infrastructure task force, in order to focus on and advocate for broadband inclusion for unserved and underserved rural areas in Monroe County.



Strategy 1c) The permanent community partnership should research the possibility of using American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Funds to support a county Community Digital Navigator position, which would work in tandem with ROI's Digital Inclusion Coordinator to execute and facilitate the additional strategies below.

Strategy 1d) Conduct a "map and gap" exercise to identify inventory of a) facilities conducive to digital literacy workshops; b) businesses and organization donating devices; c) existing digital literacy workshops and topics available; d) funding streams to support digital inclusion initiatives.

Strategy 1e) Establish a communication/resource hub for the inventory in the above areas from the map and gap process with an identified process for keeping information updated.

Strategy 1f) Formalize tech savvy volunteer corps by establishing a recruiting, management, and mentorship system as well as providing continuous funding. Utilize SCORE volunteers via the Chamber of Commerce to assist/facilitate as well as the volunteer pool from the Monroe Public Library, which is already engaged in digital literacy training.

Strategy 1g) Ensure that digital inclusion is a community and economic development priority in addition to a social justice issue.

Goal 2: Build/upgrade affordable and adequate broadband connectivity throughout the community and improve adoption

Strategy 2a) Expand the use of County Infrastructure Development Zones (IDZ), in order to reduce the cost of providing broadband in the rural areas. Promote this program continue building broadband in rural areas (i.e., Smithville's effort along SR 45 and SCI REMC's in the northern part of Monroe County). Consider asking for IDZs to be county-wide.

Strategy 2b) Design and implement an awareness campaign of discounted service plans and subsidy programs, both public and private, including Internet Essentials by Comcast, AT&T's Access Program, the US Lifeline program, and the Emergency Broadband Benefit to increase adoption among community residents, businesses, and organizations. This includes:



- Identifying the barriers to adoption for those populations most underserved, including low-income residents, seniors, veterans, and rural residents.
- Identifying trusted partners who could identify the most effective ways to inform and promote these programs amongst the target populations (schools, social service agencies, faith communities, etc.). Equip these partners to be involved in the awareness campaign with informational materials, basic training on the resources available for their constituencies, and possibly as host sites for digital literacy and/or subsidy program sign-up events.
- Create (or deploy an existing resource) a promotional tool that clearly outlines eligibility for subsidy programs that can be difficult for customers to navigate, such as the Emergency Broadband Benefit. Share the tool with providers to make eligibility verification easier.

Strategy 2c) Identify the small rural pockets that may not be cost-effective for private providers to cover. Explore pilot programs with wireless technology that could offer solutions for these areas, such as Low Earth Orbit (LEO) Satellite or local wireless loops. Encourage all residents, particularly those without service, to do the GEO Partners speed test on the ROI website.

Strategy 2d) Identify funding options through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), READI, or the Indiana Next Level Connections, along with any other current/future state and federal broadband funding sources and advocate for specific unserved/underserved areas in Monroe County to be included in funding applications and proposals.

Strategy 2e) Engage Township Trustees and others to identify publicly-owned properties that do not yet, but could cost-effectively provide public wireless access for temporary access or outdoor work space. (Examples of similar efforts include Marci Jane Lewis Park in Richland Township and the Smithville hotspot at the Monroe County Fairgrounds)

Goal 3: Ensure residents have access to quality and reliable devices. See the City of Bloomington's Digital Equity Strategic Plan to complement and coordinate on this strategy.

Strategy 3a) Bring together key stakeholders including City of Bloomington, County, MCCSC, RBB, IU, Monroe County Public Library, etc. to coordinate efforts to address the challenge of access to devices when children are out of school (and loaned devices from



the schools are turned in). Ask school systems to consider a pilot summer device loaner program to test demand and utilization.

Strategy 3b) Research and secure funding opportunities to purchase sufficient data plans for school districts to provide to children during the school year.

Strategy 3c) Support existing device loan programs and explore establishing new ones specifically for telehealth. Partner with nonprofits, healthcare providers, IU Health, Monroe County Public Library, Veterans Affairs, etc. to assess gaps and identify solutions.

Goal 4: Improve digital literacy and skills among all residents. See the City of Bloomington's Digital Equity Strategic Plan to complement and coordinate on this strategy.

Strategy 4a) Inventory existing digital literacy workshops and classes (as referenced in Strategy 1d) to identify gaps and niches to be filled including but not limited to efforts conducted by schools, nonprofits, community colleges, local economic development organizations, etc.

Strategy 4b) Once existing efforts are identified, jointly develop a schedule to offer frequent workshops for free or at a discounted price targeting multiple groups in the community. For example, a group of tech savvy volunteers can help conduct these workshops in addition to existing teaching and faculty. Partner with the Monroe County Library, which may be able to offer both workshops and volunteers/trainers.

Strategy 4c) Create digital literacy workshops or community "helpdesk" tech support for elder populations specifically. Consider both funded and volunteer positions for the helpdesk. See Strategy 1f. Partner with Area 10 Agency on Aging, retirement facilities, VA, etc. to implement.

Goal 5: Integrate digital inclusion strategies into community, economic, and workforce development.

Strategy 5a) Map and gap the inventory of digital trainings and toolkits specifically for local businesses. (See Strategy 1d) In partnership with BEDC, Chamber of Commerce, Ellettsville Main Street, IU Service Learning courses and others, develop trainings,



consulting services, and support programs to help local businesses increase and improve their online presence as needed to address gaps.

Strategy 5b) Convene stakeholders related to telehealth (IU Health, Centerstone, Catholic Charities, HealthNet Bloomington, etc.) to understand existing resources and challenges. Institutionalize connections between this sector and the broader digital equity ecosystem.

