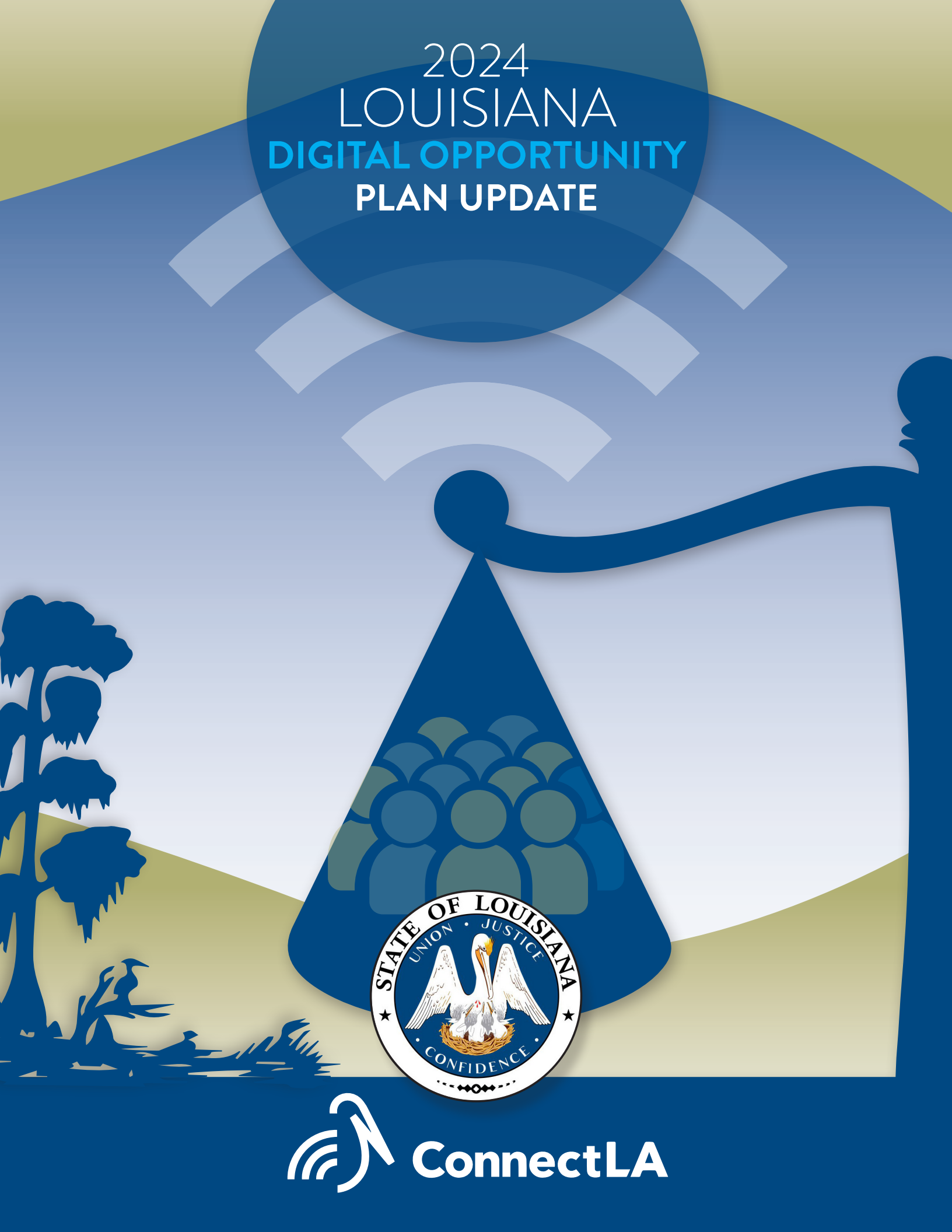


2024
LOUISIANA
DIGITAL OPPORTUNITY
PLAN UPDATE



ConnectLA



A MESSAGE FROM CONNECT LA:

Many assume the key to eliminating the digital divide is simply providing residents with the infrastructure to access the internet. However, if there is anything that the last few years has taught us, it is how flawed that line of thinking really is.

The most important thing we want to emphasize to stakeholders is that the digital divide is not a monolith. Each of Louisiana's 64 parishes and hundreds of communities has its own unique challenges. Farmers have different barriers from educators, and educators have different barriers from tribal communities. We have even compiled many of these stories throughout the years and published them on our website, Digital Opportunity - Connect Louisiana (la.gov), and will be sharing even more over the next few months to highlight this challenge.

We are extremely grateful for the community, academic and governmental leaders throughout the state who have opened their doors to us and shared how the digital divide is affecting their communities. To tackle these obstacles and expand digital opportunity, we have partnered with a wide-ranging coalition, including Higher Education Commissioner Kim Hunter Reed and the Louisiana Board of Regents, the Blanco Public Policy Center, colleges and universities such as Southern University and Grambling University and planning commissions throughout the state.

This plan outlines Louisiana's first coordinated effort to assess the state's digital divide and expand digital opportunity in Louisiana.



DIGITAL DIVIDE:

*the gap between those who have affordable access, skills and support to effectively engage online and those who do **not***



DIGITAL OPPORTUNITY:

all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society

DIGITAL OPPORTUNITY



INTRODUCTION & VISION

INTRODUCTION

This plan outlines Louisiana's first coordinated effort to assess the state's digital divide and expand digital opportunity in the state of Louisiana. According to the National Digital Inclusion Alliance, the digital divide is the gap between those who have affordable access, skills and support to effectively engage online and those who do not. Addressing this gap will expand digital opportunity in the state of Louisiana. This is in line with the NDIA's vision that all persons have the opportunity to use technology to learn, work, and thrive.

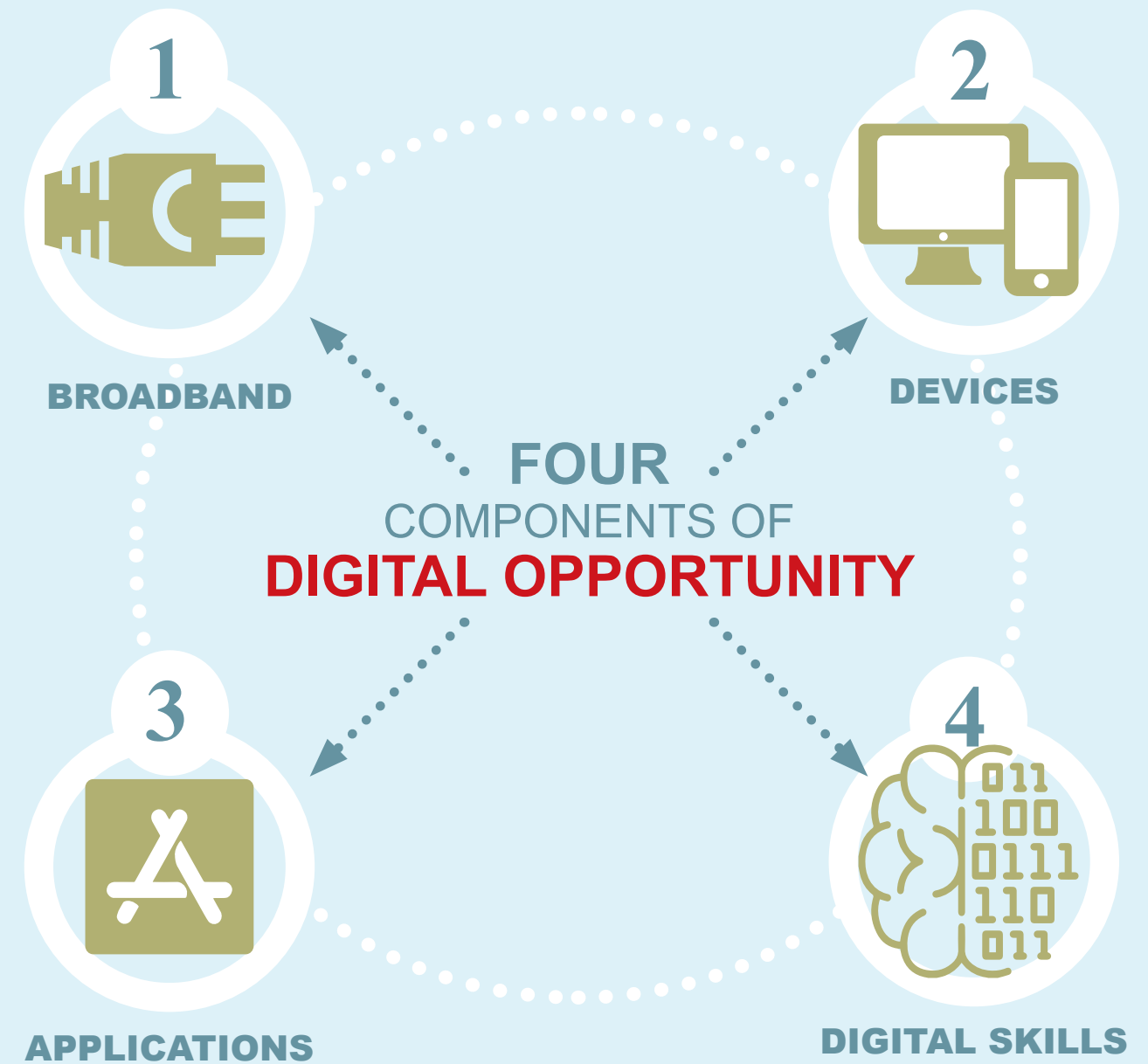
STRATEGY & OBJECTIVES

This section identifies Louisiana's primary goals related to digital opportunity including broadband availability and affordability, device availability and affordability, online accessibility and inclusivity, digital skills and online privacy and cybersecurity. For each goal, Louisiana has identified key strategies that will help the state improve opportunity for covered populations within each dimension of digital opportunity as well as one or more key performance indicator(s) that will be used to track progress toward achieving the goal. More information is available on the key strategies on page 25 and on the performance indicators in the full 2023 plan.

VISION

Louisiana's vision is expanding digital opportunity to all residents and communities. Digital opportunity for Louisiana means that all residents will have access to affordable broadband, opportunities to obtain the appropriate devices, accessible applications and support to acquire the digital skills needed to improve their quality of life. By 2029, the necessary structures will be in place to sustain Louisiana's work to expand digital opportunity across the state of Louisiana.

By 2029, the necessary structures will be in place to sustain Louisiana's work toward digital opportunity in Louisiana.





DIGITAL OPPORTUNITY PLAN



1

GOAL 1: Framework for Plan Implementation & Sustainability

Expanding digital opportunity in Louisiana requires ongoing stakeholder engagement and evaluation of current practices and long-term strategies that support improvement. **Louisiana will put in place a means to measure digital opportunity improvement, create best practices for communicating with stakeholders and review activities related to the plan.**



2

GOAL 2: Broadband Availability & Affordability

The goal of expanding digital opportunity is reliant upon Louisianians having access to broadband at affordable rates throughout the state. **Louisiana will improve and expand broadband infrastructure serving covered populations while also improving affordability for lower-income residents.**



3

GOAL 3: Device Availability & Affordability

Beyond the availability and affordability of broadband service, residents require devices to fully take advantage of the opportunities that come with a broadband connection. **Louisiana will support, promote and create opportunities to ensure that residents have access to affordable digital devices and technology.**



4

GOAL 4: Online Accessibility & Affordability

Improve accessibility of state resources and activities that are delivered or accessed online with consideration of all covered populations in Louisiana.



5

GOAL 5: Digital Skills

To expand digital opportunity, Louisiana must ensure that residents have both the basic and technically proficient digital skills to fully participate in our society, democracy and economy. This includes the digital skills needed for civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning and access to essential services. **Louisiana will increase and promote opportunities for covered populations to develop digital skills and monitor progress toward more equitable attainment of digital skills.**



6

GOAL 6: Online Privacy & Cybersecurity

The state will promote best practices in the design and maintenance of information technology systems and support efforts to protect and educate the public on online privacy and cybersecurity.

COLLABORATION & STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

COORDINATION & OUTREACH STRATEGY

The collaboration and stakeholder engagement efforts for this plan centered on meeting people where they are and actively listening to their feedback to ensure the plan accurately articulates the state of digital opportunity in Louisiana, the needs of Louisianians and the outcomes that will help the state address digital opportunity deficiencies. To effectively engage with a diverse representation of Louisiana residents, the following outreach strategies were used:

- In-person stakeholder meetings (all were recorded and livestreamed)
- Tribal consultations
- An online digital form (paper copies that could be returned via mail were distributed at in-person meetings and stakeholders were asked to distribute copies through their networks to amplify the outreach effort)
- In-person and virtual focus groups
- Public comment period for the draft plan

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Louisiana used multiple methods to engage with stakeholders throughout the state. This section provides details about the various opportunities to participate in the digital opportunity plan.



Regional Stakeholder Meetings

We scheduled stakeholder meetings in each of the state's eight planning and development districts. Collectively, 260 people throughout the state attended the meetings (Figure 1, below). Regional planning groups gave greater outreach consideration to covered populations and other hard-to-reach populations in each region. Each stakeholder engagement event had two regional leaders from the planning group to moderate the event, present digital opportunity background material and address all participant questions that arose during the stakeholder Q&A portion of the event. Representatives from the Blanco Center, the regional planning and development district, the LOUIS Library Network, the Louisiana Office of Broadband and Connectivity and postsecondary institutions located in the region staffed and supported each event. At the conclusion of each stakeholder meeting all attending state partners met for further in-depth discussions regarding each region's unique broadband challenges and timely solutions to address those challenges.

Online Digital & Paper Stakeholder Input Forms

Regional meeting engagement

Attendance at stakeholder meetings held between September 27, 2022 and November 15, 2022.

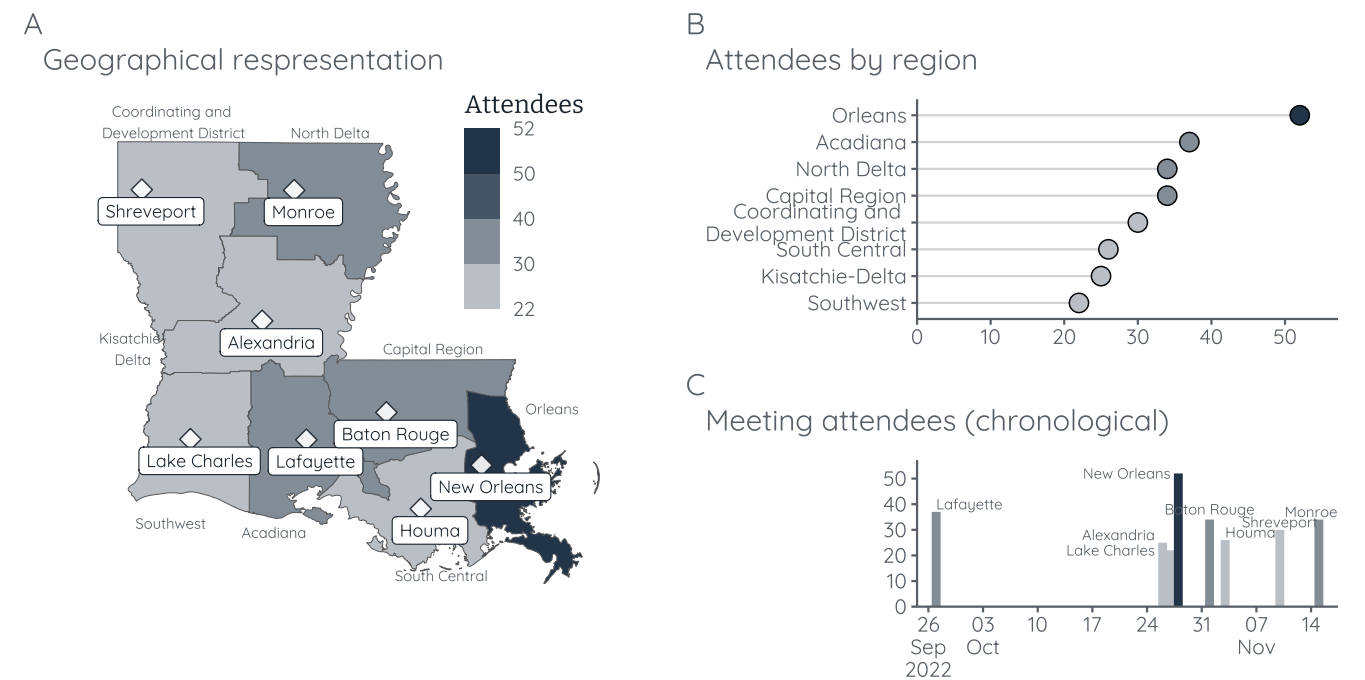


Figure 1

COLLABORATION & STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Tribal Consultations

Official tribal consultations were held with each of Louisiana's four federally recognized tribes, including the Chitimacha Tribe of Louisiana, Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana, Jena Band of Choctaw and the Tunica-Biloxi Tribe of Louisiana. In addition to Tribal leaders, staff from the Office of Broadband and Connectivity, the Blanco Center and the U.S. Commerce Department's NTIA Tribal Division attended each meeting. Staff from U.S. Senator Bill Cassidy's office attended meetings with the Coushatta Tribe, Jena Band Choctaw and Tunica-Biloxi Tribe.

Louisianians could provide input regarding their unique broadband experiences via an online form or a paper copy of the same form at their local library. The Office of Broadband and Connectivity, Blanco Center staff, and community organizations promoted the existence and accessibility of the digital form through regional stakeholder meetings, follow-up information about the meetings, focus groups and various media channels. We asked all attendees of regional stakeholder meetings to share the link with others. Also, we gave copies of the form to librarians for distribution at libraries throughout the state.

Focus Groups

For a more in-depth understanding of covered

populations within the state and as a follow-up to the regional stakeholder meetings, the Blanco Center conducted multiple focus groups. We organized focus groups in partnership with local and statewide partners who work with or are composed of covered populations. 224 people attended the 29 focus group meetings. At the meetings, staff from the Blanco Center and Office of Broadband and Connectivity provided an overview on the digital opportunity plan and the planning process. Blanco Center staff and partner organizations facilitated discussion with focus group attendees. Staff listened to stakeholder responses, took notes on attendee responses and ideas and asked follow-up questions related to digital opportunity issues. Staff integrated notes from all meetings into the needs assessment and implementation sections.

Beyond the planning process, the Office of Broadband and Connectivity is committed to extended community engagement, partnering with the broader array of stakeholders identified through this planning process, during the implementation and evaluation phases of this Digital Opportunity Plan. Other activities will require community anchor institutions, local government, K-12 schools, postsecondary institutions, the business community or other organizations to take initiative to fully address the challenges laid out in this plan. However, the Office of Broadband and Connectivity will develop processes to maintain a high level of engagement and ensure that state-led initiatives are coordinated with ongoing efforts to expand digital opportunity in Louisiana.

Digital form engagement

Parish representation during stakeholder engagement with the digital form as indicated by users from September 23, 2022 to March 24, 2023.

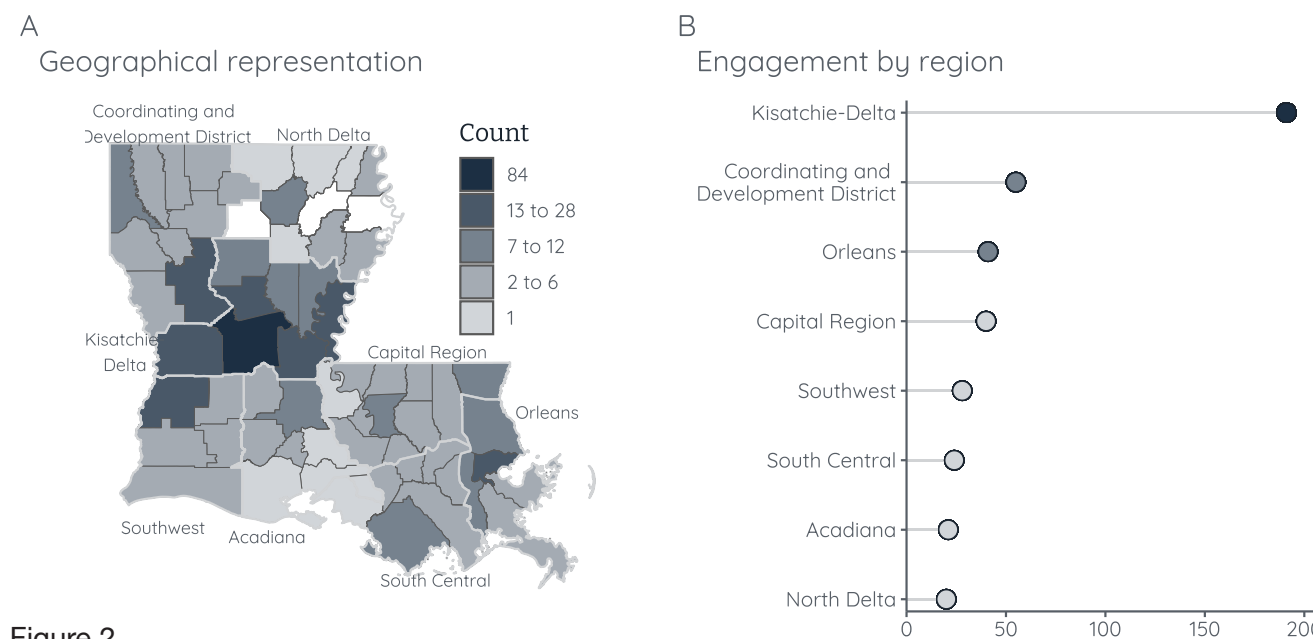


Figure 2

Public Comments on Draft Plan

The Office of Broadband and Connectivity shared an initial draft of the state plan for public comment from May 23, 2023 to August 1, 2023. This initial draft aimed to gather valuable insights from stakeholders throughout the state. During this period, the plan received 173 comments from individuals and organizations throughout Louisiana. Their constructive feedback provided essential input and provided the basis for revisions and additions which deepened the scope of the plan and its ability to address digital opportunity gaps in Louisiana. Following a thorough review of the comments, we embarked on a series of responsive actions. This included expressing our sincere gratitude for positive feedback, conducting additional research and incorporating modifications that people who commented on the draft plan suggested. Such proactive engagement exemplifies the spirit of collaboration, underscoring the pivotal role it plays in expanding digital opportunity across Louisiana.

Implementation



OVERVIEW OF BROADBAND IN LOUISIANA: REVIEW OF ACCESS & AFFORDABILITY

This section explores the gap in broadband adoption in Louisiana by comparing available data from the U.S. Census Bureau, the Federal Communications Commission and other sources on access and affordability of broadband subscriptions. Broadband access and affordability are not the only factors influencing broadband adoption, but they are the primary hurdles that must be passed before an individual can adopt broadband. Other factors like capability and trust also impact the individual decision to adopt broadband, but these influences are more subjective and difficult to measure at the population level.

Broadband access refers to whether reliable broadband service is physically available in an area. Louisiana has defined broadband as a connection that provides speeds of 100 Mbps download and 20 Mbps. However, with technology continuing to evolve, a common definition has not yet emerged. The highest quality data available on internet service comes from the U.S. Census Bureau through the American Community Survey, which defines internet access based on the technology of delivery (i.e., cable, fiber optic, DSL, cellular, satellite or another service other than dial up). By limiting those options to cable, fiber optic or DSL, this report uses ACS data to provide the best available measure of broadband availability and adoption.

According to ACS data, access to broadband in Louisiana falls short of the national average: 85.1% of Louisiana residents have broadband connections compared to 89.9% of all U.S. residents. Furthermore, there are noticeably large disparities between rural and urban regions in Louisiana, with the former having lower levels of accessibility than the latter by a large margin.

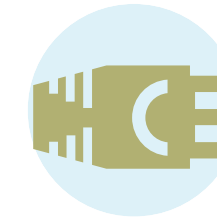
Louisiana falls short of the national average of residents with broadband connections.

Affordability

The rate of household broadband subscription aligns well with income brackets with the share of households with a highspeed internet subscription generally increasing as income levels rise. Louisianians in higher brackets were far more likely to have a broadband subscription, with 93.9% of those earning \$75,000 or more having a subscription, compared to less than 70% having a subscription among those earning less than \$20,000. Related to the affordability challenges, Louisiana has made significant progress in supporting public awareness of financial support programs for broadband with enrollment in the Affordable Connectivity Program reaching 430,028 as of May 2023. While this program is scheduled to end in April 2024, the state will continue to work to increase awareness of programs that can make services more affordable.

Adoption by Covered Population

The adoption of broadband internet subscriptions is evaluated using ACS data including information based on age, race and ethnicity and population density. Two proxies are used to measure broadband adoption: household internet subscriptions and access to internet-capable devices. While most Louisiana households have some type of internet-capable device, there are large disparities based on age, with almost one in five older adults lacking such access (Figure 3). Racial disparities also exist, with Black Louisianians being far less likely to own an internet-capable device than any other race or ethnicity. Louisianians of all races and ages, except for the Census category for "American Indians" (includes Native Americans/Tribal members), had a lower likelihood of owning an internet-capable device than national averages would suggest.



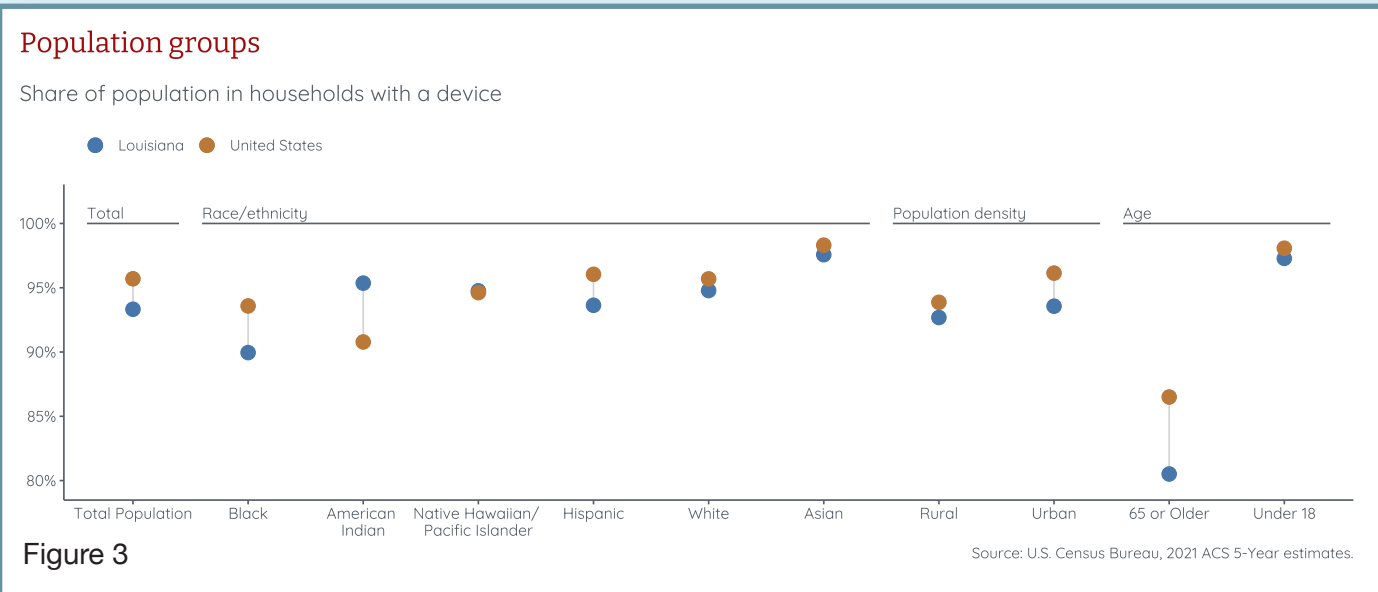
BROADBAND:

a connection that provides speeds of 100Mbps (megabits per second) download

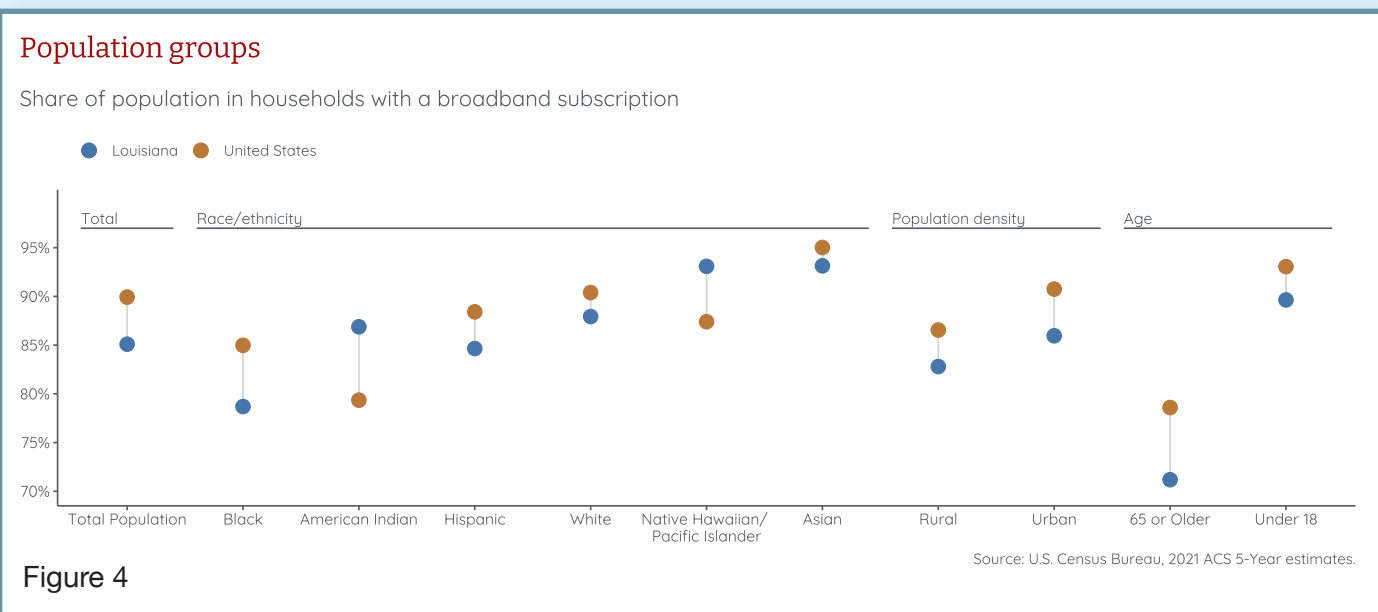


COVERED POPULATIONS:

as defined by the Digital Equity Act of 2021, groups who overall have historically experienced lower rates of computer and internet use; covered populations face complex barriers & challenges.



Data on broadband subscriptions show similar patterns with most covered populations including large disparities by age and race, with Black Louisianians being far less likely to have a broadband subscription than other race/ethnicity groups (Figure 4). Most covered populations in Louisiana have lower rates of broadband subscription than is the case nationally, except for American Indians and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, which are more likely to have a broadband subscription than those same populations at a national level. Finally, trends in both urban and rural parishes are reviewed showing that the state’s fourteen urban parishes have much more robust broadband infrastructure and higher rates of broadband subscription than the rural parishes.



NEEDS ASSESSMENT & ASSET INVENTORY

Expanding digital opportunity requires an understanding of the barriers and challenges that covered populations endure to acquire full access to the benefits of broadband connectivity. Engagement activities with stakeholders throughout Louisiana illustrate that covered populations in all parts of the state face complex barriers and challenges centered around the following core themes: broadband affordability, access and digital skills attainment. Each of these themes requires unique intervention strategies and programs to ensure that they do not impede Louisianians’ ability to access broadband, devices or use technology.

Multiple stakeholder groups highlighted several programs repeatedly, providing broad support for expanding digital opportunity in Louisiana. Two federal programs, the Affordable Connectivity and Lifeline programs, aim to address the issue of broadband affordability. The Affordable Connectivity Program is scheduled to end in April 2024, but some providers are offering loyalty discounts, or new service options to help maintain affordability for those currently enrolled. Louisiana’s Granting Unserved Municipalities Broadband Opportunities program, more commonly known as the GUMBO program, targets broadband accessibility through grants to internet service providers to increase areas where high-speed internet is available. The Northstar Digital Literacy Program focuses on digital skills. Together, these programs provide a much-needed safety net for digital access for all covered populations. Additional programs provide support for specific groups of Louisianians.

AGING INDIVIDUALS

Louisiana has a growing population of aging adults. From 2010 to 2021, the proportion of adults over the age of 65 increased from 12.1% of Louisiana’s total population to 15.5%. Older adults in Louisiana face unique obstacles in digital opportunity. They are less likely to have adequate access to both a reliable internet connection and devices to access the web. Estimates show that

28.8% of the 65-and-over cohort in Louisiana lacked home access to a broadband internet subscription and that 19.5% likely do not have a computer or similar device in their home. Compared to the rest of the United States, older adults in Louisiana are less likely to have a broadband subscription and to own a device.

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS FOR OLDER ADULTS

Much like the challenge of affordability that all low-income residents face, older adults report affordability as a common challenge, especially among those on fixed incomes. Lack of digital skills and hesitancy to adopt new technology are also notable challenges among older adults. Based on stakeholder input, older adults in Louisiana report unfamiliarity with the basics of digital skills more than any other group. Limitations like poor eyesight, motor functioning and mobility can also make it difficult to use certain devices or travel to locations where digital access or learning resources are available. Despite these challenges, this covered population has considerable diversity when it comes to digital skill levels. On average older adults who report having good financial status and more experience using computers also report higher ability levels when using personal computers. Furthermore, older adults age 65–74 report having a better understanding of newer devices and emerging technologies than those age 75–84 or age 85 and over.

RESOURCES AND ASSETS FOR OLDER ADULTS

Older adults who participate in federal assistance programs like Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income and others have been eligible to receive a discount on internet service through the Affordable Connectivity Program. The development of new options for telehealth are quickly becoming an important digital resource for older adults. The ability to access and meet with healthcare providers functions as a valuable

INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS

Louisiana has the second-highest rate of incarceration in the nation (564 per 100,000). The vast majority of incarcerated individuals (95%) will re-enter society. Digital barriers hinder an individual's rehabilitation both during their time incarcerated and upon re-entry and the underdevelopment of digital skills due to the digital divide within prisons may be an underlying cause of many issues that formerly incarcerated individuals experience within their communities.

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS FOR INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS

Stakeholders shared that digital technology has become essential to prisoners' ability to communicate with family, friends, lawyers and others; internet access is also required to engage in virtual court appearances, receive telehealth services, receive many education services and navigate legal resources. Formerly incarcerated individuals, families of those incarcerated and practitioners in the field stated that the available means of accessing technology and digital services while in prison (i.e., JPay tablets/kiosks and ATLO education software) is limited, outdated, and cost prohibitive. For example, JPay charges prisoners \$0.30 per page of email text and the JPay tablets are often inaccessible due to unresolved repair needs, lack of internet access, scarcity and/or other restrictions. The Department of Corrections does not have sufficient funding for the widespread use of the ATLO education software and non-profit programming that offers the software and devices to incarcerated individuals is very limited.

The largest barrier that underlies all of this is internet access – broadband connectivity in prisons and jails is central to the use of communication technology, but stakeholders report that rural prisons and jails throughout the state have longstanding issues with connectivity, reliability and speed. For example, prisoners cannot receive proper healthcare due to the rural, isolated location of their prison and the firewalls and connectivity issues that telehealth providers face when trying to virtually connect inside the prisons.

According to stakeholders, the stark contrast between the (lack of) technology in prisons and the highly digitized world outside prisons makes reentry difficult. Basic communication, online banking, transportation, finding assistive resources and acquiring/maintaining employment are just a few of the activities that digital skills are needed for. Individuals reported that their digital skills barrier left them feeling underprepared and dependent on the assistance of others upon re-entry.

RESOURCES AND ASSETS FOR INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS

As mentioned above, JPay and ATLO are existing resources available to some – not all – prisoners throughout the state of Louisiana. JPay charges prisoners for each email they send/receive, video sharing/receiving, internet downloads and video connect calls. This technology is reliant on internet connectivity and proper software maintenance – both of which are unreliable. ATLO is the state's contracted education software service provider, but the cost has prevented the widespread use of this software. Stakeholders were not aware of any digital skills training being offered within prisons/jails.

Upon re-entry, formerly incarcerated individuals can go to community campuses and libraries to access computers. Some libraries also have a limited number of computers that can be taken home on a loan system. Lifeline services can be used to receive a government-provided phone, but the qualification requirements for this are stringent. Stakeholders shared that digital skills were the most critical element for their success upon re-entry, but they were not aware of any existing digital skills programming specifically targeting formerly incarcerated individuals.

Digital barriers hinder rehabilitation.

VETERANS

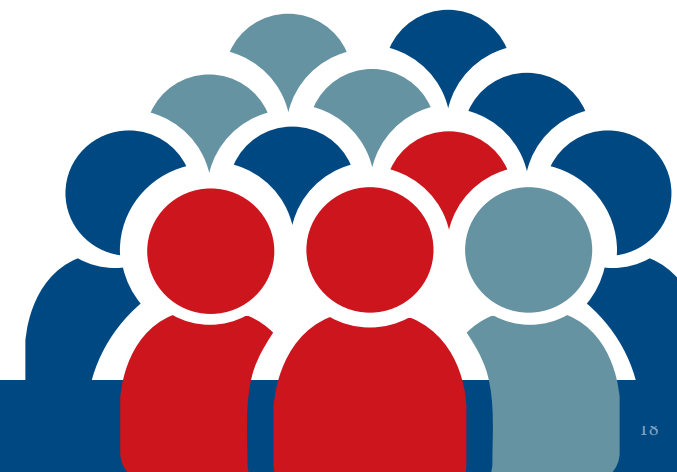
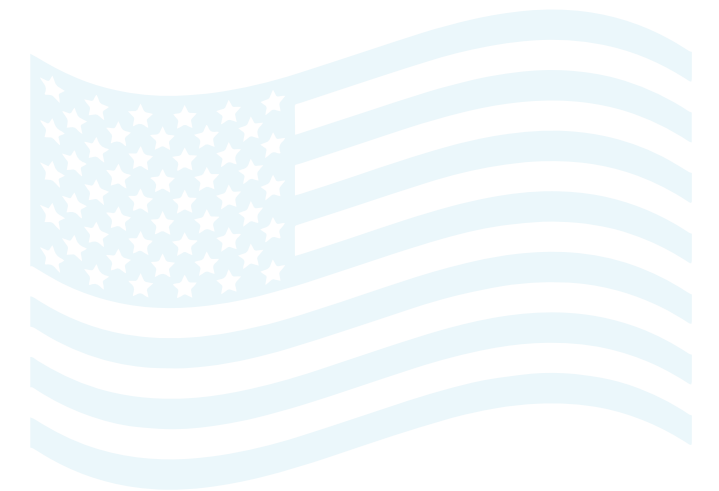
Veterans include individuals from all racial and ethnic groups including individuals from urban and rural areas. Yet, veterans face unique challenges and barriers when it comes to digital inclusion. Louisiana veterans are older than the general population, more likely to have a disability and more likely to live in rural areas. While they are less likely to live below the federal poverty line, The United Way reported that 36% of veterans live in an ALICE-defined household (Asset Limited, Income Constrained and Employed). Like most people in low-income households, these veterans are far less likely to have access to broadband service.

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS FOR VETERANS

Veterans in Louisiana make up 11.9% of the homeless population despite being only 5% of the overall population. Veterans are also twice as likely to be disabled, have a higher poverty rate and are more likely to live in rural areas. Of those living in rural areas, 27% do not have access to broadband internet. Broadband serves as a vital means of social cohesion and connection for those living in sparsely populated rural areas and the lack of access to broadband prevents veterans from accessing mental health resources such as support groups, therapy and referral services. The social isolation made worse by the digital divide can exacerbate preexisting health concerns, including the risk of substance abuse and suicidal ideations.

RESOURCES AND ASSETS FOR VETERANS

Stakeholders shared that many resources, programs and support groups for veterans are digitally based. As with the general population, Veterans have access to two Federal Communications Commission programs to provide discounts on broadband access, the Affordable Connectivity Program and Lifeline. For qualifying VA pension recipients, a streamlined eligibility process makes access to these programs more efficient. The VA introduced the Digital Divide Consult as a way of helping connect Veterans with these programs and others to improve broadband access, with 100,000 Veterans already assisted nationally. For Veterans in the Veterans Health Administration healthcare system, telehealth, resources to help navigate healthcare, mobile apps, and online portals are available. Use of these services increased post-pandemic, illustrating the importance of digital equity and access for Louisiana's veterans.



INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

About one in three adults in Louisiana (almost 1.2 million people) have one or more disabilities. The United Way calculates that about 60% of Louisiana residents with a disability live in poverty or are Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. To be able to use broadband services, an individual must be able to interact and communicate with the equipment. Most modern technology users engage through reading a screen and entering commands via a mouse, touch screen and/or standard keyboard. These modalities pose different limitations to different disabilities. Assistive/adaptive technologies are designed to address these limitations – with the proper technology, software and skills training, broadband would serve as a lifeline for individuals with disabilities, as most of these individuals struggle to maintain independence. This technology includes:

- Software to enlarge screen elements or audibly read text
- Closed captioning and/or interpretation
- Speech interfaces
- Modified keyboards
- Eye-movement-tracking software

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

Individuals with disabilities shared that the major barriers that they face are lack of access to adequate internet and affordable devices that accommodate their specialized needs. As businesses and governments continue the transition to more internet-based services and programs, this lack of connectivity for people living with disabilities translates into digital exclusion and social isolation. As common experiences diverge, the disability community becomes an exception – laying the groundwork for increased marginalization.

Those living with disabilities are known to face disproportionate vulnerability and disadvantage during and following a disaster – internet accessibility and lack of assistive/adaptive technology become a greater challenge during a disaster.

RESOURCES AND ASSETS FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

Based on input from stakeholders within the disabled community, existing programs and resources do not address the lack of digital opportunity for persons with disabilities. The challenges of existing programs include:

- Small population targeted by programs
- Limited funding
- Lack of assistive/adaptive technology
- Dysfunction of current programs
- Lack of adequately trained staff
- Restrictive requirements for participation

The lack of access to assistive/adaptive technology for young children excludes them from access to education and instructional materials and severely limits their opportunity for successful outcomes. Regarding digital opportunity, this systematic digital exclusion puts children at the highest risk within the disability community.

The inaccessibility of Louisiana state government websites and standard technology poses a significant barrier for those living with disabilities. This inaccessibility prevents people with disabilities from:

- Using public transportation
- Accessing education
- Accessing public benefits
- Finding assistive resources

The accessibility of government websites and technology is already codified in federal law: Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act requires that all federally funded programs provide accessible websites and technology and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act requires that all public entities provide accessible Internet services. Although many government programs and services are primarily internet-based, little attention has been paid to making them accessible. According to comments from participants in stakeholder engagement events, some state agencies do not comply with these standards.

To be able to use broadband services, an individual must be able to interact and communicate with digital equipment.

INDIVIDUALS WITH A LANGUAGE BARRIER

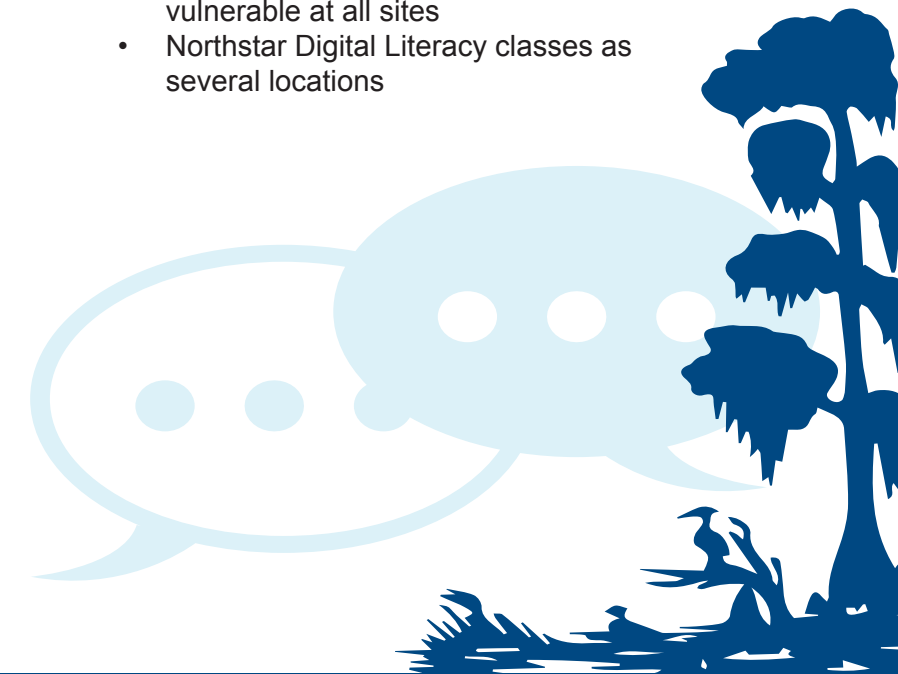
Although the United States has not adopted a national language, English is the primary form of communication used throughout the country. Non-English-speaking communities face many challenges that impose barriers to digital opportunity. The largest non-English-speaking group in Louisiana is Hispanic residents (mostly Spanish speakers), with small pockets of Vietnamese-speaking residents along Louisiana's coast. Individuals with a language barrier are more likely to be living in poverty and to have received less education.

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH LANGUAGE BARRIERS

- Accessibility and affordability of internet access
- Barriers to education, resources and services
- Usability of technology
- Translation technology focused on English speakers
- Barriers to telehealth

RESOURCES AND ASSETS FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH LANGUAGE BARRIERS

- Louisiana Statewide Digital Skills Pilot programs targeting Spanish-speaking populations at specific pilot sites and vulnerable at all sites
- Northstar Digital Literacy classes at several locations



BLACK INDIVIDUALS

Those who identify as Black or African American make up 33% of Louisiana's population, representing one of the largest covered population in Louisiana. A similar percent of Louisiana's K-12 students and of the state's labor force are Black. While the statewide poverty rate is 19.6%, the poverty rate within the Black population is about 31%. Continued large-scale investment in broadband offers an opportunity to expand digital opportunity for this covered population, which will be critical to addressing opportunity broadly.

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS FOR BLACK INDIVIDUALS

Throughout focus groups with the Black population in Louisiana, lack of access and affordability were the major factors discussed when it came to digital opportunity. Compared to other races and ethnicities in Louisiana, the Black population has the lowest percentage of households with a broadband subscription (78.7%) and lowest device ownership (90%).

On average, lower household incomes and higher rates of poverty disproportionately affect Louisiana's Black population. With many Black Louisianians struggling to make ends meet, the affordability of broadband internet services hinders many from accessing its benefits. In Louisiana, the Black median household income is \$33,576 compared to white households being almost double at \$64,597. These disparities are important to consider when expanding digital opportunity because research shows that as household income increases, so does the adoption of broadband internet.

Participants in stakeholder engagement events identified the development of digital skills as another key challenge. Digital skills are critical when using technology for personal needs, but also serve as an important steppingstone to economic opportunity.

RESOURCES AND ASSETS FOR BLACK INDIVIDUALS

The Urban League of Louisiana – Offers virtual classes and trainings at no cost, helping participants gain knowledge and learn digital skills, build confidence to operate in a digital environment and be able to respond to the challenges of an increasingly digital economic environment.

100 Black Men Non-Profit Organizations of Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Lafayette and St. Mary Parish – Offer youth programs, trainings and classes in digital skills specifically targeted toward Black youth in the respective areas each organization serves.

Digital skills are critical when using technology for both personal needs & economic opportunity.

HISPANIC INDIVIDUALS

In Louisiana, 5.3% of residents are Hispanic and face higher rates of poverty (23.5% compared to 18.8% statewide). Hispanic individuals also make up the largest non-English-speaking minority group in Louisiana. According to the ACS, 48.3% of Hispanic/Latino individuals in Louisiana are foreign-born and, as a result, many are likely to experience an English language barrier. Each of these factors can help to contextualize the extent of this population's need and help to begin the discussion of the specific digital opportunity barriers they experience.

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS FOR HISPANIC INDIVIDUALS

Almost a quarter of all Hispanic people living in Louisiana live below the poverty line, with 66% living in ALICE defined economic strain. These socioeconomic factors contribute to the digital divide, as many in the Hispanic population struggle to afford broadband internet service and computer equipment.

Digital skills training and technology use are heavily dependent on English language fluency and training for non-English speakers is more limited. Multilingual outreach programs addressing digital skills in education and telehealth have not yet matched the needs of the Hispanic community.

RESOURCES AND ASSETS FOR HISPANIC INDIVIDUALS

Digital skills programs, small business mentoring, as well as outreach efforts in Spanish and English have been facilitated through Louisiana libraries and other organizations. Such programs help to expand digital opportunity. For example, Louisiana's Digital Skills Pilot included a special effort in Jefferson Parish to have staff learn Spanish to be better equipped to serve this population.

The Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Louisiana and its foundation have opportunities for training, grants and other services that support Hispanic business owners and employees in Louisiana.

Continued large-scale investment in broadband offers an opportunity to expand digital opportunity for covered populations.



ASIAN INDIVIDUALS

In Louisiana, roughly 80,000 residents identified as being Asian alone, representing 1.7% of the state's population. When combined with the 21,000 additional persons who identify with multiple races or ethnicities that include Asian, the total increases to 102,350 individuals or 2.2% of the state's population. As it stands, 93.1% of those identifying as Asian alone reported having a broadband internet subscription, which is above the statewide average of 85.1%. While this group on average is more affluent and highly educated, there are communities within this group facing significant barriers.

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS FOR ASIAN INDIVIDUALS

Language is a significant barrier for the Asian population. Among those who identified as Asian, 26,000 reporting that they spoke English "less than 'very well.'"

The coastal region has a dense pocket of Vietnamese individuals engaged in commercial fishing and shrimping who face challenges with a remote location that is actively receding, compounding existing language barriers.

RESOURCES AND ASSETS FOR ASIAN INDIVIDUALS

Resources for Asian communities include:

- Coastal Communities Consulting, providing targeted technical assistance to Vietnamese fishermen with limited English proficiency
- Asian chambers of commerce, offering a range of opportunities for community connection
- Programs such as the Vietnamese Initiatives in Economic Training (VIET) of the New Orleans Chamber of Commerce

INDEIGENOUS, NATIVE OR AMERICAN INDIAN INDIVIDUALS AND TRIBAL MEMBERS

Louisiana's Native American population includes four federally recognized Tribes and eleven state recognized Tribes. These Tribes live in multiple regions of the state, making them susceptible to geographically unique broadband challenges. Tribal members and other Native America residents include about 227,000 people or 5% of Louisiana's population. A broad range exists in access to a high-speed internet subscription and to a computer at home for Tribal and Native American residents in Louisiana. While some have similar access to the average U.S. resident, many Tribal members lack access at a much higher rate than the average Louisianian or U.S. resident.

CHALLENGES & BARRIERS FOR INDIGENOUS, NATIVE OR AMERICAN INDIVIDUALS & TRIBAL MEMBERS

Lack of access to devices or a broadband connection poses significant barriers to Native American and Tribal households in Louisiana. However, the ability to create, navigate and understand digital resources can be key to preserving cultural assets important to Tribal members.

The resilience of broadband infrastructure is critical for this mostly rural covered population. Attendees at Tribal consultations, regional stakeholder meetings and focus groups cite a lack of diverse internet/cellular service providers (ISPs). Natural disasters such as hurricanes makes service recovery after storms more sluggish for some state Tribal residents when compared to residents in other regions of the state.

RESOURCES & ASSETS FOR INDIGENOUS, NATIVE OR AMERICAN INDIVIDUALS & TRIBAL MEMBERS

Tribal consultations and focus groups helped identify digital opportunity resources and assets. The Jena Band of Choctaw, Tunica-Biloxi and Coushatta Tribes provide a technology stipend for members around age 16 and around age 55-65 to purchase a device. Multiple Tribes have or are in the process of setting up telehealth options for members. Additionally, the Affordable Connectivity Program has provided a \$75 discount on internet services to members of federally recognized tribes living on Tribal lands.

Digital skills training will begin soon at several Tribal locations in Louisiana. The Jena Band of Choctaw and Tunica-Biloxi will host digital literacy classes starting in 2023. The Jena Band of Choctaw will offer in-person trainings that include general digital literacy skills and cybersecurity best practices. The Tunica-Biloxi will partner their digital skills classes with a call center for technical assistance.

Several Tribes in Louisiana have formed partnerships with postsecondary institutions to address digital technology as it relates to preservation of culture and language. The Jean Charles Choctaw, in partnership with the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, is collecting digital histories and digital representations of their Tribe and historic Tribal lands. The Tunica-Biloxi Tribe partnered with Tulane University to support preservation of the Tunica language.

The ability to create, navigate and understand digital resources can be key to preserving cultural assets important to Tribal members.



INDIVIDUALS IN RURAL AREAS

For those living in rural Louisiana, the challenges and barriers to accessing and adopting broadband services intersect along geographic and socio-economic lines. The interests of internet service providers also play a part in where broadband infrastructure is provided, who it is provided by and the cost of those services. These factors can limit accessibility and affordability of broadband and the attainment of basic digital literacy skills in rural Louisiana. While rural residents show similar rates of device ownership (92.7%) compared to total population averages in Louisiana, the share of rural Louisianans with a broadband subscription at home (82.8%) is slightly lower than both the Louisiana average and the subscription rate of urban residents.

The agricultural sector plays a key role in rural Louisiana and stakeholders provided a high level of engagement related to agriculture. Examples of the role of broadband in agriculture are included in the plan with a full discussion of the agricultural sector and broadband provided in the Appendix.

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS FOR INDIVIDUALS IN RURAL AREAS

Low population densities in rural areas and the high cost of installing and operating broadband infrastructure present a non-viable proposition for service providers, disincentivizing large-scale private investment in rural internet infrastructure.

The consequences of low broadband accessibility include barriers to learning digital skills, virtual education and telehealth.

Affordability is another barrier where broadband is available. Research shows that one-in-four individuals in a rural parish live below the poverty line, compared to less than one-in-five in urban and suburban parishes. Research shows households with higher incomes are correlated with higher adoption rates of internet services.

RESOURCES AND ASSETS FOR INDIVIDUALS IN RURAL AREAS

- The current GUMBO grants are incentivizing ISPs to expand broadband infrastructure into rural areas, with over \$170 million awarded in 50 different parishes, affecting 80,000 locations in need.
- The United States Department of Agriculture's Rural Development Broadband ReConnect Program, furnishing loans and grants to provide funds for the costs of construction, improvement, or acquisition of facilities and equipment needed to provide broadband service in eligible rural areas.

Household income directly impacts broadband access.



LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLDS

Low-income households, also known as covered households are those where the combined income for members is equal to or below 150% of the federal poverty level. The Louisiana Digital Opportunity Plan integrates information about low-income households into many of the sections above. However, this section provides more detail and highlights information about low-income households.

In-home internet connectivity rates are contingent upon household income, with lower-income households having more limited broadband connectivity rates than higher income households. In the United States, 20.7% of the population lives below 150% of the federal poverty level. In contrast, 28.9% of Louisianians, or more than 1.3 million people, live below 150% of the poverty level. These stark trends continue at the parish level where only five of Louisiana's 64 parishes have a lower percentage of residents living below 150% of the poverty level than the U.S. average. As services, information, and crucial resources migrate online, digital inequities continue to exacerbate disparate access to broadband services and devices, all driven by longstanding inequalities in education, age, race, income, immigration status and geography.

CHALLENGES AND BARIERS FOR LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLDS

Other covered population groups also experience many of the hardships endured by covered households; however, household income also directly impacts broadband access by influencing the amount available for households to purchase broadband. In Louisiana, fewer than 60% of households with incomes below \$20,000 have access to a broadband subscription. In comparison, over 90% of households that earn over \$75,000 annually have access to a broadband subscription.

With fewer options for broadband access at their disposal, lower income households often become smartphone-only internet users, usually without access to home broadband services. It is estimated that 27% households with an annual income below \$30,000 are smartphone-only internet users.

Additional challenges and barriers impact unhoused individuals or those without permanent housing situations. Obtaining consistent broadband internet without a permanent home presents challenges beyond those that impact lower income individuals who have access to housing.

PROGRAMS & RESOURCES FOR LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLDS

There is a steadily growing list of federal and state programs that offer residents in need of financial aid the opportunity to obtain access to broadband, a smart device or funding that will support broadband infrastructure projects in areas with high levels of covered households. Libraries provide additional resources to lower income individuals and those without access to permanent housing. These resources include access to laptop and desktop computers, digital skills support (e.g., support when using a library computer to apply for jobs and related opportunities) and access broadband internet.



ALIGNMENT WITH EXISTING EFFORTS TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES

Expanding digital opportunity will require alignment with public and private sectors and collaboration between local and state governments. While this is the first, comprehensive digital opportunity plan in Louisiana, various cities, parishes and planning entities have touched on digital opportunity-related issues in their strategic plans. To overcome the digital divide that Louisianans face, collaboration among various public, private and community entities is necessary. Digital opportunity barriers must be addressed, especially where those barriers disproportionately affect underserved populations throughout the state.

Here we discuss how existing plans can align with this digital opportunity plan and the ways in which digital opportunity can improve outcomes related to these five areas:

- Economic and workforce development
- Education
- Health
- Civic and social engagement
- Delivery of essential services

Economic and Workforce Development

The digitization of the contemporary workforce has amplified both opportunity and inequality in the workplace. The increasing demand for digital skills in the job market requires workers to have digital literacy and comprehension. This trend is becoming more prominent with recent research indicating that over 80% of middle skill jobs require concrete digital skills.

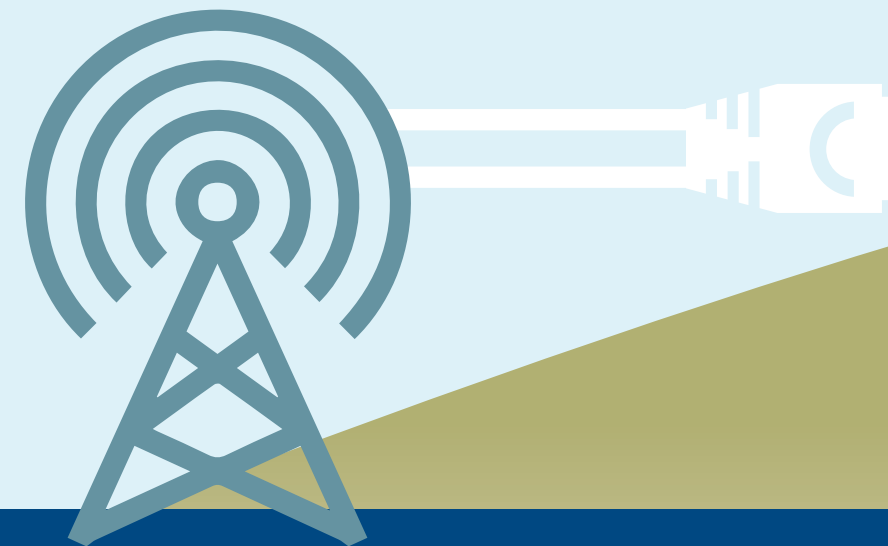
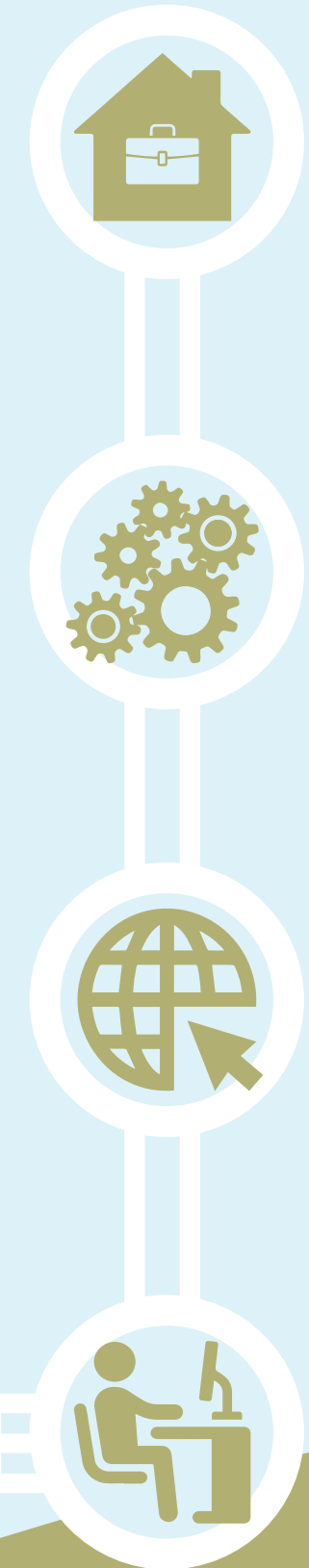
Rapidly changing technology requires quick adaptation from workers. The ratio of computer-based tasks to in-person tasks is rapidly changing with research showing that by 2025, 50% of work tasks will require digital skills. Existing skill sets are becoming obsolete at an ever-increasing rate. Workers throughout the economy require a baseline of digital skills and the ability to adapt and re-learn to remain competitive in both current and future jobs.

Louisiana's current plan to expand broadband infrastructure will require a corresponding rapid expansion of workers to build the infrastructure and maintain the service.

As the state's agencies overhaul their own processes to reflect current technology, digital skills of both workers and beneficiaries of these agencies become paramount, making collaboration between innovation and digital skills training beneficial to all sectors of Louisiana's economy.

Stakeholders consulted during this planning process, report positive outcomes when digital training is provided in the workplace and suggest further incentives can improve participation, eliminating the need to outsource services that require digital literacy.

Workers across the economy require a baseline of digital skills.



Education

The role of technology in today's education system is vital. Technology-based teaching tools are now critical for a student's educational success. Areas where digital opportunity is lacking include lack of technology, lack of access to internet services and lack of digital skills within the student population. In Louisiana, 80,000 students in K-12 education are without a computer or internet access at home. Where programs to address this divide exist, information technology staff are needed to guide students and parents when using digital technology.

While 97% of enrolled postsecondary students reported having a computer and internet access, the remaining 3% represents 17,000 students without either. The major barrier to this advantage being the expense of technology and internet access. Gaps in digital skills further exasperate the digital divide even when access to technology is presented through libraries and other sources.

The large demand for digital skills in the workforce emphasizes the importance of teaching digital skills in both K-12 and postsecondary education. This is supported by reports from stakeholders who emphasized the need for a larger role for digital skills in education. Programs and initiatives addressing digital opportunity in K-12 and postsecondary education include:

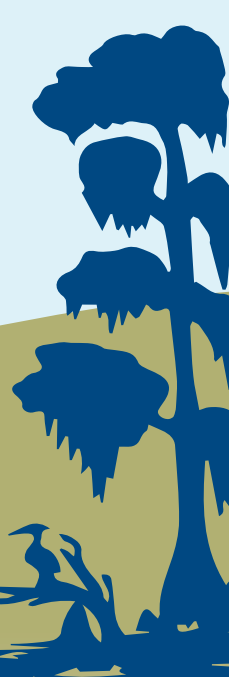
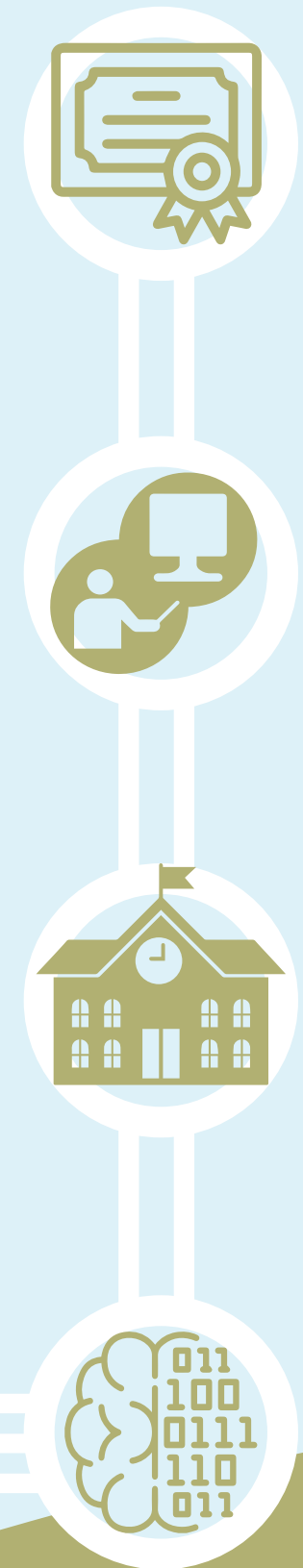
- FCC's E-Rate program, providing technology discounts from 20 to 90 percent to qualifying schools and libraries
- Louisiana Department of Education's (LDOE) 2022 Education Technology Plan, presenting strategies to integrate technology in the state's school systems, with the goal of increasing digital education and providing internet access to every K-12 student
- COVID-19 pandemic legislation, passed in December of 2020, allocating \$8 million to LDOE to procure 23,000 Chromebooks for public school students

- Louisiana Statewide Digital Skills Pilot, reducing the percentage of residents who lack digital skills
- Northstar Digital Literacy Program, available at many postsecondary and libraries across the state to provide digital skills assessment and online digital skills classes
- WorkReady U, providing digital literacy instruction embedded in other education programs
- Louisiana Optical Network Infrastructure (LONI), providing a network connecting the state's research universities
- The LCTCS's Louisiana Infrastructure Skills Academy, increasing accessibility to digital literacy training programs with campuses across the state, including rural areas and open enrollment with a diverse student body

There are numerous opportunities throughout Louisiana's four postsecondary systems (Louisiana Community and Technical College System, Louisiana State University System, Southern University System and University of Louisiana System). These institutions provide a range of degree and non-degree programs and credentials that prepare students for careers in technology and the technology-based aspects of jobs throughout the economy.

Gaps in digital skills exasperate the digital divide.

Technology-based teaching tools are now critical for a student's educational success.



Health

Access to highspeed broadband is an integral component in both public health and health care. Given that the inability to access high speed broadband intersects with other social determinants of health, many national organizations are characterizing broadband access as a “super determinant of health.” When combined with other determinant factors and cost as a further barrier to access, digitally isolated communities are more susceptible to worse health outcomes.

To improve health care practices, health services researchers, clinicians and other health care professionals have been implementing and expanding the use of information technologies and telecommunications. Telehealth lies at the intersection of these efforts due to its reliance on both mainstream and innovative technologies. Telehealth provides health care access to underserved communities and reduces the overall cost of health care.

Louisiana suffers from a health care professional shortage, especially in rural areas. The use of telehealth can help address that shortage. Unfortunately, many of the underserved populations that would benefit most from these innovations in health care reside in areas with limited or no access to broadband or lack the devices, familiarity or digital skills to take advantage of these options.

Research efforts such as The FCC’s Connect2Health Task Force will help planning agencies target areas and populations with the greatest needs.

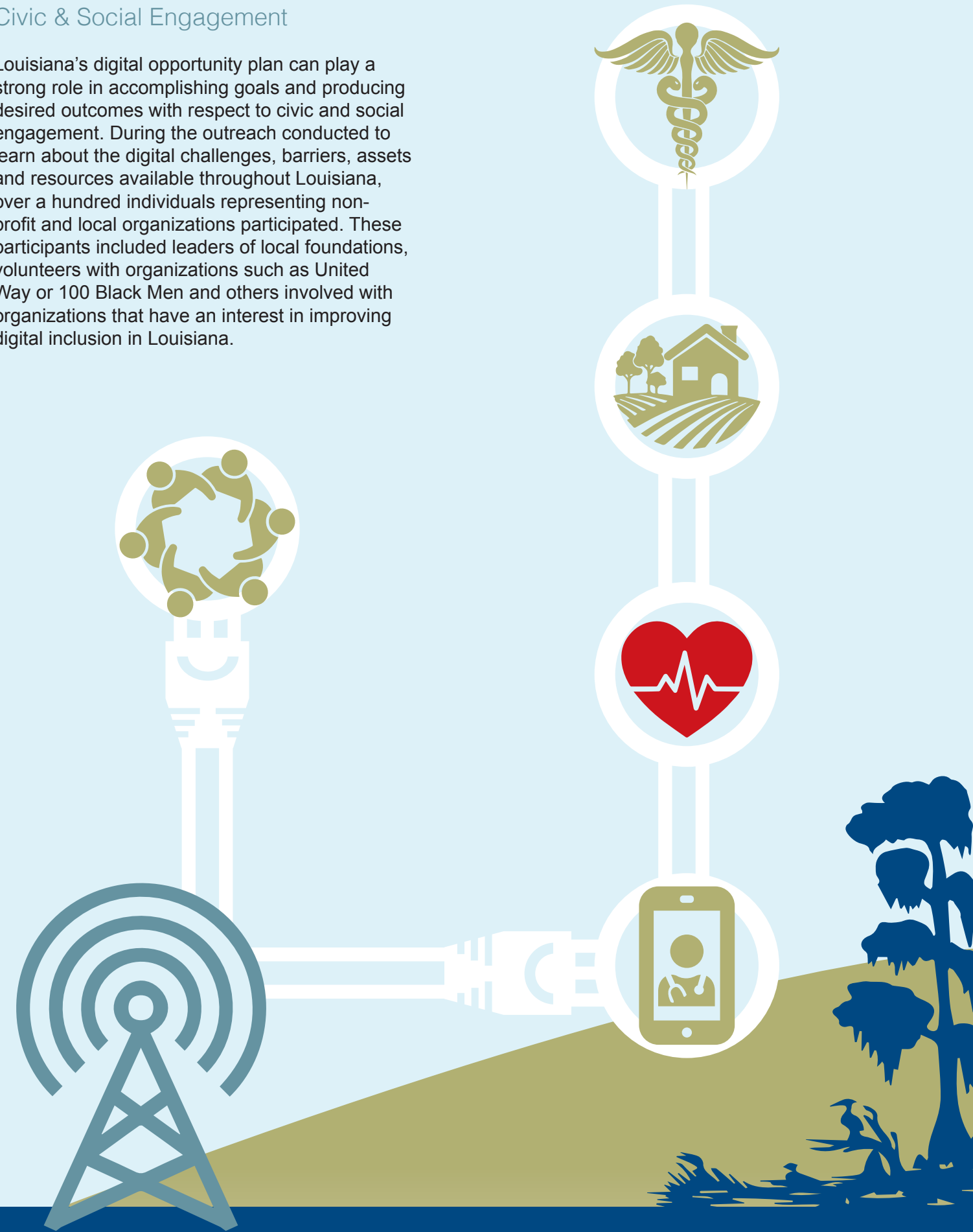
In Louisiana, many providers are now offering telehealth services and working to expand access. Pilot programs working to bring access to underserved populations show promise and may be a guide for future programs. Large gaps in service areas and uneven digital skills will continue to challenge future efforts and should be considered as programs move forward.

Many national organizations characterize broadband access as a “super-determinant of health.”

Louisiana suffers from a healthcare professional shortage.

Civic & Social Engagement

Louisiana’s digital opportunity plan can play a strong role in accomplishing goals and producing desired outcomes with respect to civic and social engagement. During the outreach conducted to learn about the digital challenges, barriers, assets and resources available throughout Louisiana, over a hundred individuals representing non-profit and local organizations participated. These participants included leaders of local foundations, volunteers with organizations such as United Way or 100 Black Men and others involved with organizations that have an interest in improving digital inclusion in Louisiana.



Libraries
can meet
learners
where they
are & help
learners
grow
technical
skills at all
stages.

Delivery of Essential Services: Libraries

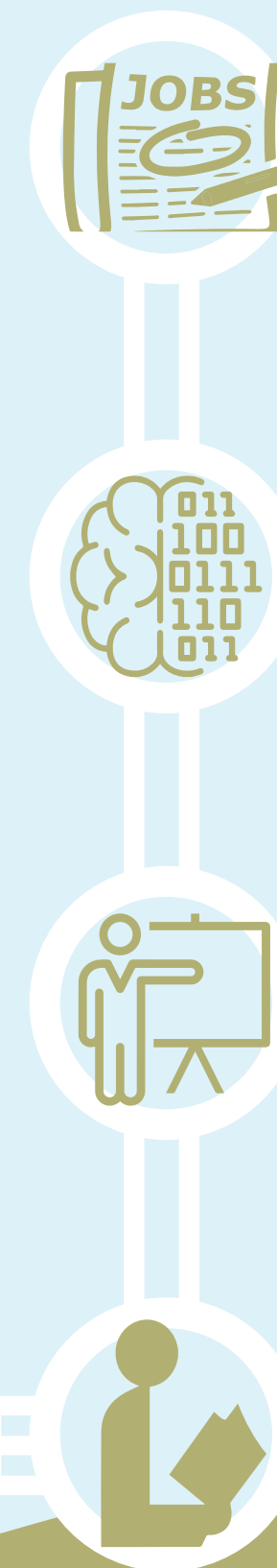
Public libraries play a substantial role in providing digital access and encouraging adoption of internet use, which impacts the education, health and vitality of surrounding communities. Libraries meet a critical need throughout Louisiana. A 2021 Pew Research survey found that “26% of respondents reported they usually need someone else’s help to set up or show them how to use a new computer, smartphone or another electronic device.” Participants in stakeholder engagement events described how libraries meet much of this need in their daily activities.

Libraries can meet learners where they are and help learners grow technological skills at all stages, with a wide range of educational opportunities. Libraries’ longstanding partnerships with a broad and varied group of trusted community organizations make them ideal for reaching underserved, remote or specific communities (e.g., programs aimed at non-English speaking communities or older adults). Given this level of importance, it is crucial to not only consider existing programs, but to remain vigilant in looking for new opportunities to use libraries in the state’s efforts towards expanding digital opportunity.

Some programs and initiatives to address the digital divide in libraries include:

- Free internet available at all libraries and wi-fi hotspot available to check out at many libraries.
- Most libraries have desktop computers available to use at the library and electronic devices (e.g., tablets, laptops) available to check out.
- Librarians at all locations provide digital support for patrons. This assistance can vary from a traditional classroom setting, individualized one-on-one coaching, or overall technology assistance.
- The Louisiana Statewide Digital Inclusion Pilot program is a one-year effort at five libraries to address digital inclusion needs in Louisiana. This program has an emphasis on digital skills and includes 65 professional librarians and other staff designated to serve as digital navigators and improve digital inclusion programming.

Libraries
provide
digital
access which
impacts
education,
health,
& social
connection.



Delivery of Essential Services:
Other Agencies

Other agencies throughout the state have goals aligned with the Louisiana Digital Opportunity Plan. These include public and internal facing programs. An example of an internal-facing initiative is the requirement for cybersecurity training for state employees. Another example is a goal of securing the technological infrastructure to allow state agencies to respond to crises throughout the state in a timely manner.

Improving externally facing digital services is a key component of improving delivery of state services to Louisiana’s residents. One example is the use of applications, websites and social media by the state’s court system to make legal processes more accessible. Most other agencies have plans in place or are implementing plans to improve their strategies for providing accessible electronic services.

Delivery of Essential Services:
Cybersecurity

Covered populations encounter various cybersecurity barriers due to varying levels of familiarity with cyber threats. Some lack knowledge about phishing, malware, and data breaches, making them more susceptible to cybercrimes. Certain groups rely on high-risk services, like financial management, increasing their exposure to threats.

Distrust in state cybersecurity hinders adoption of digital opportunity measures. Some covered populations, like older adults, broadly fear the risks associated with being online. To meet digital equity goals, the state must invest in cybersecurity infrastructure to avoid costly reactive responses to attacks.

Policymakers and stakeholders must expand cybersecurity efforts, considering the unique risks faced by these populations. Collaborating with local governments for resource allocation will be crucial to efficient and non-duplicative efforts.

Improving externally facing digital services is a key component of improving delivery of state services to Louisiana’s residents.



DIGITAL OPPORTUNITY IMPLEMENTATION GOALS



IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY & KEY ACTIVITIES

This section identifies specific implementation activities tied to each of the strategies identified on page 4. Those activities are grouped according to the six main digital opportunity goals.



IMPLEMENTATION GOAL 1

GOAL 1: Framework for Plan Implementation & Sustainability



Achieving digital equity in Louisiana requires ongoing stakeholder engagement and evaluation of current practices and long-term strategies that support improvement. Louisiana will put in place a means to measure digital improvements in digital opportunity, create best practices for communicating with stakeholders and review activities related to the plan.

KEY STRATEGIES

- A.** The Office of Broadband and Connectivity will lead statewide implementation of the plan and create a digital opportunity advisory panel (e.g., BEL Commission or similar) including members of covered populations or organizations that work with covered populations, supported by staff at the Office of Broadband and Connectivity, which will meet to review digital opportunity plan activities and facilitate public oversight.
- B.** The Office of Broadband and Connectivity will create and maintain a digital opportunity dashboard to track outcomes and achievement related to digital opportunity for covered populations in Louisiana.
- C.** The Office of Broadband and Connectivity will work with partners to create and identify best practices for connecting with covered populations and other stakeholders to improve digital opportunity in Louisiana.

KEY ACTIVITIES

- A.** (1) The digital equity advisory panel will meet a minimum of twice annually to review progress toward achieving Louisiana's digital opportunity goals, make recommendations for addressing deficiencies and work collaboratively to drive adoption of the plan.

(2) The Office of Broadband and Connectivity will update Louisiana's Digital Opportunity Plan annually and present the annual update to the digital equity advisory panel.

(3) The Office of Broadband and Connectivity will coordinate implementation of the Digital Opportunity Plan and funding available through capacity grants and BEAD non-deployment activities including concrete coordination mechanisms.

a. The Office of Broadband will host quarterly meetings with a coordination team to help to align the Digital Opportunity Plan, capacity grants and BEAD activities with a coordination agenda that will follow the lifecycle of the two funding programs and annual updates to the plan.

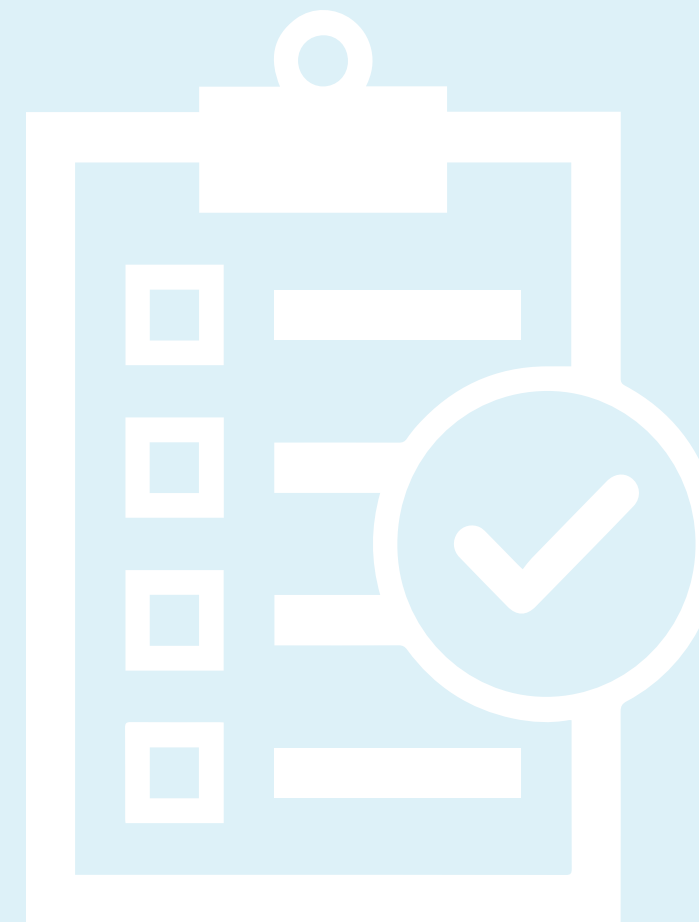
b. Grant review, awards and implementation of grants will be synchronized by the established coordination team to minimize overlap and loss of resources.

B. The Office of Broadband and Connectivity will create a digital opportunity dashboard that tracks clearly defined metrics on access and affordability (e.g., service availability, speeds and prices) alongside data on covered populations in served and unserved areas to illustrate the progress toward reaching digital equity for Louisiana. The dashboard will include aggregated metrics to track general trends and maps to display information visually at different levels of geography (e.g., state, region, parish, municipality). By making this information easily available and presentable to the public, the state can use information on broadband infrastructure to make improvements in different areas of the state. The digital opportunity dashboard will be updated annually or as new data is released.

C. (1) The Office of Broadband will highlight and share best practices for improving digital opportunities for covered populations in an annual report to the advisory panel and make the report available to the public.

(2) The Office of Broadband will conduct stakeholder outreach with all covered populations to share best practices that improve digital opportunity for covered populations in Louisiana. Non-deployment funding will be available to support stakeholder engagement including travel, capacity-building or contract support.

(3) The Office of Broadband will use non-deployment funding to support implementation of Tribal, local, or regional digital opportunity plans (to supplement, but not to duplicate or supplant, planning grant funds received by the Eligible Entity, as defined and in connection with the Digital Equity Act of 2021).



The Office of Broadband and Connectivity will create a digital opportunity dashboard that tracks clearly defined metrics on access and affordability.

GOAL 2: Broadband Availability & Affordability



The goal of achieving digital equity is reliant upon Louisianans having access to broadband at affordable rates throughout the state. Louisiana will improve and expand broadband infrastructure serving covered populations while also improving affordability for lower income residents.

KEY STRATEGIES

- A.** The Office of Broadband and Connectivity will identify areas without broadband and maintain updated information on areas with unmet needs and the covered populations in those areas.
 - a. The state will track clearly defined metrics that combine population size, population density and the demographic profile of served and unserved areas to ensure that future plans move the state toward a more equitable distribution of services.
- B.** The Office of Broadband and Connectivity will ensure public broadband infrastructure dollars are spent equitably to improve access and affordability for covered populations.
 - a. For funds disbursed through grant programs (e.g., GUMBO and future state grant programs), prioritize applications that promote competition or use other targeted approaches to reduce the long-term cost of broadband for covered populations.
- C.** The Office of Broadband will coordinate future initiatives addressing affordability to ensure that they are targeted to fill gaps in federal and local supports and equitably improve access for covered populations.
 - a. As the state explores new assistance-based initiatives to help those with lower incomes, being mindful of existing local, state and federal programs throughout the state, can help develop programs that work in conjunction with those that already exist.

- D.** The Office of Broadband will coordinate with leaders of organizations that serve or are composed of covered populations (e.g., postsecondary institutions, workforce organizations, non-profit organizations, business groups) and conduct outreach to covered populations to provide details about service and programs that can make broadband more affordable.

KEY ACTIVITIES

- A.** Tracking can be done using the Digital Opportunity Dashboard, which will be developed as a key activity of Goal 1.
- B.** (1) The Office of Broadband and Connectivity will design future grant programs to prioritize access and affordability for covered populations.
 - (2) The Office of Broadband and Connectivity will evaluate how public broadband infrastructure dollars are spent and provide a scorecard for Louisiana's broadband investment that highlights covered populations.
 - (3) The Office of Broadband and Connectivity will continue to study opportunities for different types of infrastructure deployment that may benefit covered populations, including a middle mile approach, as recommended by Tribal governments, and ensure that public grant programs prioritize best practice approaches to achieve access and affordability for covered populations. If applicable, targeted grant programs could allow local governments, Tribal organizations, LONI, or other organizations to test different modes of broadband deployment and construction.
 - (4) The Office of Broadband and Connectivity will produce a report on best practices in infrastructure deployment and results on from other states related to access and affordability for covered populations.

- C.** The Office of Broadband and Connectivity will track and maintain public-facing information on existing local, state and federal assistance-based initiatives such as the Lifeline Program. This information will include eligibility requirements, how to apply and participation rates for covered populations. Non-deployment funds will be used to support programs similar to and Lifeline should the program deplete their funding.
- D.** Expand outreach and remote resources to covered populations through accessible online resources; community centers; libraries; health clinics; K-12 and postsecondary schools; Spanish language pamphlets; advertisements with newspapers, radio or television; social media; and/or related in-person events. Non-deployment funds will be used to support these activities.

Louisiana will design future grant programs to prioritize access and affordability for covered populations.

The goal of enhancing digital opportunity is reliant upon Louisianians having access to broadband at affordable rates throughout the state.

IMPLEMENTATION GOAL 3

GOAL 3: Device Availability & Affordability



Beyond availability and affordability of broadband service, residents require devices to fully take advantage of the opportunities that come with a broadband connection. Louisiana will support, promote, and create opportunities to ensure that residents have access to affordable and accessible digital devices and technology.

KEY STRATEGIES

- A.** Develop a statewide strategy for creating sustainable access to low-cost and accessible technology and devices.
- B.** Dedicate public funding to support access to devices, leveraging bulk purchasing power where possible to reduce costs.
- C.** Encourage and promote private sector efforts to increase access to devices and/or lower costs of devices through device refurbishing and recycling.
- D.** Conduct outreach to covered populations using wide range of mass media and more targeted print and digital methods to provide information about vendors who provide discounted or low-cost refurbished devices.

KEY ACTIVITIES

- A.** The Office of Broadband and Connectivity will lead development of a statewide strategy for creating sustainable access to low-cost and accessible technology and devices in consultation with other state agencies.
- B.** Provide funding to community anchor institutions such as libraries to purchase laptops, tablets and hotspots. Providing devices to organizations like these can serve multiple residents per device. Moreover, prioritizing those community anchor institutions that offer digital skills classes or support digital

navigators within the community will ensure that devices are available to support other goals of the digital opportunity plan.

- C.** The Office of Broadband and Connectivity will create a matching grant program to encourage private sector engagement in the recycling and refurbishment sector and build relationships that can support other sources of funding long-term. The Office of Broadband and Connectivity will also promote these organizations using outreach to covered populations through accessible online resources; community centers; libraries; health clinics; K-12 and postsecondary schools; Spanish language pamphlets; advertisements with newspapers, radio or television; social media; and/or related in-person events.
- D.** (1) All public funding for devices will be tracked by the Office of Broadband and Connectivity with reporting by covered population to ensure progress toward digital equity is being made. Promotion about opportunities to obtain discounted or low-cost devices will be done through outreach to covered populations through accessible online resources; community centers; libraries; health clinics; K-12 and postsecondary schools; Spanish language pamphlets; advertisements with newspapers, radio or television; social media; and/or related in-person events.

(2) The Office of Broadband and Connectivity will sustain efforts to increase public awareness of support for connected devices through the Lifeline program including information on eligibility, how to apply and reporting on enrollment by covered population.

Louisianians require devices to fully take advantage of the opportunities that come with a broadband connection.



Louisiana will support, promote, and create opportunities for residents to have access to digital devices and technology.

GOAL 4: Online Accessibility & Inclusivity



Improve accessibility of state resources and activities that are delivered or accessed online with consideration of all covered populations in Louisiana.

KEY STRATEGIES

- A.** Increase alignment of efforts within state government to improve accessibility of information provided online with consideration of all covered populations.
- B.** Improve accessibility of state-run programs that use online processes for applications or to manage services and increase their integration in a way that simplifies access for the public.
- C.** Develop a long-term mechanism to continue improving accessibility and inclusivity as technology and unmet needs for covered populations change over time.

KEY ACTIVITIES

- A.** Encourage state agencies to review website content to identify and implement updates that will improve accessibility for covered populations.
- B.** (1) Review state-run programs to determine whether online applications are available in language that can be understood broadly for covered populations, are accessible for learning or hearing-impaired individuals, translatable to ESL applicants and function in a way that they can be used on a variety of devices (computers, tablet or phones).

(2) Convene state agencies to present status of website accessibility efforts and offer opportunities for collaboration among agencies at the bi-annual meeting of the digital opportunity advisory panel.

(3) Provide training and technical support and multilingual assistance for digital navigators at community anchor institutions such as public

libraries who provide training to computer users with a variety of needs, including those with disabilities who need to use specialized assistive technology. This training, technical support, and assistance will be supported by non-deployment funds.

- C.** (1) Creation of a subcommittee on accessibility and inclusivity, including members of each covered population with lived experiences, which will report to the digital opportunity advisory panel. This subcommittee will identify and develop digital inclusion opportunities in partnership with public libraries, postsecondary institutions, adult education programs and community organizations to provide options that address new and changing accessibility and inclusive technology needs.

(2) Subcommittee will establish agreed upon benchmarks for accessibility and inclusivity for each covered population. For example, the subcommittee will determine specifications of websites that provide robust access to the disabled population. Similarly, the subcommittee will identify strategies and best practices for improving inclusivity of each covered population.

(3) Continued training for state employees to improve accessibility of websites, forms and state business activities to meet the needs of covered populations.



Louisiana will improve accessibility of state resources and activities that are delivered or accessed online with consideration of all covered populations in Louisiana.

Louisiana will continue training for state employees to improve accessibility of websites, forms and state business activities to meet the needs of covered populations.

IMPLEMENTATION GOAL 5

GOAL 5: Digital Skills



To achieve digital opportunity for all its residents, Louisiana must ensure that residents have both the basic and technically proficient digital skills to fully participate in our society, democracy, and economy. This includes the digital skills needed for civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services. Louisiana will increase and promote opportunities for covered populations to develop digital skills and monitor progress toward more equitable attainment of digital skills.

KEY STRATEGIES

- A.** Establish a Statewide Framework for Digital Skills Attainment
 - a. This framework will identify best practices and provide guidance on how to integrate digital skill development into K-12 and post-secondary education, workforce training and other public training and programming. This framework will also identify the role of each organization (state, local, private sector) in Louisiana's efforts to expand digital skill attainment.
 - b. While a full framework is beyond the scope of this plan, the digital opportunity planning process has made it clear that Louisiana's covered populations would benefit greatly from an accelerated effort to deploy digital skills-related support, which will be a central part of a comprehensive framework. While a comprehensive framework is developed, the state should proceed with funding an expanded digital skills support network.
- B.** Monitor and promote ongoing activities related to digital skill development throughout the public sector to help residents identify and access digital skill training.

- C.** Cultivate and promote efforts by the private sector and community-based organizations to provide digital skill training and technical support to covered populations, including specialized training in assistive technology.
- D.** Develop and maintain technical support for residents to ensure that state-run programs using online processes can be broadly and equitably accessed and used.

KEY ACTIVITIES

- A.** (1) Create a subcommittee on digital skills which will report to the digital opportunity advisory panel. This subcommittee will provide guidance to the Office of Broadband and Connectivity on how best to establish and sustain a coordinated system of digital skills providers—including K-12 schools, postsecondary, adult education, library systems, Tribal governments and others—that link digital skills into workforce and education programs.
 - (2) Subcommittee on digital skills will define “qualified digital skills training” and curate a list of relevant programs.
 - (3) Subcommittee will develop a reporting system for completion of digital skills training for libraries, anchor institutions, and other organizations that receiving Digital Equity Capacity Grant funding for digital navigator programs.
 - (4) Designate and fund a state government office as the organization to manage the statewide digital navigator program. Using digital opportunity funds, the Office of Broadband and Connectivity will designate funding for three years to support digital navigators in each parish. Local libraries and other community anchor institutions will be eligible to apply for this funding. The Office of Broadband, Board of Regents, and other state agencies will work with local leaders to identify long-term funding opportunities to support digital navigators. The Office of Broadband, Board of Regents, and other state agencies will work with local communities, libraries, postsecondary institutions, and

other organizations to identify philanthropic opportunities and other long-term funding sources, as well as partnership opportunities to support digital navigators and sustain digital skills programs.

(5) Provide funding to local and parish governments, Tribal organizations, community anchor institutions, postsecondary institutions (including academic libraries), adult education providers, workforce development centers, and/or non-profit organizations to develop and manage digital navigator programs for specific covered populations. Non-deployment funds will be available to support digital literacy upskilling from beginner to more advanced levels.

(6) Fund a statewide subscription to NorthStar Digital Literacy or fund the development of an online digital inclusion learning environment with a focus on digital skills instruction for the statewide digital navigator program to allow public libraries, workforce centers, postsecondary institutions and others to use the program to assess and teach foundational digital skills.

- B.** (1) The digital opportunity advisory panel will work to promote opportunities for digital skill development classes and activities by developing promotional resources (e.g. pamphlets and other marketing materials in multiple languages) and accessible online resources to equip community centers; libraries; health clinics; K-12 and postsecondary schools in their efforts to reach out to covered populations through mass media, targeted print and online media and/or in-person settings.
 - (2) All public sector agencies identified in the statewide digital skills framework will provide updates at least annually to the digital equity advisory panel on digital skills related programming and activities. This will include updates on prisoner education to promote pre-release digital literacy, job skills, and online job acquisition skills. There will be non-deployment funding available for state agencies to support upskilling from beginner to more advanced levels.

- C.** (1) The digital opportunity advisory panel will convene a roundtable with diverse industry representatives to highlight best practices in digital skills training and technical support for covered populations.
 - (2) Showcase private sector digital skills training and technical support through reoccurring Office of Broadband and Connectivity reports to the digital opportunity advisory panel and other communication and outreach activities.
- D.** Provide funding to a minimum of one library per each parish to offer opportunities for technical support. This funding could be braided with funding for digital navigators or digital skills classes.

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GOAL 6: Online Privacy & Cybersecurity



The state will promote best practices in the design and maintenance of information technology systems and support efforts to protect and educate the public on online privacy and cybersecurity.

KEY STRATEGIES

- A.** Expand the mission of Louisiana’s Cybersecurity Commission to ensure the unique needs of covered populations are included in all planning activities and recommendations.
 - a. Louisiana’s Cybersecurity Commission was created by Executive Order Number JBE 17-31 (amended by JBE 19-19 and JBE 22-9) with the task of coordinating cybersecurity efforts among state governmental agencies, local governments, tribal governments, private companies, academic institutions and other entities in both the public and private sectors. Ensuring that these discussions consider the unique needs of covered populations will lead to more robust planning and better protect individuals in those groups.
- B.** Promote state policies that are sensitive to online privacy and cybersecurity in consideration of unique needs of covered populations. This can include policies regarding collection and safeguarding of application data for public programs that take into consideration the location and device that a user might be using such as a shared computer in a public library (where data typed on screen may be visible to others) or a mobile device (where typing large information of data may be difficult).
- C.** Ensure that online privacy and cybersecurity educational resources for public sector employees are designed to accommodate the baseline knowledge and familiarity of individuals from all covered populations.

- D.** Cultivate and promote efforts by the private sector and community-based organizations to provide online privacy and cybersecurity training to covered populations.

KEY ACTIVITIES

- A.** (1) Create a subcommittee on online privacy and cybersecurity for digital equity (under the Louisiana Cybersecurity Commission- see Strategy A) to develop recommendations to address online privacy and cybersecurity training for all covered populations. Subcommittee will meet quarterly.
 - (2) Submit a bill to expand the scope of the Louisiana Cybersecurity Commission to include the Office of Broadband and Connectivity as a member and to take on the work for the online privacy and cybersecurity subcommittee.
- B.** The Office of Broadband and Connectivity will coordinate with the Information Security Team in the Office of Technology Services to ensure state online privacy and cybersecurity policies address unique needs of covered populations.
- C.** The Office of Broadband and Connectivity will coordinate with State Civil Service to ensure educational trainings are designed to accommodate the baseline knowledge and familiarity of individuals from all covered populations.
- D.** Partner with state and regional banking partners, community anchor institutions, and public education systems (both K-12 and postsecondary) to deliver training on cybersecurity, digital privacy, and other digital safety matters. Non-deployment funding will support some of these activities.

Access to digital resources is a significant concern in today’s world, particularly in Louisiana.

This report has examined the status of access to digital resources within the state. While the state has made significant strides in recent years to close digital gaps, it continues to face numerous challenges. Lower average rates of access to broadband, devices and digital skills proficiency affect the covered populations in this report as compared to others.

This divide exacerbates existing social and economic disparities and hinders opportunities for individuals and communities. Access to technology and high-speed internet are critical for education, employment, healthcare and civic engagement, among other areas. Without these services and tools, individuals are at a disadvantage and the state cannot reach its full potential.

Addressing the digital divide is crucial for the socio-economic development, educational attainment and overall well-being of Louisiana’s residents. Expanding broadband infrastructure, improving affordability and promoting digital literacy are key priorities for the state.

To achieve these goals, Louisiana needs to take a comprehensive and inclusive approach that involves government, private sector and community organizations. Such an approach should prioritize the needs of underserved communities and involve their active participation and input. By working together, Louisiana can build a more just and equitable society that benefits all its residents.

Addressing the digital divide is crucial for the socio-economic development, educational attainment and overall well-being of Louisiana residents.



Research and support drafting the
2024 Plan Update provided by the
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Public Policy Center



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