State of Alaska Digital Equity Plan
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Cover art by Mititquq, Holly Nordlum, Inupiaq Artist

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1.   Executive Summary

Alaska's residents know what adversity looks like when it comes to accessing high-speed internet, with many experiencing barriers such as high costs, connectivity limitations, and training needed to fully use the Internet when it is available.

The scale of unserved and underserved communities across Alaska is an obstacle to community and economic development. Rural communities are particularly vulnerable. Each year, many of the State's rural communities shrink due in part to limited employment opportunities. Outmigration impacts the viability of rural schools[1], and can disrupt cultural practices and lifestyles that are a central part of many Alaskans' identity. Alaska's expansive geography and small population also play an outsized role in the high costs that contribute to the digital divide.

Some specific challenges facing Alaska:

- Alaska ranks 51st in BroadbandNow's annual rankings of internet coverage, speed, and availability.[2]

- 9% of Alaskans don't have internet access or own a device that can be used to access the internet.[3]

- 80% of Alaskans cannot get broadband at an affordable price ($60/month or less excluding promotions and government programs).[4]

- 21% of Alaskans are not able to purchase a broadband plan that is considered "high speed" internet (connection speeds of at least 25Mbps download and 3Mbps upload).[5]

- According to the Alaska Governor's Task Force on Broadband Final Report (November 2021)[6], more than 240 rural communities across the state have no broadband service under the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) definition of 25Mbps download speeds and 3Mbps upload speeds with latency suitable for real-time applications.

- Many Alaskans lack adequate digital skills training, based on anecdotes gathered through statewide outreach over the past year.

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[1] https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2023/07/06/alaska-karluk-school-families-needed/

[2] Alaska's Internet Ranking, https://broadbandnow.com/Alaska

[3] Alaska Population Metrics, https://www.internetforall.gov/interactive-map/Alaska

[4] Access to wired, low-cost broadband plan, https://broadbandnow.com/Alaska

[5] Access to Wired or Fixed Wireless Broadband, https://broadbandnow.com/Alaska

[6] https://indd.adobe.com/view/42ddcfe3-5ea9-4bcb-bd09-a71bcb63869a

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Connectivity is a key ingredient to addressing these challenges. Using federal resources and in strong collaboration with Tribal partners, the nonprofit sector, and cities and boroughs, the State of Alaska is working toward changing this landscape. By pulling together, Alaskans have developed a pathway to digital inclusion.

Investment in the state's broadband infrastructure with a focus on digital equity provides an opportunity to accomplish the state's vision that every Alaskan, as part of their quality of life, will have the digital tools, access, and skills to affordably participate online, wherever they are.

To address these challenges, Alaska's Digital Equity Plan focuses on seven key strategies:

1. Develop an affordability initiative.

2. Launch statewide digital literacy activities.

3. Strengthen institutions to provide access to and delivery of critical services.

4. Help every interested Alaska Native tribe, village corporation, and regional Native corporation take advantage of newly available and recurring Federal Communications Commission funding that covers up to 90% of the monthly cost of broadband service and $25,000 for broadband equipment to create tribal library computer centers.

5. Create device refurbishment, distribution, and maintenance programs.

6. Establish a circuit rider program of digital navigators called the "Alaska Native Digital Corps" who can help rural Alaskan communities install equipment and software, connect to the internet, and train entities and individuals – including local and tribal governments, non-Native and tribal nonprofit organizations, and Native corporations and other small businesses.

7. Provide a robust catalog of training opportunities, both in-person and on-line, to help new broadband users learn how to access the internet and assist established users in sharpening their skills. Utilize computer, digital, and cybersecurity services already offered by Alaska Native corporations.

The Alaska Broadband Office knows that the implementation of these strategies rests both on the effective buildout of Alaska's broadband infrastructure and coordination of State, Tribal, public, and private efforts.

An extensive outreach campaign informs this Digital Equity Plan. More than a dozen nonprofits serving the covered populations hosted approximately 196 community meetings across the state over the past year. Alaskans were clear in articulating the disadvantages they experience. Successful implementation of this Digital Equity Plan will require similar determination.

Shaping the Plan to Address Barriers for Alaskans

The following themes emerged over the course of Alaska's statewide digital equity planning campaign:

> ***Broadband access in rural Alaska is expensive, limited, and inconsistent:*** BroadbandNow ranks Alaska last amongst states and the District of Columbia for internet coverage, speed, and availability, and statistics from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) show that rural communities experience the brunt of the service limitations.[7] Anecdotally, listening session participants in small, rural, and Tribal communities reported that service disruptions are part of daily life. Many rural communities still lack any access to internet service and most that do have access have limited options. When ice severed a sub-sea fiber-optic cable providing service to Utqiagvik, Point Hope, Wainwright, Kotzebue, and Nome, internet and cellular service was disrupted and telecommunications companies scrambled to provide alternatives, albeit at reduced service levels.

- ***Covered populations in all communities lack access:*** While Alaskans living in urban communities do have choices between multiple providers and plans, service was still inaccessible to the covered populations due to factors like cost, limited digital skills, and no access to devices.

- ***The digital divide results in uneven educational opportunities:*** Rural communities are particularly vulnerable to educational disparities caused by the lack of affordable and reliable internet. This includes most Alaska communities that are remote and unconnected by road. Some communities do not have any facilities (including libraries) with reliable public internet access, proper equipment, devices, software, IT Support services, and management tools to accommodate community use. Many rural schools are closed to the public during the summer leaving no public access option. Residents in urban communities also experienced challenges. Some listening session participants weren't aware of the public resources available to them while others couldn't access them for reasons ranging from physical limitations to language and cultural barriers.

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[7]https://broadbandusa.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=50c64e2c028d46a58247125e4bcdcdc8&_gl=1%2
A1fuw9bw%2A_ga%2AMTE0OTE3NjcwOC4xNjg2ODc3Mjky%2A_ga_XL1D9JMCL1%2AMTY5MDY3ODAxNy4xMS4wLjE2OTA2Nzg
wMTcuMC4wLjA.&_ga=2.68033617.1510052865.1690678017-1149176708.1686877292

- ***Workforce supply and training opportunities are limited by a lack of internet access:*** Communities without internet access are limited to in-person training opportunities often held in regional hubs when not otherwise provided online or when online access isn't available. This can be costly, time-consuming, and difficult to access for individuals with families. And, once trained, remote employment often isn't possible due to internet limitations, leading to outmigration.

- ***Better health outcomes are a challenge without reliable access to internet services:*** Healthcare services in Alaska—particularly the Tribal healthcare system—are a national leader in telemedicine. And that's with the current digital divide. But with telemedicine as the only way to talk to a doctor in most rural communities, any lack of connectivity can create life and death situations.

> *"I got a lifeline phone, but you only get 8 gigs and a lot of times I am out and about, and I have to use the data for the maps so that smokes it. It stops me in my tracks from getting where I need to go for jobs, treatments, for this class or that class... Slow data, not enough data….It drops off. For a week and a half, we didn't have data. Now I am doing mental health treatment through telehealth so I have to have data, or I can't do it."*
>
> - Listening Session Participant

- ***The internet is the easiest way to access many civic and social services:*** Accessing critical services becomes much more challenging without reliable, high-speed internet. Alaskans use the internet to access public benefits like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, and Veteran's Affairs services. Fishing and hunting licenses and the annual Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend application are also easiest to access via the internet. Additionally, participation in online public processes (like streaming legislative committees on Gavel Alaska) or accessing self-help legal resources is not possible without reliable internet.

- ***Alaskans can't live where they want to live:*** Without internet access, many Alaskans have to relocate to communities on the road system with greater opportunities for education, career advancement, and more. This outmigration erodes a community's culture, separates individuals from their families and traditional way of life, and reduces the local workforce pool.

- ***Community Anchor Institutions have a key role to play:*** Alaska's local and Tribal governments, state agencies, public entities, school districts, nonprofits, and other institutions have played a role in mitigating challenges in communities across Alaska and will be critical to ensuring success as digital equity is addressed in the coming years.

- ***Encourage and enable Alaskans to take greater advantage of existing federal programs that could increase access to broadband service and devices such as smart phones:*** The Affordable Connectivity Program provides $75 per month for eligible Alaskans to pay for monthly broadband expenses as well as $100 for the purchase of a digital device. According to the White House, nearly 110,000 Alaskan families are eligible for this income-based program, yet little more than 20,000 Alaskans have applied to date.

  Because the FCC categorizes all of Alaska as "tribal land," all Alaskans are eligible for the tribal subsidy of $75 per month rather than the $35 per month available in cities and towns in the Lower 48. Congress initially funded this program at $14 billion and funding may lapse as early as April 2024, but if the program is funded, the State must make enrolling Alaskan families a priority. As of this writing, Congress is considering legislation to extend the program.

  Families are eligible for this program if they participate in the Head Start Program, if their children receive free or reduced priced school lunches, if they participate in other low-income program like Pell Grants for college students, or if their household income is less than a certain percentage of the poverty level.

  Likewise, the State should ensure that all eligible Alaskans take advantage of the Lifeline Program available at most Alaska carriers. This program provides free or very low-cost phones as well as monthly service to low-income individuals who elect not to have a wired phone in their home. This on-going program is funded through the Universal Service Fund (USF) at the FCC through monthly assessments on phones across the nation. The State should work closely with the Alaska Telephone Association to conduct outreach to eligible Alaskans.

- ***Alaska's 229 Indian tribes and over 200 Native corporations are newly eligible to create tribal library computer centers but lack the knowledge or resources to navigate the complex application process:*** In January 2022, the FCC issued an Order making Indian tribes and Native corporations eligible to create tribal library computer centers funded through the USF's Schools and Libraries Program. Under that program, low-income communities may seek reimbursement of up to 90% of their monthly broadband bills. The exact percentage of reimbursement is determined by the participation rate of local school children in the School Lunch Program. The program also provides $25,000 for broadband equipment for each tribal library for items such as routers and hotspots. That amount is slated to increase to $50,000 for tribal libraries in the coming year. Tribes may re-apply for additional funding to acquire new, updated equipment every five years.

- *Tribes and Native corporations are also eligible for Basic Tribal Library Grants of $10,000 each per year as well as Enhanced Tribal Library Grants of $150,000 annually through the Institute of Museum and Library Services, an independent federal agency:* These funds may be used to equip or staff tribal library computer centers. In fiscal year 2022, only 55 Alaska tribes and Native corporations applied of the more than 400 that were eligible. With support and resources provided through programs like the AFN Navigator Corps, more entities could access this funding.

Plan Development and Outreach: Engaging Alaskans

Throughout the digital equity planning period, an extensive campaign was launched by the State of Alaska and its partner organizations. This campaign included community listening sessions, a listening tour, engagement with community leaders, a statewide survey, a Digital Equity Summit, and more. This Digital Equity Plan strives to honor the thousands of Alaskans who took the time to attend and share their experiences at one of the 196 sessions conducted across the state.

Communities Visited

Akiachak	Healy	Manokotak	Savoonga
Akiak	Homer	McGrath	Seldovia
Alakanuk	Houston	Mekoryuk	Seward
Ambler	Hydaburg	Nanwalek	Sitka
Anchorage	Juneau	Napakiak	Sleetmute
Bethel	Kake	Napaskiak	Soldotna
Chitina	Kasigluk	Nenana	Talkeetna
Cooper Landing	Kenai	Newtok	Teller
Cordova	Ketchikan	Nome	Tok
Crooked Creek	Klawock	Noorvik	Toksook Bay
Dillingham	Kobuk	North Pole	Tununak
Eagle River/Chugiak	Kodiak	Palmer	Tyonek
Eureka	Kongiganak	Pilot Station	Unalaska
Fairbanks	Kotzebue	Point Lay	Utqiagvik
Galena	Kwethluk	Quinhagak	Valdez
Gambell	Lake Louise/Eureka	Russian Mission	Wasilla
Glacier View (virtual)	Lime Village	Saint Mary's	Wrangell
			Yakutat

Resolving Inequity

The State of Alaska is working to ensure that every Alaskan, as part of their quality of life, will have the digital tools, access, and skills to affordably participate online, wherever they are. To do so, the State will focus on high-speed internet affordability, access to devices, strengthening institutions, and digital skills. These efforts will be guided by the following principles:

- *Equity:* All Alaskans have the same opportunity for internet connectivity, reliability, and pricing in the place they choose to reside.

- *Competition:* There is sufficient competition among internet service providers and a diversity of technological solutions to offer choices that are affordable and at adequate speeds.

- *Performance:* The internet is fast and reliable, and the quality will improve over time as use of the internet continues to evolve.

- *Affordability:* Cost is not a barrier for any Alaskan who wants to connect to the internet, now or in the future.

- *Safety:* Alaskans understand the cybersecurity risks that come with technology access and are educated on how to protect themselves and their data and how it is used.

- *Learning:* Alaskans have access to digital literacy training and content that encourages self-sufficiency, participation, safety, and collaboration.

- *Outreach*: Leverage existing outreach networks such as AFN's Navigator Program and outreach efforts led by RurAL CAP, non-profit tribal organizations, the Association of Alaska Housing Authorities (which serves 14 housing authorities statewide), and the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (which operates more than 200 telehealth centers statewide). These entities, among others, have existing relationships with underserved groups.

The State recognizes that it cannot do this work alone. Continued support from tribal, nonprofit, federal, and private partners will be critical. The Digital Equity Plan envisions a statewide Digital Equity Coalition (Coalition) that would be comprised of organizations involved in the Planning process plus additional partners that represent covered populations and/or address digital equity and workforce development. The Coalition, as it develops, will establish goals consistent with the State's Digital Equity Plan, with a range of complementary activities, including filling gaps where the State has less of a role. This independent partner may then be able to assist in the delivery of many of the strategies identified in this plan.

Implementation Timeline

Alaska's participation in the federally funded State Digital Equity Planning Program is the first in a two-part series of state Digital Equity programs under the Digital Equity Act. Upon completion of its Digital Equity Plan, Alaska will be eligible to apply for the non-competitive Digital Equity State Capacity Grant Program and is expected to receive approximately $10 to $13 million to implement digital equity initiatives. In parallel, nonprofit organizations, local and municipal governments, and other entities around the country will be eligible to apply for the $1.25 billion Digital Equity Competitive Grant Program, which offers competitive grant funding opportunities for proposed local or community-based digital equity programs. This will be a crucial pathway for strengthening institutions in Alaska, and the State of Alaska anticipates being engaged with organizations, Tribes, and local governments interested in applying for these funds. The State's Digital Equity Plan provides guidance and a baseline for future activities and encourages partners to respond to the vision and goals herein.

Acknowledgements

This undertaking would not have been possible without the hard work of dedicated Alaska community leaders. The State of Alaska wishes to thank Rasmuson Foundation, AARP Alaska, Alaska Municipal League, Alaska Federation of Natives, RurAL CAP, Kenai Community Foundation, Seward Community Foundation, Alaska Warrior Partnership, Alaska Public Interest Research Group (AKPIRG), Alaska Literacy Program, Special Olympics of Alaska, Polynesian Association of Alaska, and Sol De Medianoche. In addition to the Digital Equity Planning Committees for their invaluable assistance throughout this process, the State also wishes to thank the many Alaskans who took the time to add their valuable voice to the digital equity conversation in Alaska.

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Key Activities

To advance implementation efforts, the State of Alaska will focus on the following activities:

Strategy	Key Activities
Affordability Initiative	• Identify policy initiatives that advance high-speed internet affordability. • Identify and develop other funding opportunities to sustain affordable access. • Ensure affordability strategies are inclusive of every Alaskan, but with specific focus on the covered populations. • Increase enrollment in Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) and other affordability programs.

Digital Literacy Campaign	• Create statewide digital literacy programs with a focus on in-person programming that includes:
	  ▪ Train-the-trainer initiative.
	  ▪ Use of existing digital literacy curriculum and programs.
	  ▪ Coordination and support of community partnerships.
	  ▪ Expand and support existing digital navigator programs.
	  ▪ Leverage existing digital literacy resources and curriculum.

Strengthening Institutions	• Provide pathways to increased broadband access at public entities. • Encourage nonprofit and other partners to increase their focus on digital equity. • Enable the equitable delivery of public and nonprofit services. • Institute planning efforts that expand the capacity of community anchor institutions to meet the needs of covered populations.
Device Affordability & Refurbishment Program and Technical Support	• Partner with the private sector, philanthropy, government, non-profits, and others to provide affordable devices. • Develop technical support programs. • Identify sources for adaptive device accessories to meet the needs of covered populations. • Work toward access to devices in community anchor institutions and public spaces.

Implementation Timeline: 2023 – 2030

For a detailed visualization of the timeline, please see Section 5.3 - Implementation Timeline

2023 – 2024	
Continue to coordinate with ABO on affordability initiatives, promote to and enroll households in ACP, and support existing digital literacy programs and explore options for new programs.	**Determine partners** for cybersecurity, online safety, and privacy campaign.
	Explore options and identify partners for device affordability, refurbishment, and technical support.
Establish DE Coalition and determine roles of member groups. Establish baseline for KPIs.	**Identify** assistive technology needs and funding opportunities.
Identify and study the feasibility of affordability strategies.	**Apply** for DE Capacity Building Grant
	Conduct further assessments to determine baseline for KPIs.

2025	
Continue to coordinate with ABO on affordability, accessibility and other Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) efforts throughout DE grant programs. Continue community engagement and public input.	**Plan** Digital Navigator Programs and identify and train future digital navigators. Plan Statewide Digital Literacy Program, cybersecurity, and online safety and privacy campaigns.
Design and develop policy initiatives to advance broadband and device affordability, including identification of other funding opportunities to sustain affordable access.	**Build a roadmap** for digital literacy initiative and cybersecurity, safety, and privacy campaign.
Support Alaskan organizations with their applications to the DE Competitive Grants.	**Finalize contracts** with device refurbishment/distribution/repair entities.

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2026

Continue coordination with ABO, engagement with communities and covered populations.

Advocate for policy initiatives to advance broadband affordability, advocate for other funding opportunities to sustain affordable access, Digital Navigator Programs, Statewide Digital Literacy Program, Cybersecurity and online safety and privacy campaign.

Identify sources for adaptive device accessories to meet the needs of the covered populations, Partner with manufacturers, distributors, non-profits, and others to provide affordable devices.

Launch affordability initiative and statewide digital literacy program.

Assess progress towards KPIs.

2027

Continue community engagement and partnerships with stakeholders.

Improve, refine, and expand new programs.

Assess success of prior year and progress towards KPIs.

Engage communities to ensure services and programs are meeting specific needs.

2028

Incorporate actions from policy initiatives to advance broadband affordability.

Continue to pursue funding opportunities to sustain affordable access and to ensure adaptive devices and accessories are available for all.

Expand Digital Navigator Programs and Statewide Digital Literacy Program, Cybersecurity and online safety and privacy campaign.

Ensure adaptive device accessories to meet the needs of the covered populations, Manufacturers, distributors, nonprofits, and others provide affordable devices.

2029

Outcomes and impact evaluation: Survey and Community Conversations.

2.   Introduction & Vision for Digital Equity

Whether it is agonizingly slow speeds, high costs, an unreliable connection, an unaffordable device, the inability to fix a device, or public websites made inaccessible by a lack of digital skills, Alaskans face many barriers to participating in the digital economy and society. Funded by the landmark Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021 (IIJA), the State of Alaska's Digital Equity Plan offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to address digital equity across Alaska. These historic efforts are made possible by the State's close collaboration with partners, and by the ability to listen and learn from the communities most impacted by digital inequity.

> *Digital Equity is the condition in which individuals and communities have the information technology capacity that is needed for full participation in the society and economy of the United States.*
>
> *-Digital Equity Act, Division F, Title III - Digital Equity Act of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.*

IIJA's Digital Equity Act is designed to focus on covered populations; the outcome of an equitable approach to broadband buildout should be that Alaska's most vulnerable citizens' benefit. These groups have been identified by the federal government as disproportionately lacking access to affordable and reliable high-speed internet connectivity, affordable devices, and the skills and knowledge to effectively use both the internet and devices.

Covered Populations

Almost 83% of Alaskans are considered part of one or more covered populations, including all individuals living outside of the Anchorage and Fairbanks metro areas. For a list of further digital equity related definitions and details on covered populations, please see Appendix A: Definitions.

The State of Alaska recognizes the following covered populations as defined by the NTIA, as the specific Alaskans that the State's efforts are intended to benefit:

- Rural residents
- Members of a racial or ethnic minority
- Individuals with a language barrier
- Individuals with disabilities
- Veterans
- Incarcerated individuals
- Individuals over age 60
- Individuals in low-income households

The below table provides a snapshot of Alaska's population demographics, as compared to those of the other 49 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia:

	Alaskans (%)	All Americans (%)
All Covered Populations	82.7%	81%
Low-Income Households	17.9%	25%
Aging Individuals	18.7%	26%
Non-Federally Incarcerated Individuals	0.6%	0.6%
Veterans	10.1%	8%
Individuals with Disabilities	11.9%	16%
Individuals with a Language Barrier	English Learner: 4.4% Low Literacy: 12.7%	English Learner: 5% Low Literacy: 21%
Racial or Ethnic Minorities	40.2%	26%
Individuals Primarily Living in Rural Areas	49.4%	16%

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Additionally, the State of Alaska recognizes the need for a subcategory for Native people under the category of "Racial and Ethnic Minorities". U.S. Census data also shows that Alaska Native people make up the majority of the population in many rural and remote places of the state, especially western and northern Alaska. Given the special language needs, lack of broadband service in the rural communities, and the high poverty rate in many Native communities, the Alaska Native population requires special attention in the report.

2020 Census Area	Percentage of Native Residents
Kusilvak Census Area	96.9%
Bethel Census Area	88.5%
Northwest Arctic Borough	88.1%
Nome Census Area	82.6%
Dillingham Census Area	79.9%
Yukon-Koyukuk Census Area	77.2%
Lake and Peninsula Borough	76.8%
North Slope Borough	57.8%
Prince of Wales-Hyder	54.7%
Yakutat City and Borough	52.4%
Bristol Bay Borough	48.6%
Hoonah-Angoon Census Area	46.7%

2.1. Vision for Digital Equity

The Digital Equity Act of 2021 aims to address digital inequity by identifying barriers that disrupt access and by stimulating community-driven solutions. Throughout the development of the State Digital Equity Plan, Alaskans made their voices heard at listening sessions. This feedback was used by Alaska's Digital Equity Steering Committee to produce the following *Vision Statement.*

> *Every Alaskan, as part of their quality of life, will have the digital tools, access, and skills to affordably participate online, wherever they are.*

2.2. Digital Equity Strategies & Objectives

Alaska's Digital Equity Plan is consistent with federal guidelines and addresses the digital divide across the following areas:

- Broadband Availability & Affordability
- Online Accessibility & Inclusivity
- Digital Literacy
- Online Privacy & Cybersecurity
- Device Availability & Affordability

Federal guidelines mandate the development of strategies across each of the five areas listed above for all eight covered populations. The strategies must (a) establish measurable goals, objectives, and proposed core activities to address the needs of covered populations, (b) set out measures ensuring the plan's sustainability and effectiveness across State communities, and (c) adopt mechanisms to ensure that the plan is regularly evaluated and updated.[8]

Data & Methodologies for Developing Strategies and Key Performance Indicators

Having a means of measuring progress toward goals is a critical part of accountability. But finding enough available data to build unique strategies across the eight covered populations is challenging in Alaska, where data is often lacking. As a result, many of the strategies laid out below incorporate data collection as an essential first step of the strategy.

Alaska does have a readily available and strong network of nonprofits and community anchor institutions dedicated to improving the lives of the covered populations through eliminating digital inequity and focusing on the most common positive impacts. The strategies detailed below are based off of hundreds of conversations with members of Alaska's covered populations and the entities that serve them. To help collect this information, Rasmuson Foundation, as the State's Digital Equity Administrator, turned to nonprofit organizations and partners that exist to serve these populations for support. Sixteen individuals representing 13 local partners were trained by the Alaska Humanities Forum in best practices on conversation facilitation.

Between January 2022 and August 2023, members of churches, coalitions, federations, networks, organizations, local governments, nonprofits, unions, state government, and tribes, as well as individuals, hosted and participated in community conversations. Over 3,191 individuals shared their lived experiences with broadband, data, devices, digital data, knowledge, and

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[8]Page 6, https://broadbandusa.ntia.doc.gov/sites/default/files/2022-11/Digital%20Equity%20Plan%20Guidance%20-%2011-8-22.pdf

impacts on their lives, and provided suggestions and recommendations to improve outcomes. More detailed information on the outreach strategies used for creating the Key Performance Indicators can be found in Section 4.

2.3.   General Key Performance Indicators

The following strategies, activities, and Key Performance Indicators (KPI) are broken into two sections: the first grouping of strategies apply generally to all covered populations. The second grouping of strategies are specific to the specified covered populations.

Depending on funding, each strategy will be tracked throughout the Capacity Grant and Competitive Grant phases of the Digital Equity Act. As additional data is collected about a covered population, the State will be able to further delineate and specify KPIs. The information detailed below lays out measurable objectives. Each KPI is projected to be funded by the Digital Equity Capacity Grants and contains a baseline, near-term goal, and long-term goal. Unless otherwise outlined in a specific KPI, Baseline surveys/study are projected to be within 12 months, Near-Term KPIs will measure progress over 3 years or by 2027, and Long-Term KPIs will measure achievements at the end of 2030. If there is insufficient funding, the ABO will have to prioritize the KPIs. Complementary information on implementation strategies is found in Section 5 of this plan.

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Matrix of Key Performance Indicators (KPI) to Requirements					
	a. Affordability of access to fixed and wireless broadband technology	**b. The online accessibility and inclusivity of public resources and services**	**c. Digital literacy**	**d. Awareness of, and the use of, measures to secure the online with respect to, an individual**	**e. Availability and affordability of consumer devices and technical support for those devices**
1. Individuals with a Language Barrier	2.3.1.	2.3.5.	2.3.4.	2.3.2.	2.3.3.
2. Incarcerated Individuals	2.4.2.(B)	2.3.5.	2.4.2.(B)	N/A[9]	2.4.2.(C)
3. Individuals with Disabilities	2.3.1.	2.3.5.	2.3.4.	2.3.2.	2.3.3.
4. Individuals in Low-Income Households	2.3.1.	2.3.5.	2.3.4.	2.3.2.	2.3.3.
5. Aging Individuals	2.3.1.	2.3.5.	2.3.4.	2.3.2.	2.3.3.
6. Veterans	2.3.1.	2.3.5.	2.3.4.	2.3.2.	2.3.3.
7. Racial and Ethnic Minorities	2.3.1.	2.3.5.	2.3.4.	2.3.2.	2.3.3.
8. Individuals Primarily Living in Rural Areas	2.3.1	2.3.5.	2.3.4.	2.3.2.	2.3.3.

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[9] Incarcerated individuals will have this metric provided for them through the Department of Corrections.

2.3.1. Broadband Availability and Affordable Internet

Impacted Covered Populations:

- · Individuals with a Language Barrier
- · Individuals with Disabilities
- · Individuals in Low-Income Households
- · Aging Individuals
- · Veterans
- · Racial and Ethnic Minorities
- · Individuals Primarily Living in Rural Areas

Strategy: Develop an initiative for broadband affordability that includes policy, available pricing, ACP enrollment, and identification of new funding strategies.

Key Performance Indicator:

Increase share of Alaskans for whom broadband is affordable.

- Baseline: To be determined by a study of household awareness of affordable broadband (Internet) service.

- Near-term: Based on the study outcome:

  - If less than 25% eligible household awareness, then an expected 10% increase per year for 3 years,

  - If between 26% and 70% eligible household awareness, then an expected 5% increase per year for 3 years, and

  - If over 70% eligible household awareness, then an expected 2% increase per year for 3 years.

- Long-term: 96% of eligible households in all communities in Alaska have been contacted and made aware of access to an affordable broadband plan.

2.3.2. Online Privacy and Cybersecurity

Impacted Covered Populations:

- ·   Individuals with a Language Barrier
- ·   Individuals with Disabilities
- ·   Individuals in Low-Income Households
- ·   Aging Individuals
- ·   Veterans
- ·   Racial and Ethnic Minorities
- ·   Individuals Primarily Living in Rural Areas

Strategy: Launch a statewide digital literacy campaign.

Key Performance Indicator:

Increase the number of Alaskans who are digitally literate.

- Baseline: Digital literacy within the individual covered populations will be determined through a survey.

- Near-term: Based on the study outcome:

    - If less than 25% literacy coverage, then expected 10% increase per year for 3 years,

    - If between 26% and 70% literacy coverage, then expected 5% increase per year for 3 years, and

    - If over 70% literacy coverage, then expected 2% increase per year for 3 years.

- Long-term: 75% of Alaskans in the covered populations will report on a survey that they have taken the initial digital literacy course or self-reported a digital literacy understanding.

2.3.3. Devices and Affordability

Impacted Covered Populations:

- Individuals with a Language Barrier
- Individuals with Disabilities
- Individuals in Low-Income Households
- Aging Individuals
- Veterans
- Racial and Ethnic Minorities
- Individuals Primarily Living in Rural Areas

Strategy: Create a program for device refurbishment, distribution, and maintenance.

Key Performance Indicators:

Increase the number of Alaskans who have access to an affordable device that meets their needs.

- Baseline: 95% of Alaskans use a computer or tablet.

- Near-term: Increase the number of Alaskans who use a computer or tablet to 96%.

- Long-term: Increase the number of Alaskans who use a computer or tablet to, at least, 97.5%.

2.3.4. Digital Literacy

Impacted Covered Populations:

Individuals with a Language Barrier
Incarcerated Individuals
Individuals with Disabilities
Individuals in Low-Income Households
Aging Individuals
Veterans
Racial and Ethnic Minorities
Individuals Primarily Living in Rural Areas

Strategy: Ensure information and training is accessible in ways meaningful to Alaska's eight covered populations.

Key Performance Indicators:

Increase the number of pathways to broadband access at public entities.

- Baseline: Determine through a study, the percentage of Alaska public entities that do not have public internet access points.[10]

- Near Term

  - If less than 25% of public entities have access points, then expected 10% increase per year for 3 years.

  - If between 26% and 70% of public entities have access points, then expected 5% increase per year for 3 years, and

  - If over 70% of public entities have access points, then expected 2% increase per year for 3 years.

- Long-term: 75% of Alaska public entities will provide facilities with public broadband access.

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[10] https://www.internetforall.gov/interactive-map/Alaska.

2.3.5. Online Accessibility and Inclusivity

Impacted Covered Populations:

- Individuals with a Language Barrier
- Incarcerated Individuals
- Individuals with Disabilities
- Individuals in Low-Income Households
- Aging Individuals
- Veterans
- Racial and Ethnic Minorities
- Individuals Primarily Living in Rural Areas

Strategy: Increase support for Alaska's Community Anchor Institutions (CAIs) by developing an effective and low-cost Digital Equity Policy Plan.

Key Performance Indicators:

Encourage nonprofits to increase their focus on digital equity.

- Baseline: Determine through a survey the percentage of non-profit CAIs that do not have a Digital Equity Policy Plan.

- Near Term

  - If less than 25% of non-profit CAIs have a Digital Equity Policy Plan, then expected 10% increase per year for 3 years,

  - If between 26% and 70% of non-profit CAIs have a Digital Equity Policy Plan, then expected 5% increase per year for 3 years, and

  - If over 70% of non-profit CAIs have a Digital Equity Policy Plan, then expected 2% increase per year for 3 years.

- Long-term: Increase adoption and implementation of a Digital Equity Policy Plan by non-profit CAIs by a minimum of 15% over the baseline.

2.4.   Population-Specific Strategies

While there is some commonality around need, each of the covered populations also experience their own unique challenges. This next grouping of KPIs is designed to address those.

Contained below is information about each of the covered populations in Alaska, followed by the specific KPIs. Included is the definition of each covered population as defined by federal guidelines; Alaska-specific data about each population; who led the population engagement process; lessons learned throughout the engagement; and finally, the specific KPIs.

2.4.1. Individuals with a Language Barrier

The NTIA defines a person with a language barrier as an individual who uses a language other than English at home, who speaks English less than "very well", or who has a low literacy level.

According to estimates, nearly 20 Indigenous languages are still spoken in Alaska, but the principal languages still commonly in use in day-to-day conversations are Yu'pik, Siberian, and Inupiaq Eskimo dialects. Special accommodation should be made to address these unique language needs including providing computer and digital literacy trainers who speak those languages, particularly in addressing the needs of the elder community.

According to the 2021 U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, more than 59,000 people living in Alaska are foreign-born, and 15.8% of Alaska's population speaks a language other than English at home.[11]

Barriers identified during listening sessions included a lack of embedded translation services on websites, the accuracy of the translation when available, lack of familiarity and knowledge about how to access broadband at community spaces like libraries, and lack of opportunity to utilize available resources like grants because the application processes are often prohibitive to English Learner communities.

During a listening session, one English Learner shared a story about how, when they fell behind paying their electric bill, they didn't know there was a process for applying for assistance and the electricity was cut off. With no electricity, their family was eventually forced to leave stable housing. Another person shared that it is common to ask children for help with navigating the internet when there are language barriers online and that people who can't access the internet on their own feel cut off from the world and helpless. A third shared a story about how they lost healthcare coverage because they couldn't figure out how to use the website.

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[11] https://data.census.gov/table?g=040XX00US02&y=2021&d=ACS+1-Year+Estimates+Selected+Population+Profiles

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Goal: Make Digital Resources Widely Available to Individuals with a Language Barrier

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Strategy: Ensure resources including government websites and digital literacy materials are accessible to English learners.

Key Performance Indicators:

Identify best practices for website readability and language accessibility and incorporate them into State of Alaska practices.

- Baseline: Within 24 months, conduct a best-practices assessment for website readability and language accessibility, develop replicable guidelines, and determine what percent of public access websites pass the readability and language accessibility metrics;

- Near-term: Incorporate best practices by department within the State of Alaska and update their websites by 2027. Based on the study outcome:

    - If less than 25% accessibility determination, then expected 10% increase per year for 3 years,

    - If between 26% and 70% accessibility determination, then expected 5% increase per year for 3 years, and

    - If over 70% accessibility determination, then expected 2% increase per year for 3 years.

- Long-term: 90% of all State of Alaska websites providing public services incorporate readability and language accessibility best practices.

2.4.2. Incarcerated Individuals

Incarcerated is defined by NTIA as individuals incarcerated in non-Federal correctional facilities.

Alaska has one of the highest incarceration rates in the country. At mid-year 2021, the Alaska Department of Corrections (DOC) reported holding in-custody or supervising a total of 9,216 individuals, equating to approximately 1.3% of the State's entire population.[12] Among those individuals in-custody or under DOC supervision at mid-year 2021, a total of 4,597 individuals were housed inside an in-state correctional facility, 16 were housed in an out-of-state correctional facility, 295 were housed at a community residential center, 195 individuals were in the community on electronic monitoring, and 4,113 individuals were on parole or probation.

Some obstacles identified during listening sessions were lack of access to broadband, lack of access to technology, and lack of digital literacy education.

The DOC doesn't allow incarcerated people to access the internet, and state law prohibits prisoners from having a computer "of any kind" in their cell. This not only limits the ability to connect while incarcerated, but contributes to significant digital illiteracy, which can be the difference between success and failure once released. One formerly incarcerated father who was recently released shared, "Keeping in contact with your family is so important. A lot of people don't have money to contact their family. It feels like you're isolated. For me, keeping those relationships and keeping hope was a big part of it. I really wanted to talk to my daughter every day."

Many times, clients served by nonprofits feel stigmatized and isolated by their struggles to access and navigate the internet. One reentrant expressed feeling overwhelmed with trying to learn how to use technology. They asked, "How can we get back to living out here if we don't know how to do it?"

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[12] https://www.anchoragereentry.org/_files/ugd/1285b7_f32b0a0d1d8f4d3c88d37ed44d313d91.pdf

Goal: Ensure Accessibility and Digital Literacy for Incarcerated Individuals

Strategy: Provide access to technology within correctional facilities across Alaska to facilitate opportunities for rehabilitation and reentry in ways that promote public safety, without cost to Incarcerated Alaskans.

Key Performance Indicators (Incarcerated):

(A) Improve Digital Literacy Education Levels.

- Baseline: Develop and administer a baseline digital literacy assessment to the incarcerated population to understand current skill levels.

- Near-term: Improve digital literacy scores among inmates by 20% over baseline within one year of implementation of digital literacy education.

- Long-term: Improve digital literacy scores by 50% over in five years and ensure on-going training opportunities are available to incarcerated Alaskans until release.

2.4.3. Individual with Disabilities

NTIA defines people with disabilities as individuals with a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. This could include experiencing difficulties with at least one of the following: hearing, vision, cognitive, ambulatory, self-care difficulties, and independent living difficulty. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 12% of Alaskans have serious cognitive impairments including difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions; 10% have serious mobility issues including difficulty walking or climbing stairs; 7% of Alaskans are deaf or have serious difficulty hearing; 6% of Alaskans have barriers to independent living including difficulty doing errands alone or going to the doctor; 5% are blind or have serious difficulty seeing even when wearing glasses; and 3% have limitations with self-care including difficulty getting dressed and bathing.[13]

Obstacles identified during listening sessions included lack of accessible websites and devices. Participants expressed frustration with both the cost and quality of service.

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[13] https:// www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/impacts/alaska.html

A member of the visually impaired community shared an experience about having to fill out an online form: "There was no way to fill it out by paper, have a proxy fill it out, go into an office, the only option they gave was to fill it out online, but the form was inaccessible." An individual with a traumatic brain injury shared they had a doctor's appointment near the end of the month, but their high-speed data ran out. They could not get connected to their appointment in a timely manner and lost their appointment with the specialist. When rescheduling, the next available appointment was more than a month out.

Goal: Digital Skills, Privacy, and Cybersecurity

Strategy: Launch a statewide digital literacy campaign focused on reaching Alaskans with disabilities

Key Performance Indicators:

Making digital resources ADA accessible for people with disabilities

- Baseline: Within nine months, review all State websites to determine their level of ADA accessibility;

- Near-Term: 65% of State government websites will be compliant with section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act by 2027;

- Long-Term: 90% of State websites will be compliant with Title II and Title III of the ADA and Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act.

2.4.4. Individuals in Low-Income Households

NTIA defines a "covered household" as a household with income no more than 150% of the federal poverty threshold. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 10.5% of Alaska's population is living in poverty.[14] According to the most recent 2020 Census data, on average more than 20% of Alaska Native families live in poverty – nearly double the poverty rate in the rest of the state. Yet that statistic pales in comparison to the nearly 35% poverty rate found in many Native villages in Western Alaska which is one of the highest poverty rates in the nation.

Some of the obstacles identified during sessions included the cost of purchasing devices and plans and not being able to get to community anchor institutions for public access, especially for individuals with inconsistent work schedules. During one listening session, an individual recalled the struggle just to do homework. When the library was closed, the individual would connect to the internet from their car. In the dead of winter, the temperature outside could be 60 degrees below zero. "There's a lot of kids that work at night, taking a class or whatever, with the library internet. That's a blessing for people that can't afford internet at home." A librarian shared a story about a homeless individual who regularly uses the internet to keep in touch with his girlfriend and child.

> **Goal: Increase economic opportunities available through broadband for Alaskans in covered households.**
>
> **Strategy:** Increase access to and educational opportunities for economic growth of low-income Alaskans.
>
> **Key Performance Indicators:**
>
> **Increase online options for covered low-income household members.**
>
> - Baseline: Review the percentage of non-profits that provide free or low-cost training resources that are available to low-income individuals.
>
> - Near-term: Within 24 months, create and distribute best-practices training resources to 50% of nonprofits who work with low-income individuals;
>
> - Long-term: Distribute best-practices training resources to 80% of nonprofits who work with low-income individuals.

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[14] https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/AK/HSD410221

2.4.5. Aging Individuals

NTIA defines an "aging individual" as an individual who is 60 years of age or older.[15] According to the Alaska Commission on Aging, in 2022 Alaskans aged 60+ represented more than 20% of the state's total population.[16]

Some obstacles identified during public outreach included a lack of affordability and reliable internet services, the need for training on various devices and programs, and cybersecurity concerns.

During one listening session, a homebound elder shared that they couldn't afford heat, much less internet service; however, they needed the internet to apply for eligible programs and services. Without an internet connection, they feared they may lose their home.

Another individual talked about the toll of isolation on seniors. "Mentally and emotionally, not having access to connection, there are studies that show it increases dementia, depression, anxiety, all these different things. We have a lot of Alaskans with family elsewhere, so distance communication is a priority."

And finally, one senior talked about the need for training. "I keep wishing I had a sixth grader next to me. I'm in my mid-70s, and I don't even do Facebook. If you join something and they say, 'oh look at Facebook, you'll find it'. It's way over my head."

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[15] Page 6, https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/demo/technical-documentation/community-resilience/total_covered_populations_quick_guide.pdf

[16] https://health.alaska.gov/acoa/Documents/ACoA_seniorsnapshot_2022.pdf

Goal: Increase digital safety, security, and digital literacy and competencies in Alaskans aged 60+.

Strategy: Launch a statewide digital literacy campaign for seniors.

Key Performance Indicators:

Increase the number of Alaskans over age 60 who are digitally literate & use the internet safely

- Baseline: Within 24 months, determine the number of programs offering digital literacy training specifically designed for seniors and determine best practices in curriculum designed for seniors.

- Near-term: Increase the number of online digital literacy programs offered to seniors by 33% by 2027.

- Long-term: Increase the number of online digital literacy programs offered to seniors by 66%.

2.4.6. Veterans

The NTIA defines veterans as individuals aged 18 years and older who served in the armed forces in the past, and who were not discharged dishonorably but are no longer on active duty.[17]

For Alaskans this breaks down as follows:

1. There are 62,744 veterans in Alaska,[18]

2. Of those, approximately 22,569 or 32.3% of Alaskan veterans were aged 65+, and[19]

3. According to the Veterans Administration, American Indian and Alaska Native peoples have the highest rate of military service in the nation.

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[17] https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/demo/technical-documentation/community-resilience/total_covered_populations_quick_guide.pdf

[18] https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/AK/HSD410221.

[19] https://health.alaska.gov/acoa/Documents/ACoA_seniorsnapshot_2022.pdf

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Obstacles identified during those sessions were lack of affordability of internet and devices, reliability of internet and devices, and the negative mental health impacts of poor digital experiences.

During a listening session, one veteran shared how internet unreliability has caused a disconnect from family and friends, causing the veteran to suffer from depression and suicidal ideation. Another veteran shared they will not get online because the internet is so slow and unreliable, the frustration can activate PTSD symptoms.

Goal: Increase mental health outcomes of veterans through the use of digital options.

Strategy: Equip Alaskan veterans with digital technology so they can meet virtually regarding their healthcare needs.

Key Performance Indicators:

Increase the availability of mental health resources to veterans

- Baseline: Complete a survey of the number of veterans who use telehealth options for mental health support and compile data about the amount of mental health support received by veterans.

- Near-term: Based on the study outcome of successfully scheduled and completed virtual mental health appointments:
  - If less than 25% accessibility determination, then expected 10% increase per year for 3 years,
  - If between 26% and 70% accessibility determination, then expected 5% increase per year for 3 years, and
  - If over 70% accessibility determination, then expected 2% increase per year for 3 years.

- Long-term: Increase the number of successfully scheduled and completed telehealth mental health appointments to 76% of all scheduled appointments.

2.4.7. Racial and Ethnic Minorities

The NTIA defines a racial or ethnic minority as an individual other than White alone, or as Hispanic or Latino of any race.[20] According to U.S. Census data, 43% of Alaskans are a member of a racial or ethnic minority group.[21] Of the 43% of Alaskans who are members of a racial or ethnic minority group, Alaska Natives comprise more than half of that number. According to the 2020 Census, nearly 22% of Alaskans are either American Indian or Alaska Native alone or in combination, and Native people make up the majority of minority residents across the state. Further, in many rural and remote parts of the State such as Western and Northern Alaska, Alaska Natives are not in the minority; in those locations, the vast majority of residents are Alaska Native. Given their special language needs, the lack of broadband service in the rural communities in which they live, and the very high poverty rate in many Native communities, they require special attention in the Plan because of their unique needs and languages.

During listening sessions, obstacles participants shared included a lack of digital literacy, affordability of internet and devices, difficulty keeping up with technological expectations in school and work, and concern about being left out on efforts to address digital equity.

One participant expressed how helpful it would be to have digital literacy resources more available. "There needs to be classes and training opportunities. Not where individuals have to go someplace, but in their communities." Another added, "And it would be great to have our trainers look like us."

A teacher shared how technology access impacts educational outcomes. "When I think of students who have access to high-speed internet with superior devices and programs, I know they're doing a whole lot better than students in our lower socioeconomic groups. When we encourage teachers to expand the way they teach and to tap into different programs, some kids can't do that. So, teachers have to be careful with how they structure the lessons and the learning."

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[20] Page 7, https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/demo/technical-documentation/community-resilience/total_covered_populations_quick_guide.pdf

[21] https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/AK/PST045222#qf-headnote-b

Goal: Ensure full inclusion of minorities in Alaska through digital literacy campaigns.

Strategy: Provide digital resources in culturally appropriate formats.

Key Performance Indicators:

Develop culturally appropriate digital literacy trainings and materials.

- Baseline: Conduct a survey to determine what percentage of online digital literacy resources are usable by ethnic minority groups.

- Near-term: Based on the outcome of the baseline determination of the number of clicks to a Digital Equity Resource Website, increase the online digital equity resource access by:
    - If less than 25% online digital equity resource meaningful access, then expected 10% increase in utility to ethnic minorities per year for 3 years as measured by clicks,
    - If between 26% and 70% online digital equity resource meaningful access, then expected 5% per year increase for 3 years as measured by clicks, and
    - If over 70% online digital equity resource meaningful access , then expected 2% per year Increase for 3 years as measured by clicks.

- Long-term: 76% increase in online digital equity resource access by racial and ethnic minorities as measured by clicks.

2.4.8. Individuals Primarily Living in Rural Areas

The NTIA defines rural as areas outside of cities and towns with 20,000 or more residents, and areas outside of cities and towns (plus their surrounding urban areas) with 50,000 or more residents. For the purpose of Alaska, rural is defined as anyone who lives outside of Anchorage, Palmer, Wasilla, Fairbanks, or Juneau.

Obstacles identified during outreach included the astronomical cost of service, the cost of data overages, a lack of affordable devices, a lack of options for repairing devices if they break, unreliable service, and the negative mental health, education, economic, social, and cultural impacts from a lack of broadband. Rural Alaska access and affordability conditions are incredibly difficult to overcome and will constitute a large part of the state's success as it relates to digital

equity, if and as they are improved. At the same time, many of the other covered populations are embedded in rural Alaska, further complicating outcomes.

One village leader explained that since the State of Alaska moved many applications for official documents and services online, it is difficult to apply for state services. "The state and federal agencies act as if we are all already connected. We are not, and we are trying to keep up and we can't. Everything is published electronically: public notices, shore leases, reporting, job applications; many residents don't have computers or the internet. We will be in the ice age when we get everyone connected."

Another rural resident described how disproportionately high levels of spending on internet means less spending on other essentials. "High bills, including internet, means many people are not able to set aside any money for retirement. They're just trying to scrape by and make it through the month."

Goal: Ensure rural Alaska online participation through increased access to broadband.

Strategy: Deliver 100/20 Mbps broadband Internet to rural Alaskans.

Key Performance Indicators:

Manage through the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program the list of unserved and underserved locations

- Baseline: Determine the number of non-deconflicted unserved locations in rural/ultra-rural Alaska,

- Near-term: Serve 20% of the unserved rural locations by 2027, and

- Long-term: Achieve "Internet for All" for all rural unserved locations by 2031.

2.5. Digital Equity Coalition & Measuring Success

To ensure continued broad support of digital equity efforts, partners may consider the formation of a Digital Equity Coalition to collect data, evaluate progress, and share findings. A diverse coalition will ensure digital equity remains a statewide focus. It will further provide an ongoing means for evaluating progress and re-evaluating strategies.

2.5.1. Strengthening Institutions

Community Anchor Institutions (CAIs) are vital to the success of the State's Digital Equity Plan. The State's implementation strategy will encourage support for CAIs to improve their access and delivery of services, leveraging both high-speed internet accessibility and affordability. The State's objectives are to provide public benefits by increasing the capacity of local and Tribal governments, public institutions (including local and Tribal libraries), public education, and nonprofits. Online accessibility and inclusivity of public resources, devices, and services is an important part of digital equity. The ABO will provide a leadership role in facilitating accessibility and inclusivity of state and local resources.

2.6.   Alignment with Existing Efforts to Improve Outcomes

The State of Alaska has long recognized the importance of high-speed internet to the wellbeing of its residents. Many of the State's existing objectives for healthcare, the economy, and education align closely with the goals of this Digital Equity Plan and previous broadband reports from the State. The Governor's Task Force on Broadband Report of 2021, states:

Improving quality of life, reducing costs, and facilitating fair and competitive markets are key goals in developing and advancing Alaska's economy and making our state a great place to raise a family or operate a business. Deploying and operating broadband networks that can deliver high-speed, reliable, and affordable communications services to Alaska's residents and businesses is an integral part of that effort.[22]

The Governor's Task Force Report informed the Digital Equity Plan by clearly defining three goals improving the accessibility, affordability, and equity of broadband in Alaska. The DE Plan strategies will contribute towards advancing them:

1. *Accessibility:* All Alaskans should have improved access to high-speed broadband; state policy should identify baseline service attributes and set goals for improvement over time.
2. *Affordability:* Lowering the cost of broadband increases the opportunity for business development, increased healthcare, and educational achievement, and promotes improved quality of life for all Alaskans.
3. *Equity:* Needs should be evaluated at a regional level; investments should occur relative to reducing inequities and establishing better balance of access and costs across Alaska's regions; solutions should not lock any community into a new, future-deficient status quo.

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[22] Governor's Task Force on Broadband, November 2021. https://indd.adobe.com/view/42ddcfe3-5ea9-4bcb-bd09-a71bcb63869a

Figure 1: The Importance of Digital Skills & Access

The Governor's Task Force Report[23] recommends ways to address cost disparity for service to rural and remote communities. These recommendations include establishing a Broadband Parity Adjustment. This Digital Equity (DE) Plan also prioritizes affordability and reducing cost across high-rate areas. The mechanisms for doing so are not yet established and will require further study.

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[23] 2021 AK Broadband Task Force Report (adobe.com).

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Alaska's DE Plan provides a significant opportunity to align and advance priorities across numerous other policy areas, including education, economic and workforce development, healthcare, civic and social engagement, and delivery of other essential services.

Overarching statewide plans across state agencies include goals or objectives that align with Digital Equity principles. A central theme found in many of these plans is a commitment to providing opportunities – from healthcare and education to economic prosperity – for all Alaskans. This notion of equity and inclusion across policy issues indicates that Alaska's investment in closing the digital divide will have a synergistic effect on everyone, regardless of zip code.

The following chart provides an analysis of how state priorities benefit from closing the digital divide and aligning digital equity capacity building efforts locally with statewide plans. It also highlights challenges that must be overcome.

Entity	Plan/Resource	Key Digital Equity Considerations
Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development (DCCED)	Statewide Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy 2022-2027	**Challenge:** Economic development is limited by lack of broadband infrastructure. Access to higher education and workforce training opportunities are also limited for residents without broadband access. **Opportunity:** Economies depend upon a workforce that is prepared and well-trained. Additionally, a focus on digital skills will improve opportunities for Alaskan families and businesses.
Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development (DCCED)	A Blueprint for Alaska's Broadband Future, updated in 2019	**Challenge:** Deploying broadband infrastructure in Alaska is arguably more costly and logistically challenging than anywhere else in the United States. Vast distances and varying land ownership complicate permitting and compliance with federal regulations. **Opportunity:** Build upon the multi-stakeholder engagement and relationship building that the taskforce created. Build on the understanding gained of the unique challenges of infrastructure deployment to share lessons learned and advance work throughout the broadband ecosystem.

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Entity	Plan/Resource	Key Digital Equity Considerations
Department of Education and Early Development	Meeting Alaska's Education Challenge Together	**Challenge:** Connectivity issues for rural students prevent equitable access to educational materials and skills development. **Opportunity:** Digital equity will increase access to high-quality instructional materials and learning experiences for all students and improve communication between the school and parents to support student learning.
Department of Health & Division of Public Assistance	Healthy and Equitable Communities Strategic Plan, 2022-2025	**Challenge:** Rural areas have less access to healthcare options and specialists. Patients must travel to get the care they need. **Opportunity:** Access to telehealth will offer options for high-quality healthcare for both physical and mental health treatment and prevention.
Department of Health & Division of Public Assistance	Division of Public Assistance: https://health.alaska.gov	**Challenge:** Online access to public benefits limits some residents from accessing Medicare, Social Security, and SNAP benefits, for example. **Opportunity:** More Alaskans will be empowered to access the public resources they need to support themselves and their families.
Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium	https://www.anthc.org/	**Challenge:** Without reliable high-speed internet access, telehealth options are limited, and rural patients may have to travel long distances to meet with a specialist. **Opportunity:** Telehealth videoconferencing provides access to high-quality health care providers and specialists that are not usually available in rural areas. ANTHC helps make patient care more efficient by reducing the wait time, travel time and expense of specialty care and follow-up visits. The expansion of telehealth, through federal funds, will allow further improvement of health outcomes.

Entity	Plan/Resource	Key Digital Equity Considerations
Alaska Division of Elections	https://www.elections.alaska.gov	**Challenge:** Residents that cannot access high-speed internet struggle to participate in online community surveys or online public meetings. **Opportunity:** Civic engagement, access to local, state, and federal policymakers improved by increased connectivity.
Alaska Court System	Alaska's justice ecosystem, Building a partnership of providers	**Challenge:** Without access to technology and the internet, individuals are unable to access the Court's robust online self-help materials or live stream / participate in Zoom hearings and meetings. **Opportunity:** Advance the Court System's mission of increasing access to justice for all Alaskans.

The following sections describe current plans as they relate to digital equity, with further analysis of digital equity needs and challenges described in the next chapter.

2.6.1. Economic and Workforce Development

The State of Alaska's 2022-2027 Statewide Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) seeks to, "provide an equitable and unified approach to a competitive business environment, growth of the state's Economic Engines and Emerging Industries, and an enduring economic structure where all Alaskans can actively participate and benefit", and, "to create a shared approach to Alaska's future prosperity that is locally based, regionally driven, and state connected."[24]

The Comprehensive Economic Development (CEDS) prioritizes broadband accessibility, affordability, and resiliency and links business development and expansion opportunities to increased digital skills and competencies (Objective 3.5).[25] The following recommended actions in the CEDS are reflected as key actions this DE Plan (see Section 5): (1) E-commerce trainings and resources for all communities, especially those newly connected to broadband utilizing Digital Equity Act funding; (2) Provide cybersecurity technical assistance to businesses, especially those contracting with the federal government. The CEDS includes prioritization of broadband deployment and resiliency.

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[24] "Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy 2022-2027" (Alaska Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development, October 2022)

[25] Ibid Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy

The Digital Equity Act places high priority on addressing workforce development opportunities for covered populations through expanding internet access and digital skills, including through online workplace resources, as does the State's CEDS' workforce strategy: Develop Alaska's Workforce and Human Capital. Economies exist for the good of the people and depend upon a workforce that is prepared and well-trained. This goal strives to improve the readiness of the workforce to permit the greatest possible opportunity to make a good living and meet the needs of an expanding economy.[26]

2.6.1.1.   Hybrid and Remote Work

Alaska is experiencing a transition to remote and hybrid work; the U.S. Census Bureau reported that the share of teleworkers jumped from 6% in 2019 to 33% in 2021 and has continued to grow.[27] One of the Statewide CEDS goals includes attracting remote workers and entrepreneurs, providing an opportunity to leverage this trend.

Remote Work in Bristol Bay:
According to the Bristol Bay Regional Career and Technical Education Program, 24% of surveyed positions already work partially or fully remotely in Bristol Bay. "The area has already seen growth in high-paying jobs…young and enthusiastic professionals [are moving] to the area to take advantage of all the region has to offer while still being able to work in their chosen fields."
-- Remote Work Opportunity Assessment by the Bristol Bay Native Association (BBNA)

Section 2.6.1. Goal

The State of Alaska's goal through the KPIs relating to digital training in sections 2.3 and 2.4 is to measure the improvements and increase in the covered populations' adoption of digital training to augment the workforce. The specific measurements are in the individual KPIs.

2.6.2. Education

Alaska's Department of Education & Early Development expresses its commitment to digital equity as critical to ensuring the continuation of connectivity for all students within its mission that they "will succeed in their education and work, shape worthwhile and satisfying lives for themselves, exemplify the best values of society, and be effective in improving the character and quality of the world about them."[28] Many of DEED's priorities require equitable resources for

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[26] Ibid Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy

[27] Effects of COVID-19 on Telework by State," Department of Transportation Bureau of Transportation Statistics, accessed April 7, 2023

[28] AK Stat § 14.03.015 (2021)

and access to high-speed internet and internet-capable devices, and the knowledge needed to use them. DEED's strategic plan prioritizes:

- Facilitating access to high-quality instructional materials and learning experiences for all students, preschool through postsecondary.

- Creating and disseminating materials for parents and community members on how they can support the development of their children's reading skills.[29]

Alaska's Digital Equity Plan is responsive to the state's educational goals and aligns with DEED's strategic plan by ensuring that "all students have access to the information technology and the resources they need to excel in school, from kindergarten through university." The Plan includes strategies for all Alaskan students to have access to affordable broadband connections and free/low-cost internet-capable devices to access educational resources.

> *"Closing the achievement gap means ensuring equitable educational rigor and resources."*
>
> *- Meeting Alaska's Education Challenge Together*

Post-Secondary Education

While the pandemic highlighted educational disparities, it also catalyzed the introduction of new technologies to the classroom. According to the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education (ACPE), the transition to virtual instruction encouraged Alaska institutions to continue offering digital instruction methods, opening the door for new technological innovations in education in the future. Listening session participants explained that without reliable internet (similar to K-12) post-secondary students are unable to complete assignments, which "results in bad grades and a downward domino effect." Moreover, poor broadband quality may prevent participation in online learning opportunities.

> *The World Bank estimates that a ten-percentage point increase in broadband penetration can lead to a 1.2% jump in real per capita GDP growth in developed economies.*

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[29] *Meeting Alaska's Education Challenge Together*. (Alaska Department of Education & Early Development, January 2018): https://education.alaska.gov/akedchallenge/alaska-strategic-priorities.pdf

Alaska has set a goal for post-secondary school completion, aiming for 65% of working-age Alaskans to hold a postsecondary school credential by 2025. The University of Alaska is critical to the plan's success, even as Alaska trades and vocational training systems will be integral to opportunities. Postsecondary education attainment offers many benefits, including increased yearly earnings. The Average Individual Earnings by Degree Attainment in 2021 identifies the following: College graduates earning $70,642; those with some college earning $52,270; and those without a degree earning $49,284. This income gap is a stark reminder of the value of post-secondary education.

Section 2.6.2. Goal

Improve the digital literacy for all levels of education through the measurable outcomes of KPIs: 2.3.4.; 2.4.2.(B) above.

2.6.3. Health Outcomes

2.6.3.1.   Alaska Department of Health

The Alaska Department of Health (DOH) describes its goal for all Alaskans to have "equitable access to opportunities to lead healthy lives" in the Healthy and Equitable Communities Strategic Plan, 2022-2025. The DOH Strategic Plan recognizes that health depends on many factors, including the well-being of families, schools, workplaces, housing, and being free from discrimination, as well as access to healthy foods and activities[30].

"Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security are all online now. You need the internet to manage these things."

Another listening session participant noted that they, "can't access federal funding applications, such as [Federal Student Aid], without broadband."

- Listening Session Participants

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[30] "Healthy and Equitable Communities Strategic Plan, 2022-2025" (Anchorage, Alaska: Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, December 2021) https://health.alaska.gov/dph/Director/Documents/AKHECommunitiesPlan.pdf

Alaskans who rely on public assistance and services need to be able to quickly access information about programs. The State's Division of Public Assistance website provides critical information and resources to help Alaskans find support on a range of important topics integral to helping a family meet their basic needs, including:

- Medicaid
- Food stamps (SNAP)
- General Relief Assistance
- Affordable Housing
- Senior Benefits

- Suicide Prevention
- Tribal Health
- Veterans' Benefits
- Heating Assistance

2.6.3.2. Healthy Kids

The Alaska Early Childhood Joint Task Force (JTF)'s Early Childhood Alaska: A Strategic Direction for 2020-2025 plan offers a holistic approach to helping Alaska children and families thrive in a strong and equitable early childhood system. Of the plan's 12 objectives, seven require access to reliable and affordable broadband, which are summarized: having access to behavioral health services; communication between teachers, families, and students and between teachers and other educators; access to coordinated and centralized data; and coordinated approaches across the state to improve education services and outcomes in early childhood.

2.6.3.3. Military Health Initiatives in Alaska

Alaska is home to an active Department of Defense presence, as well as a significant number of Coast Guard stations. Many active military and veterans need access to mental health support but those living in remote or rural parts have limited options. Alaska Army's Mission 100 dictates that every single soldier gets wellness counseling from military and family life counselors to make sure that everybody has a chance to experience counseling.[31] To provide service members with continued support when they transition out of the military, many need access to telehealth to meet with a counselor, especially if they live in a place with a shortage of mental health providers. Alaska's active military and veterans depend on a variety of tools to stay connected with each other and with family around the nation.

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[31] Dan Bross Fairbanks KUAC-, "Alaska Army Suicides Drop as Leaders Push Programs to Improve Soldiers' Lives," *Alaska Public Media*, January 10, 2023, https://alaskapublic.org/2023/01/10/alaska-army-suicides-drop-as-leaders-push-programs-to-improve-soldiers-lives/

2.6.3.4. Alaska Native Tribal Health Initiatives

Multiple regional and statewide Alaska tribal health corporations, consortiums, and rural clinics benefit from and provide services that recognize digital equity, including the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC), Alaska Native Health Board (ANHB), and Medicaid and the Tribal Health Care Delivery System (THCDS), among others — providing an important framework for advancing State goals related to health outcomes and the delivery of other essential services.

ANTHC, specifically, includes digital equity in its existing planning efforts. ANTHC is a nonprofit Tribal health organization designed to meet the health needs of Alaska Native and American Indian people living in Alaska. In partnership with the Alaska Native and American Indian people and the Tribal health organizations of the Alaska Tribal Health System, ANTHC provides world-class health services. ANTHC has a Health Technology and Telehealth initiative. Its services allow health care professionals to work together in the Tribal health system to provide quality care and increased access for Alaska Native people. Telehealth videoconferencing provides access to high quality health care providers and specialists that are not usually available in rural areas. ANTHC helps make patient care more efficient by reducing the wait time, travel time, and expense of specialty care and follow-up visits. Alaska's digital equity initiative and the forthcoming capacity and competitive grants may be an opportunity for ANTHC[32] to modernize and expand its telehealth initiative.

Section 2.6.3 Goal

It is though accessible and affordable broadband and access to devices that the State of Alaska sees the true power of telemedicine being realized. The KPIs that will indirectly measure the opportunity of Alaskans to fully take advantage of telemedicine are: 2.4.2.3; 2.4.2.4; 2.4.2.5; 2.4.3.2, and 2.4.8.2.

2.6.4. Civic and Social Engagement

The Alaska Division of Elections provides all the information a citizen will need to be able to participate in the state's election systems. Alaskans can request an official ballot online that they can print and return by mail or fax. However, without a reliable high-speed internet connection and the skills to use it effectively, many Alaskans are missing this helpful resource and the ability to make their votes count. The Alaska Division of Elections goes to great lengths to ensure every voter has the opportunity to participate, including through mailed materials, and online access augments this effort.

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[32] About Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium. FY21 ANTHC Fact Sheet. Accessed at https://www.anthc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/FY21-ANTHC-Fact-Sheet.pdf

At the same time, there are 165 municipal elections that occur each year and which depend on interoperability of systems, data management, and access. **These elections are increasingly utilizing technology to improve the election experience.** Engaging in local and state government is a way for Alaskans to learn about the issues that impact their communities, voice their concerns or support for policies, and engage with policymakers. Many government entities hold council and assembly meetings, legislative hearings, and public comment periods online. The video conferencing programs necessary to participate in online public meetings require not only reliable broadband and a capable device but also a sufficient data package to stream live video.

2.6.5. Judicial Access

As the Alaska Court System's 2017 report on Alaska's justice ecosystem finds, "Providing Justice for All (JFA) in Alaska depends on a partnership of providers building a strong ecosystem of networked, meaningful, and effective services." Connecting people to meaningful information and vital services responds to the underlying legal issues and their broader impacts on Alaskan communities and families. Strengthening connections is critical to increasing access to justice in our state. Expanding access to justice requires innovation and moving past the idea that an attorney or a courtroom is the best or only solution for Alaskans. Partnering across legal, social services, medical, and information providers to address the array of justice needs that people face may be the key to the early detection, diagnosis, and intervention necessary to empower Alaskans to solve their problems before they find themselves in the legal system. Innovating the ways in which we understand "justice" and the ways we provide "access" are the guiding principles of the JFA plan."

Section 2.6.5. Goal: For Incarcerated individuals and those that are in transition to a non-incarcerated life, the positive outcomes will be measured in the KPIs in section 2.4.2.

2.6.6. Delivery of Other Essential Services

Community Anchor Institutions (CAIs) provide a variety of other services that Alaskans depend on. Based on the statutory definition of "community anchor institution" as defined in 47 USC 1702 (a)(2)(E), the Alaska Broadband Office applied the definition of "community anchor institution" to mean a school, library, health clinic, health center, hospital or other medical provider, public safety entity, institution of higher education, public housing organization (including any public housing agency, HUD-assisted housing organization, or Tribal housing organization), or community support organization that facilitates greater use of broadband service by vulnerable populations, including, but not limited to, low-income individuals, unemployed individuals, children, the incarcerated, and aged individuals.

Based on the statutory definition above, the following criteria were used to determine the inclusion or exclusion of community support organizations not specifically listed in 47 USC 1702(a)(2)(E): Whether the community support organization facilitates greater use of broadband service by vulnerable populations, including, but not limited to, low-income individuals, unemployed individuals, children, the incarcerated, and aged individuals. The "Community Support Organizations" classification has been used for all non-profit organizations including places of worship, youth centers, senior centers, recreation centers, and direct service providers.

Section 2.6.6. Goal: All KPIs above serve the goal of the delivery and consumption of the digital economy for the covered population. There is not one that ties to this broad category.

2.7. Cybersecurity

The State of Alaska's 2023 Statewide Alaska Cybersecurity Strategic Plan reflects the State's continued dedication to enhancing cybersecurity and supporting the public entities within Alaska, as well as collaborating with local partners. The Cybersecurity Plan was developed through a collaborative effort of the State of Alaska (SOA) government, boroughs, cities, Tribes, public education, and health institutions throughout the state. It incorporates best practices for managing cybersecurity risks and includes actionable and measurable goals and objectives focusing on the following priorities:

- Enhance Cybersecurity Resilience and Interoperability

- Foster a Cybersecurity Culture

- Strengthen Cybersecurity Collaboration and Partnerships

- Improve Cyber Incident Management and Response Capabilities

The State's approach to digital equity will leverage this plan, especially as it relates to community anchor institutions, recognizing that the goals and objectives are designed to help us navigate the ever-changing cybersecurity landscape and plan for new technologies. The State's approach developed a comprehensive cybersecurity plan for the state of Alaska that incorporates existing plans and feedback from local governments, promotes the adoption of best practices and methodologies, and ensures the continuity of operations in the event of a cybersecurity incident. The outcomes from this planning effort and implementation will include assessment of the capabilities of the State of Alaska relating to the actions described in the plan and identifying and mitigating any gaps in the cybersecurity workforce, enhancement of the delivery of safe and trustworthy online services and work to establish strong partnerships to improve information sharing and collaboration, and collaboratively striving to achieve measurable progress towards reducing cybersecurity risks and identifying, responding to, and recovering from cybersecurity threats to information systems owned or operated by, or on behalf of, Alaska public sector agencies, and in the public interest.

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This State-led, collaborative approach will result in opportunities for community anchor institutions to better deliver safe and secure services to the public and will facilitate increased technical assistance in communities across Alaska. At the same time, through its Digital Equity planning process, the State recognizes additional needs for cybersecurity for businesses and households. The State will undertake or collaborate with partners to achieve a needs assessment and will develop or collaborate with partners in the development of a cybersecurity strategy that is responsive to the needs of covered populations.

2.8.   Alignment with Existing Municipal, Regional, and Tribal Digital Equity Plans

Please see Section 3: Current State of Digital Equity.

2.9.   Coordinating Digital Equity Funding

Broadband Access Equity and Deployment (BEAD) program: The State of Alaska is slated to receive more than one billion dollars in BEAD funding. Those funds will be used to address unserved locations first, followed by underserved locations. The BEAD-funded projects will be required to meet certain guidelines regarding cost to the customer. This funding will make a significant and positive impact on broadband affordability, especially in rural Alaska. The ABO is the coordinating agency on the Digital Equity Capacity grant and BEAD Implementation funds. The ABO will work to ensure coordination among those two programs. Partners engaged with the ABO and in support of digital equity will serve as the connecting network to communicate and coordinate with additional funding sources awarded to community-based organizations, nonprofit organizations, and/or private internet service providers. As a function of the BEAD program, the ABO has included previsions to ensure accessibility and affordability in the future. There are four main ways this is being accomplished.

Accessibility: subgrant awardees must show scalability and sustainability of their projects.

Scalability: the primary and preferred projects are fiber. This allows for a 1Gbps/1Gbps residential service on the day the project is completed.

Sustainability: subgrantee applications must show economic sustainability in a 20-year economic model that will be vetted by an economic analyst within the ABO.

Affordability: subgrant awardees must show that they have "Low-Cost Option" and "Middle Class Affordability" options defined in the BEAD program as:

- Low Cost Option – The term "Low Cost Option" is defined as a service plan with the following parameters: 1). Service Level: A minimum service bandwidth of 100Mbps download bandwidth and 20Mbps upload bandwidth that is no greater than 120% of the retail rate for a similar service in urban Alaska areas; and 2). meets the FCC rule of 80% of capacity, 80% of the time during the busy hour with a maximum of 100ms latency one way.

- Middle Class Affordability – The term "Middle Class Affordability" is defined as a service plan with the following parameters: 1). A minimum service bandwidth of 100Mbps download and 20Mbps upload that is within a rate range of $75.00 to $125.00; and 2). Meets the FCC rule of 80% of capacity, 80% of the time during the busy hour with a maximum of 100ms latency one way.

Other funding sources contributing to closing the digital divide include:

- Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program (TBCP) Round 1: Total funding under the TCBP R1 affordability, infrastructure, and equitable distributions is more than $448 million of which AFN is administering a $35.1 million "use and adoption" award on behalf of 74 Tribes and Native corporations.

- TCBP Round 2: Alaska Native entities are submitting for a potential allocation of the remaining $1 billion available through TCBP.

- Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) Outreach Funding and Tribal Competitive ACP Outreach: RurAL CAP and other CAIs are delivering these programs.

- Tribal Digital Navigator Funding from the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) – Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) is in NDIA's Digital Navigator Corps and will be distributing devices and providing digital literacy training through 2025.

- ReConnect Program through USDA and Middle Mile Program through the NTIA.

- The proposed Broadband Parity Adjustment, envisioned by the Governor's 2021 Task Force on Broadband and with enabling legislation found in House Bill 363 (2022), is meant to offset the costs of broadband services for consumers. Currently, there is no funding for this initiative as it is dependent on Legislative appropriation and contributions from other sources. Additional funding sources and programs that will help close the digital divide can be found in the asset inventory in Section 3: Current State of Digital Equity.

3. Current State of Digital Equity

Alaska is larger than Texas, California, and Montana combined, and 86% of Alaskan communities are not connected to any road system, meaning they are only accessible by boat or aircraft.[33] Ocean and seas, rivers, mountains, and tens of millions of acres of national park, refuge, and forest service lands separate Alaska's communities. More than 90% of Alaska is in some sort of public ownership, with 60% being managed by the federal government. Alaska has 17 of the country's tallest 20 mountains; 3,000 rivers and 3 million lakes; hundreds of millions of acres of wilderness; and 100,000 glaciers.[34] While the dramatic and diverse landscape allows thousands of Alaskans to live a subsistence lifestyle, and has for thousands of years, Alaska's geography

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[33] https://www.commerce.alaska.gov/web/Portals/4/pub/AKMBPA2.pdf

[34] Official Alaska State Website, State of Alaska, https://www.alaska.gov/kids/learn/facts.htm

complicates access to the technologies and resources that are significantly more widely available in the Lower 48 (contiguous states).

The following sections are responsive to the proposed outline in the Digital Equity Plan Guidance and informed by Alaska's unique circumstances. Since broadband affordability and availability are the driving barriers to access for covered populations, businesses, organizations, and the general public in Alaska, understanding these factors first allows for better understanding of the limited landscape of available digital equity assets, plans, and programs, and sets the context for needs and gaps identified in this Digital Equity Plan that can be considered in future Digital Equity Capacity Building efforts. The sections will follow in order: 3.1 Broadband Adoption & Affordability; 3.2 Needs Assessment; 3.3 Asset Inventory; and 3.4 Existing Digital Equity Plans.

3.1. Broadband Adoption & Affordability

It is generally understood that Alaska has low adoption rates, high costs, and data caps and other use restrictions on high-speed internet services necessitated by limited broadband infrastructure, which may be addressed through the deployment of federal funds. When considering Digital Equity, increasing access and affordability of broadband services is foundational. **Advancing skill-building, internet safety, and accessibility to specific online services is only possible when there is access to the internet and people can afford it.**

Understanding the baseline of current broadband adoption and affordability is essential context to understanding the existing assets and needs for Alaskans.

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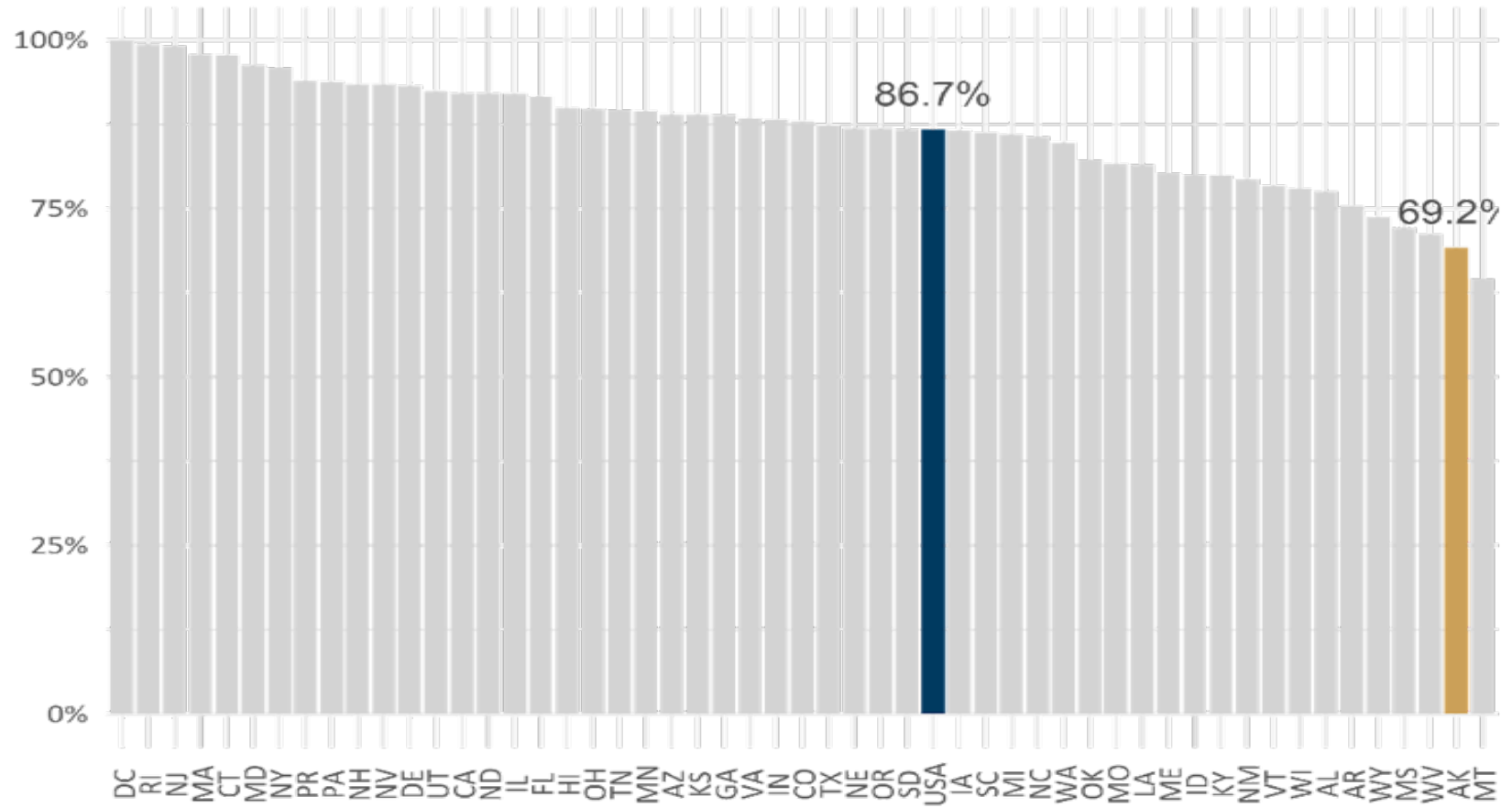*Figure 2: Statewide Residential Broadband Availability at Speeds of 100/20 Mbps*

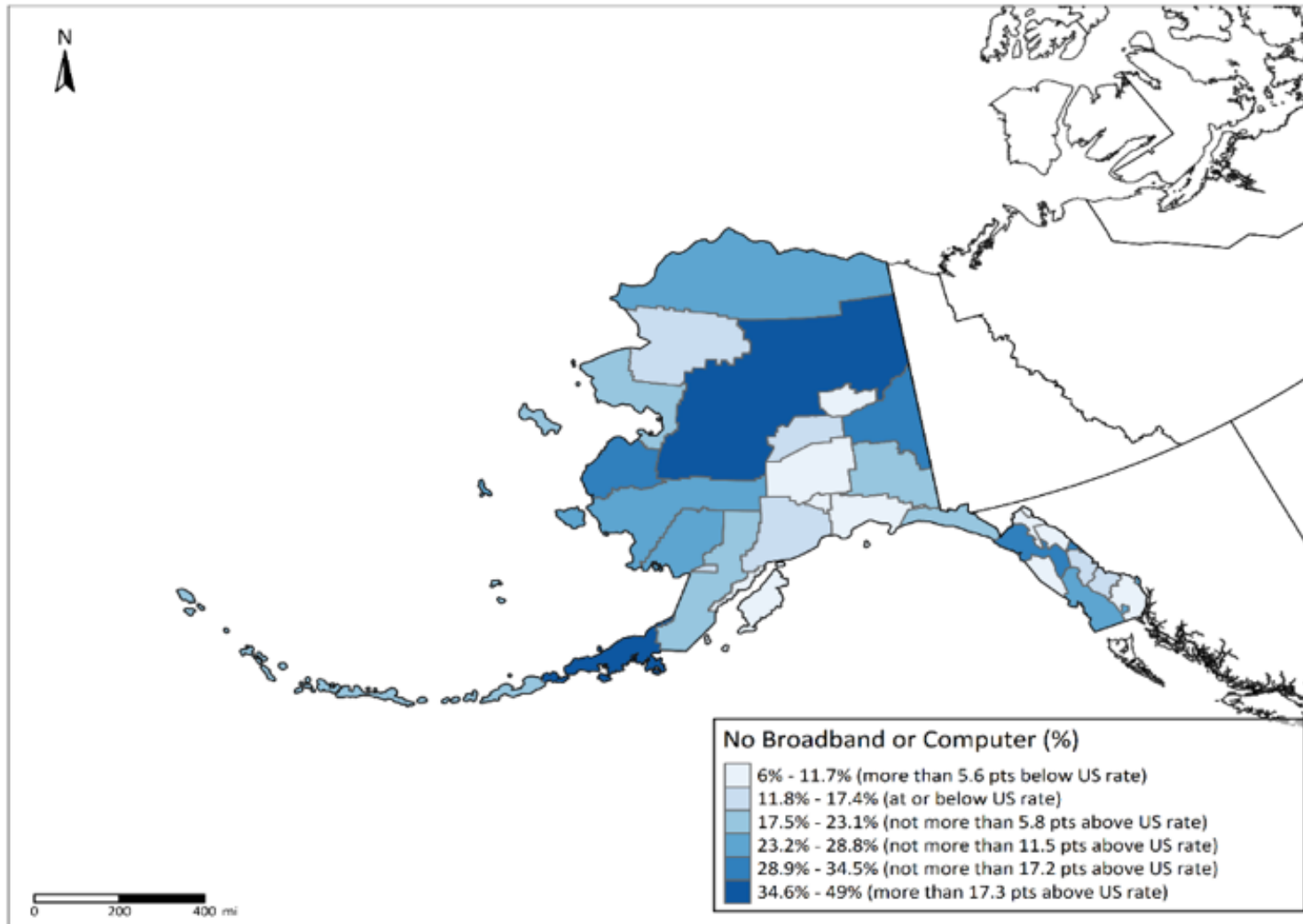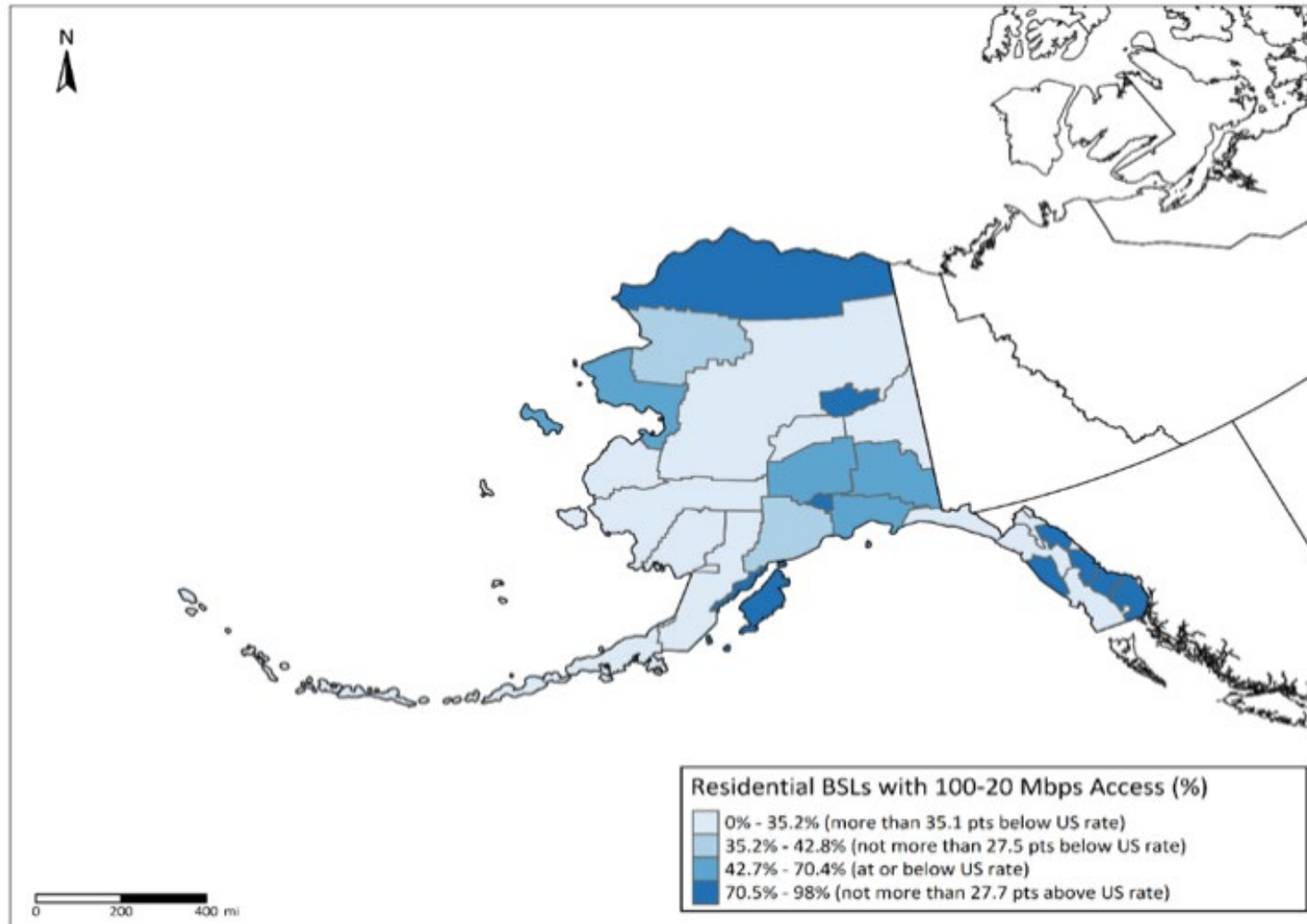*Figure 3: Rates of broadband and computer availability as compared to rates across U.S.*

Figure 4: Residential Broadband Serviceable Locations Considered Fully Served (100/20 Mbps residential access, by census area)
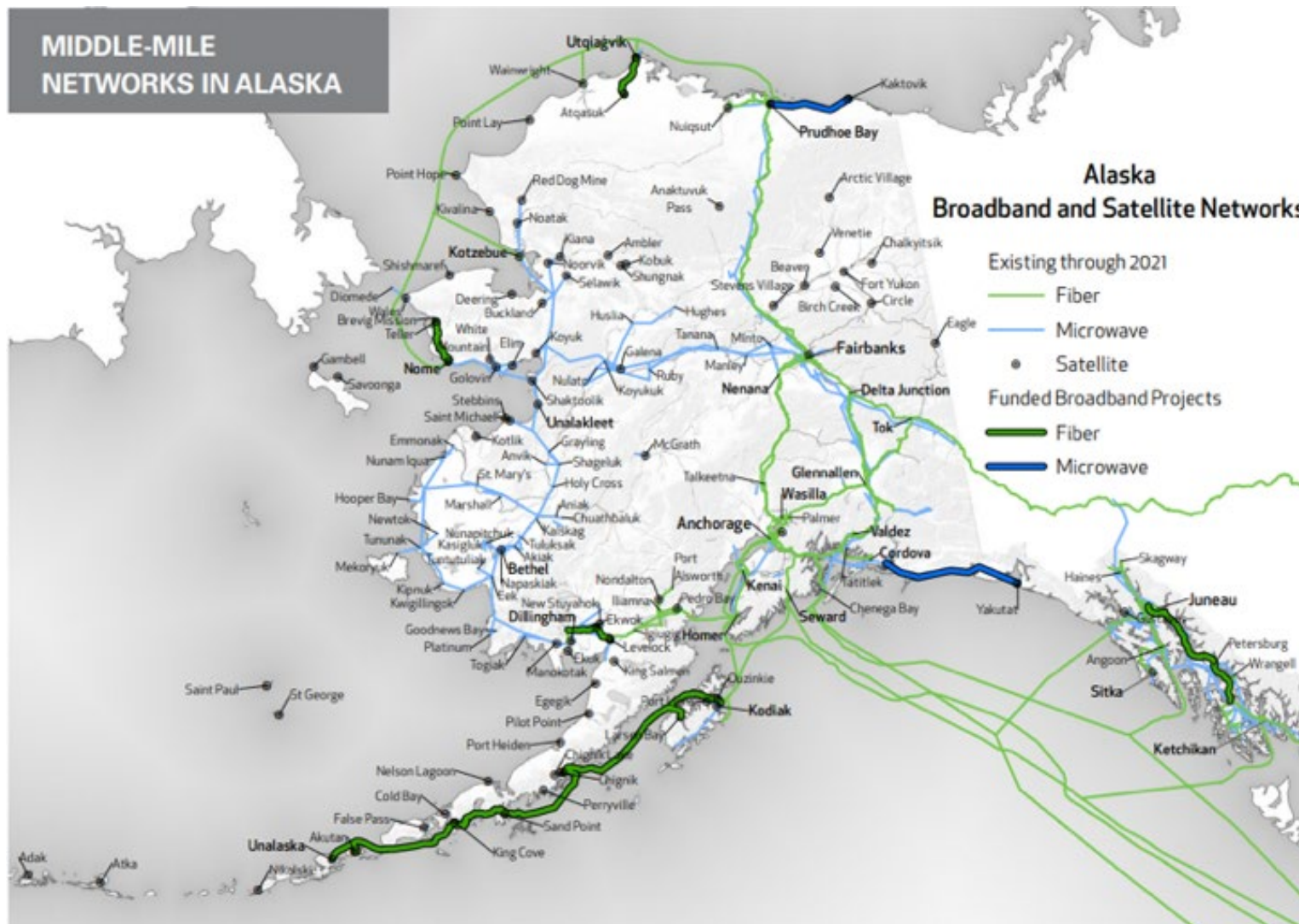
Figure 5: Middle-Mile Networks in Alaska

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For Alaskans, the benefits of broadband adoption extend beyond the NTIA definition, which defines meaningful broadband adoption as "how individuals use their digital literacy skills to enhance educational and employment opportunities." Feedback collected from listening sessions suggest that Alaskans also consider non-economic and non-educational uses of the internet such as accessing healthcare and public safety services and maintaining social connection with friends and family to be meaningful activities. Alaska's unique geography, rural nature, close-knit families, and communities and patterns of population migration mean that this final point—**maintaining social connection with friends, family, and their communities**—is of particular importance to the many Alaskans who have moved out of rural Alaska and into the urban areas of Anchorage and Fairbanks. Similarly, for the friends and families of Alaskans moving to these urban areas or locations elsewhere in the nation, stable and reliable broadband connectivity in rural areas helps maintain a sense of connection, place, and identity.

To ensure the voices of Alaskans are accurately reflected, the State of Alaska has expanded the definition of meaningful broadband connectivity to mirror the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA). NDIA defines broadband adoption as "daily access to the internet at speeds, quality, and capacity necessary to accomplish common tasks, with the digital skills necessary to participate online, and on a personal device and secure, convenient network."[35] This broader definition is the lens being used to examine adoption in the State of Alaska's Digital Equity Plan.

Broadband availability in Alaska is the second lowest in the nation at BEAD-eligible speeds of 100/20 Mbps (Figure 2), more than 15 percentage points lower than the national average. When including only non-satellite internet service options, 25/3 Mbps service is only available to 71% of Alaskan households and businesses. When looking at where broadband service is available for adoption, only 30% of boroughs (county-equivalent) or census areas (lacking a borough) have enough broadband connections to report through the FCC. Seventy percent of Alaska's communities could be considered disadvantaged. Alaska is geographically unique, and the population is dispersed and rural, so the 30% adoption rate is truly indicative of a broadband deployment issue.[36]

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[35] https://www.digitalinclusion.org/definitions/

[36] FCC Household Broadband Adoption Data, June 2019. https://www.fcc.gov/general/broadband-deployment-data-fcc-form-477

3.2. Housing Units with Internet Subscriptions

Of the 29 boroughs (county-equivalent) and Census areas in Alaska, only 12 have enough distinct high-speed residential and business connections to allow the FCC to report, meaning the remaining have zero or so few that the confidentiality requirements aren't met.[37] Residential service as reported by the FCC only needs to exceed 200Kpbs, which does not meet the current definition of highspeed broadband service of 25/3Mbps.[38] There is great opportunity for increased deployment of services, with only 185,000 residential connections and 329,285 housing units.[39] BEAD funding, distributed by the ABO, will support a significant increase in deployment.

Figure 4 (page 55)shows the percentage of Alaskans in each borough or Census area with neither broadband nor computer access in their household. While urban centers in Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau have low rates of no broadband and computer access in a household, **rural areas with comparatively low population density have rates significantly higher than the national average.**

9.3% of Alaskans do not have access to broadband or a computer.

Nearly 50% of Alaskans in Yukon-Koyukuk Census area do not have access to home broadband or a computing device, the highest in all of Alaska and nearly five times the national average.

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[37] For more information on broadband adoption data from the 2019 FCC Form 477 dataset, please see Table 2: Broadband Adoption by Borough and Census Area, located in Appendix C.

[38] Ibid FCC Household Broadband Adoption Data

[39] https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/AK

Table 2 on the following page highlights the challenges of accessing Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA)-defined broadband speeds. In addition, to a significant number of boroughs and communities that have little to no access, it is well known that the cost of connectivity in Alaska is quite high. However, there are significant variations in rates in different regions of Alaska, as well as the changes to pricing which have resulted from the major infrastructure projects recently completed.

There is a stark connectivity disparity between urban and rural Alaska. Larger cities and towns, including Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, Sitka, Ketchikan, and Kodiak have reliable access to high-speed internet in their homes and businesses. By contrast, in Interior (excluding the Fairbanks North Star Borough) and Southwest Alaska, few, if any, residents have access to high-speed internet (Figure 4, page 55).

This disparity is further evidenced by the distribution of residential broadband serviceable locations considered fully served with access to 100/20 Mbps broadband service (Figure 5).

Table 2: Broadband Adoption by Borough and Census Area

Borough or Census Area	> 10 Mbps Download	> 25 Mbps Download	> 100 Mbps Download
Aleutians East Borough	20% - 39%	0%	0%
Aleutians West Census Area	80% - 100%	0%	0%
Anchorage Municipality	60% - 79%	60% - 79%	40% - 59%
Bethel Census Area	1% - 19%	1% - 19%	0%
Bristol Bay Borough	0%	0%	0%
Denali Borough	20% - 39%	1% - 19%	1% - 19%
Dillingham Census Area	1% - 19%	0%	0%
Fairbanks North Star Borough	40% - 59%	40% - 59%	20% - 39%
Haines Borough	1% - 19%	1% - 19%	0%
Hoonah-Angoon Census Area	1% - 19%	1% - 19%	1% - 19%
Juneau City and Borough	60% - 79%	40% - 59%	20% - 39%
Kenai Peninsula Borough	20% - 39%	20% - 39%	1% - 19%
Ketchikan Gateway Borough	60% - 79%	40% - 59%	20% - 39%
Kodiak Island Borough	40% - 59%	20% - 39%	20% - 39%
Kusilvak Census Area	0%	0%	0%
Lake and Peninsula Borough	1% - 19%	1% - 19%	0%
Matanuska-Susitna Borough	60% - 79%	20% - 39%	1% - 19%
Nome Census Area	1% - 19%	1% - 19%	0%
North Slope Borough	1% - 19%	0%	0%
Northwest Arctic Borough	20% - 39%	1% - 19%	0%
Petersburg Borough	60% - 79%	60% - 79%	40% - 59%
Prince of Wales-Hyder Census Area	1% - 19%	1% - 19%	0%
Sitka City and Borough	60% - 79%	40% - 59%	40% - 59%
Skagway Municipality	20% - 39%	1% - 19%	0%
Southeast Fairbanks Census Area	1% - 19%	1% - 19%	1% - 19%
Valdez-Cordova Census Area	20% - 39%	1% - 19%	1% - 19%
Wrangell City and Borough	40% - 59%	40% - 59%	20% - 39%
Yakutat City and Borough	40% - 59%	40% - 59%	0%
Yukon-Koyukuk Census Area	1% - 19%	1% - 19%	0%

These disparities can be directly traced back to middle-mile network deployment across Alaska. Interior and Southwest Alaska are primarily supported by existing lower-bandwidth microwave links, whereas higher-connectivity areas are connected by fiber backhaul. In recognition of these disparities, the Governor's 2021 Task Force on Broadband recommended identifying middle mile needs (recommendation 1.2), and a balance of middle mile and last mile upgrades, depending on the needs of specific areas (recommendation 3.2). Ongoing and completed projects can be seen in Figure 5 (page 56).

Additional middle mile and other broadband deployment is ongoing (see Appendix C). This focus on targeted middle mile infrastructure deployment is expected to be continued in Alaska's BEAD deployment plan as the State focuses on serving its unserved and underserved communities first.

3.3. Affordability

Alaskans are disproportionately affected by the lack of availability of affordable high-speed internet service. In many cases, the only available internet service is highly priced, and often the most expensive plans also have data caps and additional penalties and fees. The cost of high-speed internet service remains a considerable barrier to adoption. Further engagement with the public and other stakeholders, including through statewide listening sessions, has confirmed that many residents across the state feel that their internet is unaffordable. Others have cited high pricing as a primary reason they do not have high-speed internet in their households. Listening sessions revealed individuals paying as much as $1,000/month, and a Tribe paying nearly $7,000/month.

The lack of affordable internet access limits opportunities for education, employment, and social connection, contributing to the increasing digital divide. The lack of affordability of service in Alaska is particularly pronounced in remote and rural areas, where lower than average household incomes and higher broadband costs, influenced by high deployment costs and limited ISP competition, make high-speed internet even more inaccessible.

*One listening session participant explained that their monthly satellite internet bill was $500 a month with data caps, and **sometimes the monthly bill jumped to $1,000 when they used the data, they needed to meet their needs.***

A lack of available statewide data on household high-speed internet pricing and adoption rates prevents accurate estimations of the statewide impact of unaffordable internet. It also impacts knowing the number of households that qualify for the ACP in Non-High-Cost and High-Cost areas. The households in High-Cost Areas serves as a lower-bound indicator the number of households where internet is unaffordable. As part of their efforts to track progress and impacts of programs from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), the White House releases a state update periodically. In the latest update, the estimate was that 89,000 households in Alaska qualified for enrolling in the ACP program and further research is needed to determine the total number of households where affordability is a barrier statewide.

3.3.1. Affordable Connectivity Program

The ACP is one of the most successful digital inclusion programs in the State. Congress, through the IIJA, created ACP as a replacement for the Emergency Broadband Benefit program. Overseen by the FCC, ACP provides a discount of $75 per month toward internet service for eligible households in Alaska (all ACP-eligible Alaskans can receive a $75 discount as all of Alaska is considered Tribal land for the purposes of ACP). Additionally, eligible households can also receive a one-time discount of up to $100 to purchase a desktop computer or laptop from participating providers if they contribute more than $10 and less than $50 toward the purchase.

As of June 2023, 17,552 households have enrolled in the ACP. Experts estimate that 89,000 households in total are eligible for the monthly reduction in internet service bill in Alaska, however, 80% of eligible households remain unenrolled[40] (Figure 6). There are many ways that Alaskans can qualify for ACP. These include:

- Households currently receiving Lifeline benefits.

- Households with a child participating in the National School Lunch Program.

- Households with a total yearly income of 200% of the poverty line or less – equivalent to a yearly income equal to or less than $75,000 for a family of four.

- Households where at least one member participates in SNAP, WIC, SSI, or FPHA.

- Households with a member currently receiving a Veterans Pension or Federal Pell Grant.

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[40] Alaska Fact Sheet, the White House. May 2023. https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Alaska-Fact-Sheet-May.pdf

Figure 6 provides a borough/Census area-level estimate of Alaskan households who qualify for the ACP by meeting the household income criteria as of December 2022. Most households qualify for the ACP through the household income metric; since this is only one of several qualifying metrics, this estimate of qualifying households provides a lower bound on estimates of affordability challenges in the state. In all, 28% of Alaskan households qualify for the ACP on household income alone, compared to 36% of households nationwide.

In a recent evaluation by Pew Charitable Trusts, 2 out of 3 people enrolling in the ACP program abandon their application due to the time it takes to complete or errors in the registration process.[41] To facilitate increased enrollment and better use of ACP funds, the FCC issued ACP Outreach grants to community-based organizations. Three entities in Alaska have received $1.8 million in grants total to increase enrollment and reduce the affordability barrier for eligible households, with two Tribal organizations focusing on enrolling Tribal citizens.

Some of the strategies that Alaska has and will continue to employ to increase ACP enrollment include:

4. Working with Digital Equity Plan partners and subgrantees to increase awareness of the benefits and availability of the ACP to Alaskans;

5. Conducting listening sessions across the state to understand how residents and other covered populations are using broadband technology;

6. Using broadband maps provided by the FCC to understand where coverage gaps exist and leverage such data to inform residents in such locations about the ACP; and

7. Supporting telecom provider's efforts to participate in the program, especially those providing service in high-cost or remote areas.

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[41] https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2023/02/28/enrollment-hurdles-limit-uptake-for-fccs-affordable-connectivity-program?utm_source=sendgrid&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Newsletters

ACP Estimated Qualifying Households (%)

- 20% - 28.1% (more than 8.2 pts below US rate)
- 28.2% - 36.2% (at or below US rate)
- 36.3% - 44.3% (not more than 8 pts above US rate)
- 44.4% - 52.4% (not more than 16.1 pts above US rate)
- 52.5% - 60.5% (not more than 24.2 pts above US rate)
- 60.6% - 74% (more than 24.3 pts above US rate)
- Missing

Figure 6: Estimated Alaskan Households Qualifying for ACP Benefits (i.e., qualifying households with a total yearly income of 200% of the poverty line or less) by borough/Census area.
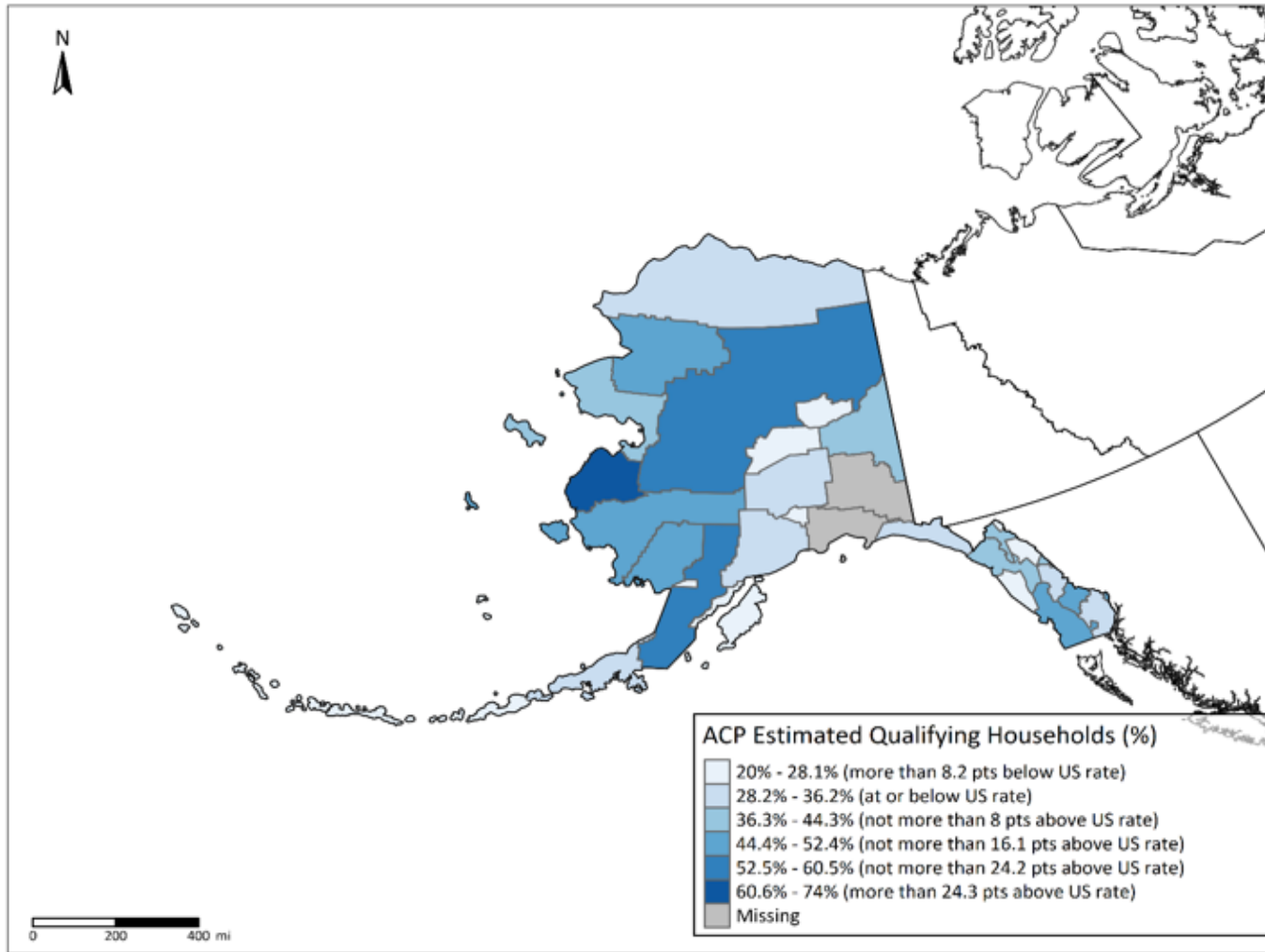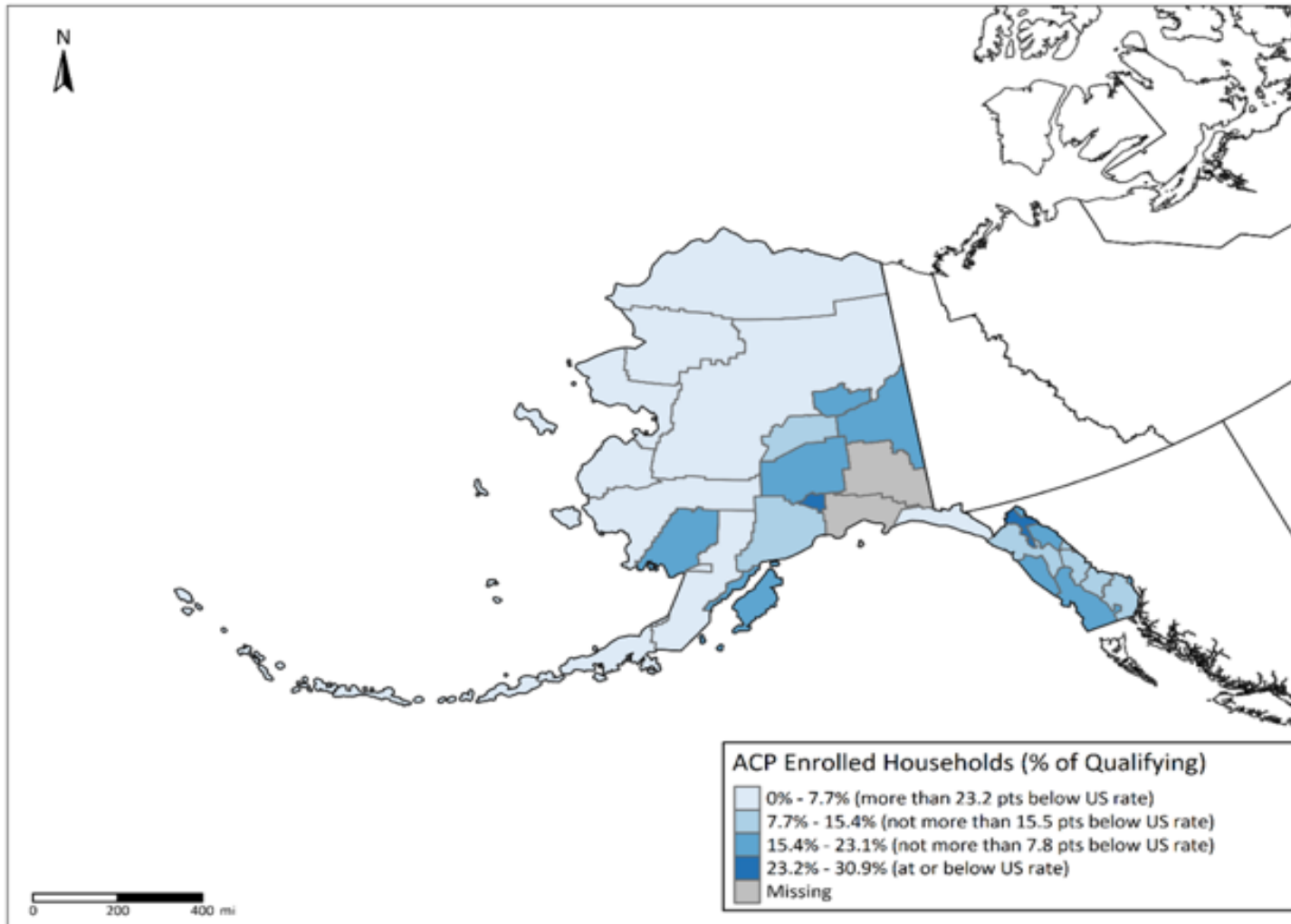
Figure 7: Estimated Alaskan Households Enrolled in ACP Benefits (i.e., qualifying households with a total yearly income of 200% of the poverty line or less) by borough/ Census area.
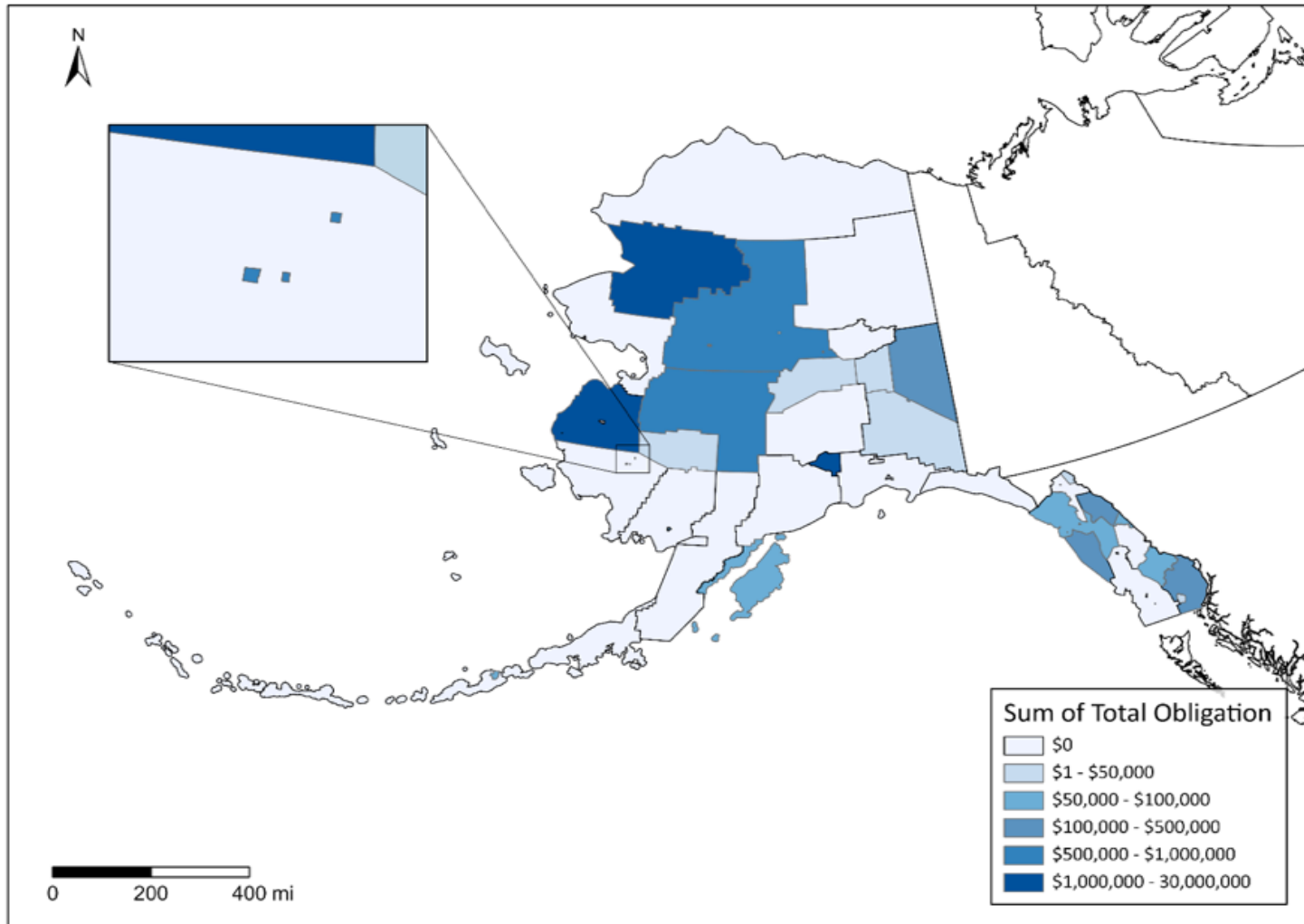
Figure 8: ECF Funds Received by Alaskan School Districts

3.3.2. High-Cost Plans

Alaska's vast and diverse geography creates unique barriers for both the construction and maintenance of connectivity to broadband infrastructure (see Figures 4 and 5) which result in significant price differences for residential internet and mobile phone service between rural and urban Alaska, as well as across rural areas. High prices, low bandwidth, and data caps and data overage charges (up to $8 per GB in some areas) result in home internet plans that are unaffordable even for households above the median income and that can fluctuate significantly from month to month.

Like in many states, rural Alaska sees an ACP enrollment rate well below the national average, which can be attributed both to a lack of program outreach as well as lack of access to services qualifying households can afford even after a $75/month benefit.

Affordability and lack of access in high-cost areas was consistently raised as a major barrier to access in listening sessions off the road system. With hundreds of millions of dollars of grant funding for rural broadband infrastructure in Alaska already approved through the Tribal Broadband Connectivity, USDA ReConnect and Middle Mile grant programs, and over one billion dollars more coming through the Broadband Equity Access and Deployment (BEAD) program, it is highly anticipated, and guaranteed in some project areas, that the pricing divide between urban and rural Alaska will lessen as high-maintenance, low-bandwidth infrastructure is replaced by terrestrial and subsea fiber connections. Across the nation, Americans with low incomes are also the most likely to be least connected—and Alaska is no different. All Alaskans, regardless of geography or income, should have the right to access reliable and affordable high-speed internet and the economic and social opportunities that come with it.

3.3.3. Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF)

Through the Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF), $7.61 million was allocated in Alaska to support providing devices to individuals in 22 school districts and one library, and $75.56 million was invested in improved connectivity across 15 school districts and two libraries. A comprehensive map of funded school districts can be seen in Figure 8 above. The ECF greatly increased access to devices and connectivity for K-12 and higher education students. However, the maintenance and replacement of these devices may become a barrier in the future.

The following data show how Alaskan schools benefited from the ECF:

- Average of $172 in equipment per enrolled student in a school district,

- Three school districts spent over $10 million in ECF funds on connectivity (see below), and

- Average of $512 per student for all other school districts spending ECF funds on connectivity.

School Districts with the greatest ECF allocations:

- Lower Yukon, with 2,000 students: $30 million in connectivity funds.

- Northwest Arctic, with 2,000 students: $27 million in connectivity funds.

- Lower Kuskokwim, with 4,000 students: $14.7 million in connectivity funds.

For a complete list of ECF allocations, see Appendix C.

3.4. Needs Assessment

Throughout the stakeholder engagement process, the DE Planning teams heard many stories about the impacts of the digital divide on individuals and families—from education and employment prospects to health, civic engagement, and ability to access public services. Most populations see broadband service as essential, but the lack of affordable and reliable service leads to low adoption rates. The following needs assessment highlights barriers to access and the impacts through the voices of Alaskans.

While the demographic, adoption, and affordability data provided below are delineated by covered populations, the lived experiences and stories presented do not. Alaskan people hold multiple identities. The public was invited to and attended listening sessions in which facilitators did not ask participants to report on their status as a member of a covered population. The barriers, impacts, and needs resonate across many different groups of people and especially those in rural communities.

As part of its Digital Equity plan and implementation, the State will be better able to distinguish barriers unique to certain populations through continued engagement strategies and surveys of the public. For the purposes of this Digital Equity Plan, the following subsection identifies and describes the barriers and needs that impact everyone in Alaska.

Educational disparities are exacerbated by the digital divide.

Access to education and educational resources are tied to digital access, and childhood impacts are carried into adulthood. During the pandemic, for students without high-speed internet service, teachers had to go through great lengths to provide educational materials. Teachers provided paper packets, jump drives, lessons delivered through VHF radio, through windows of homes, and phone calls. Some educators went to students' homes, stood outside and Airdropped materials to student devices.[42] Without broadband service at home, teachers have to work overtime at school, which results in high turnover and burnout. Over the last decade, teacher turnover has been between 22% and 24%. However, principal turnover during the same period was more volatile, with a peak of 33% turnover in 2015/16 and a low of 18% turnover in 2020/21. In recent years, the majority of teachers who turned over (58%) and principals who turned over (78%) left Alaska or remained in the state but were no longer educators.[43]

Impacts on STEM Education

One listening session participant explained: When she was a high school student, her STEM course required her to download large files, but she did not have the bandwidth at home and therefore she could not participate fully in her course. Another listening session participant noted that while many students in Fairbanks can access STEM material, students in Yukon for example do not have those same opportunities because of the quality of broadband.

Even in cases where broadband access is available, challenges still exist. Barriers include a lack of teacher understanding of technology, which can create a domino effect if students aren't accessing curricula or turning in assignments.

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[42] Parady, Lisa. *The Rest of the Story on Alaska Rural Education During the Pandemic*. Anchorage Daily News. February 11, 2021. Accessed at: https://www.adn.com/opinions/2021/02/11/the-rest-of-the-story-on-alaska-rural-education-during-the-pandemic/

[43] Educator Retention and Turnover in Alaska, Institute of Education Sciences, 2021: https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/northwest/pdf/ak-educator-retention-infographic-update.pdf

Workforce supply and training opportunities are limited by a lack of broadband access.

Many rural community members are limited to local employment opportunities because internet service is too unreliable for remote employment. This includes the ability to apply for jobs. Folks visiting libraries often need to create an email account in order to create online accounts to apply for jobs and communicate with prospective training resources and employers. Employment opportunities are reduced when access to global markets or e-commerce is limited. Businesses suffer and lose economic opportunities when the internet goes down and business owners lose the ability to accept payment when their point-of-sale system goes down. One participant highlighted the drastic impact that out-migration is having on rural communities, "Our communities are dying. Without the internet, our people are moving to bigger cities. Remote work is impossible." If families move out of a community and the number of children falls below the minimum, a school will be required to close. The shuttering of a school in a community increases the likelihood that community will not exist long-term.

Disinformation and phishing scams disproportionately affect covered populations.

The risks to safely using the internet are greater in populations that have lower digital literacy. One specific example heard during listening sessions is that Hispanic people are exposed to disinformation campaigns, and many using the internet do not have the skills to be able to distinguish between fake news or how to navigate digital information. With tested successful methods of increasing awareness in the Hispanic communities on other topics, digital literacy skills and awareness could be shared via targeted TV and radio spots, social media accounts, or a newspaper insert. The approach could be very tailored to the covered population.

Applying for Jobs

Listening session participants expressed frustration that "It's difficult to upload your resume on the State of Alaska job search website," and that it is often "Impossible to even apply for a job without an internet connection."

Better health outcomes are a challenge without reliable access to broadband services.

Telemedicine services are extensive in much of Alaska, though still limited in all that they could achieve, and emergency response times may be longer. On occasion, responders end up at the wrong location because of spotty mobile coverage when GPS fails. This lack of reliable connectivity can create life and death situations in search and rescue efforts.

Listening session participants explained that there are little to no mental health services in rural communities. One participant said that they had tried telemedicine before, but the connection was so bad, the doctor canceled the video call and called them on the phone instead. Without a visual of the patient, doctors may have a harder time assessing anxiety levels and depressive affects. Other participants noted the high cost of rural healthcare when an airplane flight is needed for something that could have been addressed online.

Civic and social services that are provided online for constituents are unavailable, which can cause economic, health, and social impacts.

Listening session participants frequently raised frustrations and actual losses caused by not being able to use or access government websites. Accessibility issues and inconsistencies with websites, including a lack of compatibility with mobile devices, means constituents cannot apply for, receive, or benefit from resources identified for their use. Similarly, listening session participants raised the negative impact of not receiving important and timely information about changes to benefits.

"Online public forums have become the new normal, but it can be hard to impossible to participate if your internet connection is bad…. Additionally, online community surveys are not reaching or including rural Alaskans without internet access who need to have their voices heard."

- Listening session participant

Case Study: Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend

The Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend (PFD) is an annual dividend paid to Alaska residents from investment earnings of mineral royalties. Each Alaskan must apply to receive the funds. Paper applications must be picked up from Distribution Centers (located in just a few urban communities). Ideally, the online system would be available to everyone. However, residents will not only need high-speed internet access but will also need digital skills and awareness of cybersecurity to navigate the application. A good example of the risks involved in navigating these online systems, or not receiving information provided online in a timely manner, is provided by a 2023 message on the PFD website:

The PFD division has been notified that some members of the public have received phishing emails from an unknown sender. The phishing email is asking PFD applicants to log into their myAlaska account using the link provided and update Alaska residency verifiers. This email was NOT sent from the division. Please do not click links in suspicious or unknown emails. PFD does not send out emails asking applicants to log into their myAlaska account to update information. The division suggests that anyone who clicked the link should update their myAlaska password and security question/answer immediately. You should also consider updating your email address password with your email provider.[44]

Barriers and Needs Analysis

The following summary tables reflect analysis of listening session inputs from across the state and provide a better understanding of the barriers and needs to be addressed in closing the digital divide. Many participants raised lack of affordable access as a barrier. Deployment of broadband infrastructure is being managed and coordinated through the ABO, which is working with the NTIA to define how programmatic elements of BEAD regarding affordability, speeds, reliability, data caps, and expansion into adjacent areas will be addressed in Alaska. As such, **the list below focuses on needs that can be addressed alongside deployment of broadband infrastructure.** As previously mentioned, many people belong to multiple covered population groups and thus share similar challenges. Therefore, this list captures multiple covered populations, rather than separating them out.

The needs listed in the tables on the following pages informed the development of the goals, objectives, and strategies addressed in Section 2 and Section 5.

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[44] State of Alaska: Department of Revenue, Permanent Fund Dividend. Access at: https://pfd.alaska.gov/

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Barriers and Needs to Close the Digital Divide for Alaska Populations

Broadband Availability & Affordability

Barriers:

- Geography and market size impacts broadband deployment.

- Geography and weather conditions can cause long-lasting service outages.

- Lack of availability reduces educational, health, social, and civic opportunities.

- Lack of reliability reduces effectiveness of e-commerce, education, social interaction, accessing constituent services, and health services.

- Landline telephone infrastructure is required to access internet service in some areas.

- Persistent lack of affordability.

- Data caps in rural areas make it difficult and expensive to use high bandwidth applications.

- Fewer providers in rural areas limit choice and pricing options.

- Lack of bandwidth limits performance and functionality, and often results in extra data fees.

Recommended Actions:

- Reliable, fast Internet access at Community Anchor Institutions.

- Increased support and coordination with partners for ACP outreach to communities where uptake is low or zero.

- Evaluate current and projected heavy data use activities across demographic groups.

- Examine metrics such as median household income, property value, and the number of households with students enrolled in school lunch programs to determine where additional efforts will be needed to address affordability beyond the ACP benefit or fixed "low-cost broadband service option."

- Funding support beyond ACP for areas where an internet subscription is prohibitively expensive, even after ACP.

Primarily serves:

- Covered households

- Veterans

- Rural populations

- Minority population

- Individuals with a language barrier

- Individuals with disabilities

- Aging individuals

Device Availability & Affordability

Barriers:

- Outdated/insufficient hardware, apps, and software.

- Lack of awareness of financial assistance for purchasing new devices.

- Lack of knowledge in setting up new devices.

- Lack of training for constituent/client support for providing technical assistance.

Recommended Actions:

- Affordable devices and access to repair and maintenance services.

- Easily teachable, loanable devices for personal use.

- Increased awareness of existing programs to assist with device purchasing costs.

- Personnel and programming to help people identify devices that fit their needs.

Primarily Serves:

- All covered populations

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Digital Literacy

Barriers:

- Older and more rural individuals more likely to report it was hard to keep up with changing technology.

- Lack of easily accessible digital education.

- Lack of understanding of internet.

- Lack of existing local community digital resources.

Recommended Actions:

- Basic digital literacy trainings.

- Intermediate digital literacy trainings.

- Device literacy trainings.

Primarily Serves:

- All covered populations

Online Privacy, Safety, and Cybersecurity

Barriers:

- Lack of knowledge or understanding.

- Lack of experience with identifying information sources leading to increased risk for phishing and scams.

- Safety measures are hindered beyond the online experience, including lack of bandwidth for security systems at homes or remote monitoring for EMS.

Recommended Actions:

- Easily accessible privacy and cybersecurity trainings.

- Culturally relevant safety trainings that increase awareness around risks of scams online leading to human trafficking or wiring funds to fraudulent accounts.

Primarily Serves:

- All covered populations, with special attention and relevancy in Indigenous communities where the risks of human trafficking are significant.

Online Accessibility & Inclusivity

Barriers:

- Disabled individuals reported vision and arthritis as two challenges.

    o Makes it hard to see the screen or push buttons.

    o The visually impaired community explained that the apps they need to use their devices are only available on certain phones (iPhone) which can be prohibitively expensive.

- Lack of mobile-friendly government services websites.

    o Lack of people/capacity to assist with navigating inaccessible websites/services.

Recommended Actions:

- State and local government adoption of best practices for online inclusion and accessibility.

- Increased capacity in communities to increase access to non-mobile devices with internet service.

Primarily serves:

- Individuals with a language barrier

- Individuals with disabilities and older individuals

3.5. Asset Inventory

To inventory the State's digital equity assets, many resources, programs, and strategies were catalogued—from small community programs to larger, statewide programs. The DE Planning teams collected information about assets in the following ways:

- Listening sessions

- Survey of Alaskan organizations including nonprofits, state agencies, higher education institutions, municipalities, and community organizations

- Survey on the broadbandforalaskans.org website, a diverse partnership of organizations facilitated by the Rasmuson Foundation under the guidance of the ABO

- Email inputs via broadband@rasmuson.org

- Small group discussions with key stakeholders

- Participation in partner events and conferences

DE Asset Inventory

As required by the Digital Equity (DE) Plan, and to gather information about existing digital equity programs and resources across Alaska, digital equity partners supported the development and distribution of an asset inventory. Organizations contacted included local, Tribal, and State government entities, organizations engaged in education or healthcare activities, housing authorities, nonprofits, philanthropic entities, internet service providers or other telecommunications providers, and other organizations as deemed relevant by the ABO. The survey form solicited information about broadband access and digital equity activities, as well as telecommunications workforce training activities.

More than 43 organizations responded prior to the publication of this report. However, the survey remains live and additional responses are expected.

The DE Planning teams discovered many local assets and small-scale digital equity programs provide covered populations with invaluable services that support the State's digital equity vision. Seaview Community Services in Seward, for example, provides iPads to low-income residents to access telemedicine behavioral and mental health services. The Anchorage Senior Citizens Center has a device lending program in which senior citizens can check out a tablet and volunteers show them how to use the devices and provide technical support.

However, in recognition of the challenge of capturing every program in all corners of the state, for the purpose of this Plan the asset inventory presents only the largest, statewide programs that help residents get online, wherever they are. One common theme is that the effectiveness and reach of the local programs are highly dependent on the people running the programs, which indicates that investing in personnel capacity to expand DE programs and services in welcoming ways tailored to covered populations can increase adoption of broadband and improve digital literacy statewide. An exemplary program that leverages funding resources with the state library network and staff is the Alaska Online with Libraries (OWL) program.

Spotlight on Alaska Public Libraries

Alaska's libraries – many of which are managed by local governments – offer numerous valuable resources, including:

- Adaptive technology tools
- Public-access broadband and Wi-Fi
- Public-access computers, devices, equipment, and software
- Digital Literacy training through services, programs, and the front desk
- Public access to online subscription resources and databases
- Public access to digital library collections and audiobooks
- Internet safety resources through the Alaska Internet Circle of Safety
- Digital Literacy Guide, which includes:
    - Computer fundamentals
    - E-Commerce/shipping
    - Email
    - About the internet
    - Mobile devices
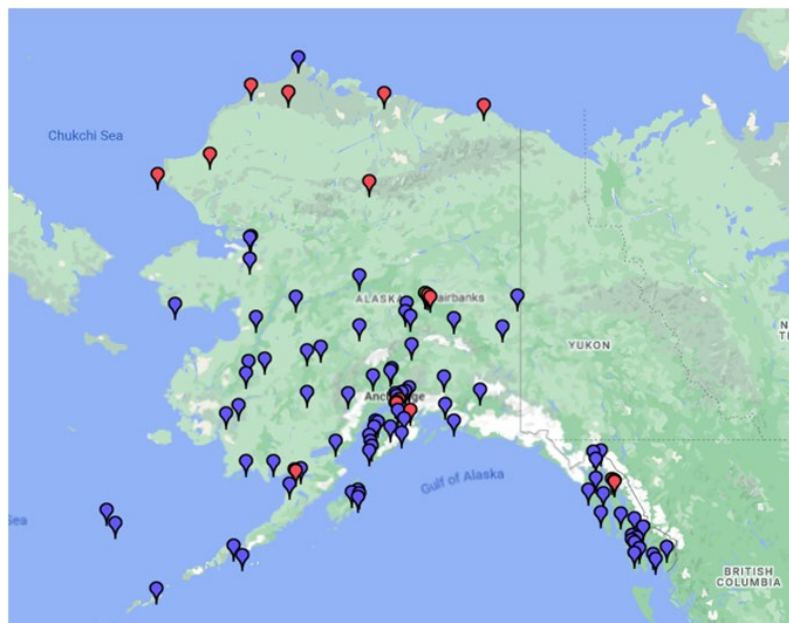   - Productivity tools
    - Social media

Figure 9: Locations of public libraries and public library branches in Alaska

Source: Alaska Division of Libraries, Archives and Museums

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Public libraries are essential hubs in the broadband ecosystem in Alaska. There are 84 central libraries and 17 branch libraries in Alaska. They serve on the frontlines of providing access to broadband, equipment, software, devices, and digital literacy. One Librarian shared the following:

> *"We are in a very rural and underserved community and region, and internet is prohibitively expensive and limited in our community. We are the only source of free, unrestricted access to technology and computers in the community. We share an internet connection with the Kuskokwim Campus, and the campus has access to 15Mpbs, and the library can only access 2Mpbs at a time. We do not qualify for the federal e-rate discount that other public libraries around the state benefit from because of our affiliation with the university. A goal has been and continues to be to be able to provide a functional and free source of internet access to the community within the library, where we also have staff available to help people with technology in a one-on-one capacity."*

3.6. Statewide Assets Summary

As previously stated, there are numerous digital equity assets throughout Alaska. Those programs and resources are being tracked throughout the planning process.

This current iteration of the plan identifies the largest, statewide assets (on the following pages); smaller, local resources will be published online at the conclusion of the planning process.

Digital Equity Assets and Programs

Resource Type	Name of Asset/Provider	Description of Asset	Covered Population(s)
Funding	Emergency Connectivity Funds ($83,176,591.05)	The FCC's Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF) provided Alaskan schools and libraries with $83M for laptops, hotspots, and broadband connectivity purchases for off-campus use by students, school staff, and library patrons across Alaska. For more information about ECF allocations, see Appendix E.	All

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Resource Type	Name of Asset/Provider	Description of Asset	Covered Population(s)
Technical Assistance	AARP Senior Planet	Senior Planet is a national program that offers free digital literacy training online specifically designed for seniors. In-person trainings can be offered when local sites become licensed.	Older adults
Program	Live Homework Help	Tutoring, aptitude test preparation, and career development.	Rural, low-income households.
Funding	Universal Service Fund – E-Rate (FY '21: $118,051,909.24)	RHC: The FCC's Universal Service Fund (USF) allows rural health care providers to pay rates for telecommunications services similar to those of their urban counterparts. E-Rate: Schools and Libraries Support Mechanism, popularly known as the "E-Rate," provides Internet access, and internal connections (the equipment to deliver these services) to eligible schools and libraries.[1] A January 2022 FCC Order expanded this program to include tribal libraries created and operated by Indian tribes or Alaska Native Corporations. The E-Rate program provides funding of up to 90% of the costs of monthly broadband service for a tribal library computer center and $25,000 for broadband related equipment which will likely be increased to $50,000 in 2024. More than 400 Alaska Native tribes and corporations are eligible to establish a tribal library computer center, offering a free alternative for internet access to families and individuals who lack access to a connected device or can't afford monthly broadband bills. The State already provides a full time E-rate coordinator through the State Librarian to help schools and libraries supply for the program.	All

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Resource Type	Name of Asset/Provider	Description of Asset	Covered Population(s)
Program	Alaska Online with Libraries (OWL)	Provides rural Alaskans with high-speed internet access and information technology training, among other things. Includes video conferencing subscription for public meetings and programs. Leverages approximately $700,000 in e-rate funds and issued $185,000 in pass through grants to libraries for improved broadband access or service45.	All
Program— funding and capacity building	Tribal Competitive ACP Outreach Program ($1,311,635)	Two Tribes and one Native non-profit won $1.311 million in ACP outreach funds to increase ACP enrollment by Tribal citizens.	Tribal citizens, individuals who are members of racial and ethnic minority groups.
Program- funding	Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) and Lifeline	The ACP is an FCC program that provides a discount of $75 per month for eligible households in Alaska as all are on Tribal lands; and a one-time discount of up to $100 to purchase a laptop, desktop computer, or tablet if they contribute more than $10 and less than $50 toward the purchase price.	Low-income households, which often overlap with Aging populations, Veterans, previously incarcerated people, and rural inhabitants.
Digital Literacy Program	Alaska Literacy Program	Offers certificate classes in digital skills and literacy for free.	All

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[45] Alaska Office of Management and Budget,
https://omb.alaska.gov/ombfiles/22_budget/EED/Proposed/31_comp3058.pdf

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Resource Type	Name of Asset/Provider	Description of Asset	Covered Population(s)
Program - funding	Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program (TBCP) ($448,098,971.90)	The Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program funds improved broadband infrastructure and use and adoption throughout Alaska, including access to affordable devices and broadband service, digital services like telehealth, telework, remote learning, and skills training, and workforce training and development.[46] A second round of funding of $1 billion has been announced for tribes, Alaska Native Corporations, and tribal organizations with an applications due date in January 2024.	Tribal citizens, individuals who are members of racial and ethnic minority groups.
Program – funding and capacity building	Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) Outreach Program – recipient RurAL CAP ($500,000)	The Rural Alaska Community Action Program, Inc. (RurAL CAP) is a nonprofit working to improve the quality of life for low-income Alaskans. RurAL CAP received $500,000 to increase enrollment in the ACP program. https://ruralcap.org/	Rural inhabitants, low-income households.
Digital Literacy Program	Digital Navigators Program, Alaska Federation of Natives	Digital navigators address the whole digital inclusion process — home connectivity, devices, and digital skills — with community members through repeated, one-on-one interactions. Funding comes from a competitive grant from the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) https://www.digitalinclusion.org/digital-navigator-corps/	Individuals who are members of racial and ethnic minority groups; people who reside in rural areas, low-income households with a focus on Alaska Natives.

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[46] For the list of recipients and award amounts see: Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program Map Dashboard (arcgis.com).

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Resource Type	Name of Asset/Provider	Description of Asset	Covered Population(s)
Access, Digital Literacy Program	Alaska Housing	Staffed computer lab to provide access, services and skill building technical assistance.	Low-income households, older adults, formerly incarcerated, Veterans, Individuals with disabilities, Individuals with language barriers, individuals who are members of racial and ethnic minority groups, people who primarily reside in a rural area

Upon receipt of the Digital Equity Capacity funding, Alaska's digital asset inventory will be published online with an interactive map. The map will evolve as more programs—local and statewide—are identified. Members of the public will be able to use the map to identify resources available to them.

3.7. Tribal Use and Adoption Grants

Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program grant funding offers Alaska Native entities an opportunity to engage in digital equity activities. In total, over $45 million in Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program (TBCP) funding has been allocated to Alaska Native entities for Use and Adoption activities. While not labelled as digital equity at the time of their release, stated purposes for these Use and Adoption funds universally map to core digital equity tenets such as broadband and device affordability and digital literacy education opportunities, as well broadband and device adoption activities.

In total, Alaska Native entities are set to receive fifteen times more Use and Adoption funds than the State of Alaska expects to receive through the Digital Equity State Capacity Program. With no additional information about Tribal Digital Equity funding available as of this draft, the State looks forward to collaborating with interested Alaska Native entities on shared affordability, adoption, and other digital equity priorities where funding allows.

For a detailed accounting of Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program recipients using funds for Use and Adoption activities, please see Table 3 in Appendix D.

3.8.   Existing Digital Equity Plans

While many community anchor institutions, municipal governments, Tribal governments, and Native Entities in Alaska have strategic plans and initiatives and recognize the importance of Digital Equity, Digital literacy, and Digital inclusion, the majority will need time to develop focused and comprehensive digital equity plans. The development of the organizations' digital equity plans will be of great importance and significance as each organization will know best how to provide the digital skills necessary to safely navigate the digital economy and these individual organizations will also know best how to serve their members in their community or region.

As an example, if it is within the Capacity Grant phase, then the State would consider potentially awarding the organization to implement their Digital Equity Plan that has been created for their community or region. If it is outside the Capacity Grant phase and the State is made aware of a Digital Equity plan that has been developed by one of our municipal or Tribal governments, or a Native Entity with whom their targeted population is aimed towards, the State will then review the plan and incorporate any of the information and data into the State's overall Digital Equity Plan where applicable when the State's plan is updated.

Ideally, the information received would be based on the organization and the community or region it represents. This will help in assisting with the overall success of implementation of State's Digital Equity Plan as it would incorporate the individual plans and will allow for Alaska residents to be more aware of the broadband infrastructure end-user best practices coming to our state. The State of Alaska would then house these plans on the ABO website for the public to review or for others to use as a guide when developing their plans for the community or region.

This section will discuss existing efforts to expand digital equity and provide examples of plans that speak to the issues. As municipal and tribal plans are developed, they will be considered throughout the Capacity Grant phase.

3.9.   Tribal Planning

In many cases, Alaska's Tribal governments, Alaska Native Village and Regional Corporations, and Tribal nonprofits have been leaders in spearheading the development of broadband projects and digital inclusion activities on behalf of Alaska Native peoples. Over the last half-decade, $387 million in grant funding has been awarded to Native entities.[47] For a list of those awards, please see Appendix D: Broadband Adoption. While most broadband deployment, adoption, and use funds have been spent on broadband deployment within Tribal communities, over $43 million have been allocated to adoption activities through the federally funded Tribal

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[47] Based on a total of ACP outreach and TBCP grants.

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Broadband Connectivity Program (TBCP). This includes more than $35 million for device and service subsidies, as well as digital skills, workforce training, and telehealth improvements, to the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN), a key partner during the development of the State's Digital Equity Plan.

State Digital Equity Plan
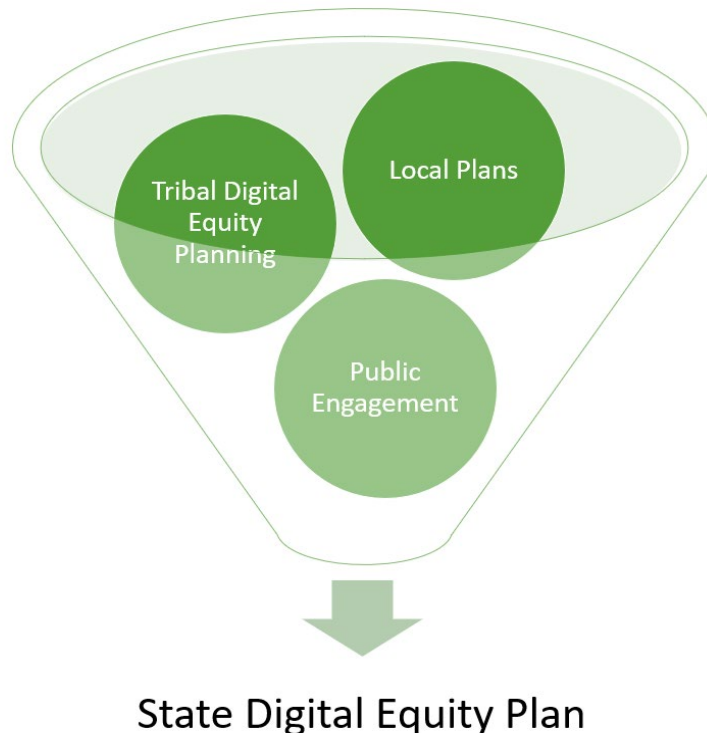
AFN is a partner for statewide listening sessions and will continue conducting sessions beyond the planning grant period through the tribal set-aside portion of the Digital Equity Act. Additionally, as a recipient of a National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) Digital Navigators grant, AFN is laying the groundwork for the rest of the state in increased digital literacy across Alaska Native communities. While the Digital Equity program sets aside at least $15 million for Tribes and Native corporations to develop and execute digital equity plans, with a possibility of additional funds in future years, NTIA has yet to award Tribal Planning Funds, delaying the planning process and therefore implementation for Alaska Native communities. This delay presents a hurdle to the State of Alaska as Tribal partners are an integral part of the State's digital equity planning and implementation process.

Municipal Planning

Alaska's local governments are uniquely structured in the nation, with 146 incorporated cities and 19 boroughs (a county-equivalent in many respects). Local governments have different authority than their counterparts elsewhere in the nation and are comprised of both home rule and general law entities. Boroughs conduct platting, planning, and zoning, and fund school districts. Half of the state is unorganized and without a borough; in those instances, the State provides those functions, except where home rule or first-class cities fill that role. Local governments are responsible for the maintenance and operation of 75% of the state's schools, and fund more than 30% of their total budgets. Schools don't have independent taxing authority and thus rely on local, state, and federal funds.

Local governments may play an important role as partners in private sector development of broadband as they have responsibilities for local permitting and land use regulations. To date, only one municipality, Ketchikan, has a telecommunications utility. But they may have a role in infrastructure build-out, including the potential for dark fiber. The real value of local governments will be as anchor institutions, as intermediaries in providing services, and improving their own public infrastructure and systems with covered populations in mind. However, local government capacity may become a limiting factor and will need to be addressed.

Local Plan Review – Snapshots in Time

Local government planning provides opportunities to address broadband development and digital equity on the local level. Hazard Mitigation Plans, for example, highlight telecommunications as critical infrastructure (e.g., Aleutians East Borough, 2021; City of Quinhagak, 2019) and uniformly cite the potential disruption to communications from increased severe weather and other climate change impacts. Local plans are too many to present in full for the purpose of this digital equity plan. Therefore, this section will highlight only a few plans, including that of a Tribal government.

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Community	Plan	Digital Equity (DE) Elements
Native Village of Eagle	Economic Development Plan	• Cell service not available, so communication usually requires a Wi-Fi connection for smartphones. • Access to training and secondary education classes via teleconference • City's public library and internet access
City of Unalakleet	Comprehensive Plan (2014-2019)	• Only half of residents have internet at home. • The Unalakleet Learning Center is a local extension of the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) Northwest Campus (NWC). It provides college students with access to computers and internet for taking classes and earning degrees from UAF. It also provides GED tutoring & testing services. However, there is limited local instruction from adjunct faculty.
City of Galena	Comprehensive Plan	• Promote utilization of the internet • Increase awareness of remote work opportunities • Market and promote high-quality of life to attract new residents

These are a few examples of alignment with broadband development objectives within hundreds of planning documents from local governments. Because local governments don't have a direct role in broadband development, planning documents are limited in what they reference. However, there are crucial elements of each local government's comprehensive or other planning documents that relate to and inform an approach to digital equity.

Three main themes emerge:

1. **Economic Development**

   • Including e-commerce for participation of local businesses in global, online business activity.

2. **Workforce Development**

   • Local government partnerships with local nonprofits and post-secondary programs support training opportunities, travel costs, and skills development.

   • Infrastructure projects provide opportunities to assess and improve the local workforce.

   • Remote training opportunities may transform local workforce development efforts, which may be a focus of local governments in the coming years.

3. **Quality of Life**

- Most planning documents reflect social determinants of health in a community, and the intersection between the economy, infrastructure, health, and environment that results in a strong quality of life. Future plans will need to incorporate broadband advancements in their approach to a sustainable and high quality of life.

Local Alaskan governments can serve as anchor institutions and can provide greater access to low-cost internet through tools such as public Wi-Fi at municipal locations, including schools, libraries, recreational centers, and even city halls as many of these types of facilities are municipal owned and operated. Municipal programs, too, can be developed to support individuals in skills development and even providing access to devices.

Another role that local governments play in building digital equity is serving constituents. Local government services are increasingly online, and reducing the digital divide will require attention to ensure access to services such as tax payments, council and assembly meetings, regulatory review and public comment process, and service outage reporting. There is a significant growth opportunity for local governments to increase their efficiency and effectiveness of operations by using best practices for digitally inclusive information via access to high-speed, affordable internet, which will correspond to improvements in the quality of life for residents including covered populations.

Throughout the grant phases of the Digital Equity Act, the State will continue to collaborate and align with local government planning efforts as they relate to digital access and equity goals.

4. Coordination & Outreach Strategy

A key charge of the Digital Equity Act was to listen and learn from some of the country's most vulnerable, difficult-to-reach populations—Americans who experience challenging physical, language, economic, and cultural barriers every day. Outreach to these populations is difficult under any circumstances but accomplishing it in Alaska—where travel to a "neighboring community" often requires a flight, boat ride, and a 4-wheeler—required a unique approach.

Three teams played key roles in developing and drafting Alaska's Digital Equity Plan: The Core Planning Team, the Working Group, and the Steering Committee (collectively called the ConnectAK Planning Team). This section outlines the partnerships and processes that led to the Plan development.

Prior to the passage of IIJA, there was no ABO to act as a central link between nonprofit and government resources. Thus, the first task of the ConnectAK Planning Team was to assist in connecting these nonprofit and advocacy organizations while the ABO was established by the State of Alaska—primarily by spreading the word about the Digital Equity Planning grant goals and objectives in an organized and inclusive fashion. Community engagement strategies included developing audience-appropriate outreach materials and a ConnectAK marketing

campaign and logo. The broadbandforalaskans.org website was created to become a one-stop public resource center with content ranging from information on the Digital Equity Act and how Alaskans can get involved, to cybersecurity tips for seniors and information about the ACP. Engagement opportunities were shared on social media sites and editorials and press releases were distributed to traditional media. The ConnectAK Planning Team hosted events and sent out monthly email communications to people and organizations who expressed interest in staying engaged.

Community outreach is the foundation upon which Alaska's Digital Equity Plan is built. By far the most meaningful engagement came from listening sessions that were conducted with the support of 13 nonprofits that reached more than 69 communities. Outreach to covered populations during these listening sessions was prioritized. As documented in Section 3, session participants identified barriers to accessing and fully utilizing broadband, discussed potential solutions, highlighted examples of current digital equity resources and tools, and shared personal experiences about how digital inequity impacted their lives.

At one session, a mother was brought to tears because she couldn't access internet-dependent tools used to assist her child's communication development—tools that worked in Anchorage but not at her rural home. At another, a woman shared how she was arrested for shoplifting food after not being able to navigate the State of Alaska's online assistance resources; a traumatic brain injury prevented her from comprehending website content. An elder shared what it was like when the internet was out for his community for months, and a principal recalled sprinting down the halls of their school to make sure everyone was off the internet so there was enough bandwidth for students to take state standardized tests.

4.1. ConnectAK Planning Teams

The ConnectAK Planning Teams were the driving force behind the outreach, coordination, and plan drafting. The teams consisted of:

- The **Core Planning Team**, which mapped out a timeline and process for collecting information required in the DE Plan.

- The **Working Group**, which took the lead in coordinating statewide outreach to covered populations.

- The **Steering Committee**, which focused on drafting the digital equity plan.

Core Planning Team

Once appointed by the State of Alaska to be the entity responsible for administering the Digital Equity Planning Grant, Rasmuson Foundation assembled a Core Planning Team (CPT) to map out a timeline and process for collecting information required in the Digital Equity Plan. The CPT kicked off Alaska's digital equity initiative by participating in statewide events and conferences to spread awareness about the Digital Equity planning process, encourage community participation, and recruit organizations interested in hosting listening sessions. The CPT also worked with the ABO, Alaska Federation of Natives, and other tribal partners to ensure coordination between the Digital Equity Planning efforts and other ongoing broadband efforts across the state.

Working Group

The Working Group led outreach efforts to covered populations, primarily in the form of organizing and facilitating listening sessions. Members consisted of 13 nonprofit organizations, each with extensive experience serving at least one of the covered populations. Since November 2022, members have organized more than 196 listening sessions in 69 communities. The total number of listening sessions will increase as they are still ongoing. Working Group member names and organizational contact information are listed on the broadbandforalaskans.org website; dates, times, and locations of upcoming and past listening sessions can also be found there.

Digital Equity Steering Committee

The Steering Committee members were the primary drafters, content decision-makers, and editors of the Digital Equity Plan. The committee included representatives from the Alaska Broadband Office, Rasmuson Foundation, the Alaska Federation of Natives, Alaska Municipal League, AARP Alaska, the State Library, the University System, telecommunications associations, and six nonprofits. Starting in the spring of 2023, committee members met twice a month to review drafted sections, provide feedback, ask questions, and hash out decision points. Between meetings, members were given "homework," including drafting and editing plan sections.

Digital Equity Plan
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Alaska Digital Equity Planning Partners

Core Planning Team

Rasmuson Foundation
Tilson Technology
Gulling Consulting

Working Group

- AARP Alaska
- Alaska Municipal League (AML)
- Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN)
- Rural Alaska Community Action Program (RurAL CAP)
- Kenai Community Foundation
- Seward Community Foundation
- Alaska Warrior Partnership
- Alaska Public Interest Research Group (AKPIRG)
- Alaska Literacy Program
- Special Olympics of Alaska
- Polynesian Association of Alaska
- Sol De Medianoche
- Rasmuson Foundation
- Alaska Broadband Office (ABO)

Steering Committee

- AARP Alaska
- ACLU of Alaska
- Alaska Telecom Association
- Alaska Broadband Office (ABO)
- Alaska Community Foundation (ACF)
- Alaska Literacy Program
- Alaska Municipal League (AML)
- Alaska Native Federation (AFN)
- Alaska Public Interest Research Group (AKPIRG)
- Alaska State Library
- Rural Alaska Community Action Program (RurAL CAP)
- University of Alaska, Fairbanks

Other Partners and Stakeholders

The Digital Equity Planning process included other critical partners. These organizations were not official members of a committee, but they supported efforts, primarily around stakeholder strategy and outreach. These groups included:

- Korean American Community of Anchorage
- Alaska Black Caucus
- Access Alaska
- Alaska Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired
- Alaska Humanities Forum
- Alaska Telecom industry
- Alaska Association on Developmental Disabilities
- Anchorage School District
- Alaska Association for Personal Care Supports

- Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority
- Partners for Progress
- State of Alaska Departments
- American Legion Post 5
- Seward Senior Center
- Seward Prevention Coalition
- Seward Homeless Connection
- Qutekcak Native Tribe
- University of Alaska System Consortium Library

5. Engagement Strategies

In addition to listening sessions, the ConnectAK Initiative included the following methods for engaging the public and partners:

- **Digital Equity Summit:** An all-day digital equity convening held on April 21, 2023, at the Alaska Native Heritage Center in Anchorage. The meeting was a chance for various digital equity stakeholders to meet and share input prior to the Steering Committee beginning their work on drafting the five-year plan. More than 100 people participated. Details provided are in Section 4.2.1 above). An additional Digital Equity convening was held in the fall of 2023.

- **One-on-One Conversations:** The ConnectAK Planning Team engaged leaders across Alaska in conversations about the DE planning process. These conversations led to additional public engagement opportunities and connections with representatives of the covered populations.

- **Engagement with state agencies through the ABO:** Staff at the ABO shared information about DE planning throughout their BEAD engagements and regularly scheduled public Q&A sessions.

- **Connecting with Alaska Native Organizations:** Relationships were developed through one-on-one conversations, extensive travel to rural communities, connections with consortiums, participation at the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) Annual Convention, engagement with tribes that submitted Letters of Intent (LOIs) to participate in the DE Tribal grant opportunities through the Digital Equity Act, and ongoing dialog with the Alaska Broadband Office's Tribal Liaison.

- **Asset Inventory:** The Core Planning Team (CPT), Working Group members, and the ABO developed and distributed a survey to assess the current state of existing digital equity resources, programs, planning efforts, and strategies among Alaska's state, local, tribal, and nonprofit organizations.

- **Email List-serv:** Since the Digital Equity Summit hosted in April 2023, the CPT continues to engage participants and the communities they represent through monthly email updates. These communications are also posted on the broadbandforalaskans.org website.

- **Events & Conferences:** Throughout the planning process, the ConnectAK Planning Team attended partner events and conferences to share information about Digital Equity and to engage participants.

- **Website:** The ConnectAK Planning Team supported the development of the broadbandforalaskans.org website to promote awareness of Listening Sessions, encourage participation, and to share digital equity resources.

- **Social Media:** ConnectAK Facebook and Instagram accounts are regularly updated to communicate digital equity activities.

- **Traditional Media:** Letters to the editor about digital equity efforts have been published in newspapers across Alaska with a call to action encouraging public engagement. Similarly, ConnectAK partners have used public radio as an outreach platform when visiting communities.

Digital Equity Summit

After months of traveling to communities across Alaska, one thing was very clear: Alaskans from completely different backgrounds, experiences, and locations had so much in common when it came to digital inequity. To bring these diverse voices together, the Working Group arranged a Digital Equity Summit to listen and share experiences of digital inequity and to empower these diverse groups to build momentum for a future where all Alaskans have equal access to and understanding of the internet.

The Summit goals were to:

1. Meet people from other parts of the state who care deeply about equal access and understanding of the internet.

2. Provide a space to listen, learn, and collaborate.

3. Get attendees up to speed on the Digital Equity Act and planning process.

4. Provide space and avenues for attendees to help inform the plan and process.

5. Discuss how to sustain the passion, energy, and focus on digital equity beyond the drafting of a plan.

Invitations to the day-long event were sent out to Alaskans who had previously engaged with ConnectAK Planning Team members during the outreach process. Participants included members of covered populations, legislators, telecommunications and business professionals, national experts, tribal representatives, community leaders, and nonprofit executives. Attendees were spread out amongst a dozen tables and strategically seated to make sure diverse perspectives and backgrounds were represented. The first half of the day focused on providing covered populations a chance to share their experiences. Working group members had identified and prepped speakers ahead of time to make sure they were comfortable and ready to share their testimony.

Attendees heard from a university professor in Bethel who could only catch about one-third of what is said on faculty Zoom calls and detailed the frustration students experience having to process a "firehose-worth of information through a drinking straw;" from a veteran from Kenai who described filling out a time-sensitive form 17 times because his Internet connection repeatedly dropped—and how he now just drives to a friend's house in Anchorage when he needs a reliable connection; and from a member of Alaska's Polynesian community who shared the hesitancy her community members felt about engaging in this project because they never see a follow-through. Attendees spent the second half of the day working together on solutions, shaping the vision that would be used in the digital equity plan and discussion about how to ensure momentum around digital equity is maintained beyond the immediate goal of drafting a digital equity plan.

> *"I recently had the privilege to visit Alaska and attend Alaska's Digital Equity Summit… I heard multiple table conversations discussing the benefits and dangers that broadband could bring to their cultures and communities. One end of the conversation was excitement about jobs and healthcare, and on the other was a fear of online scams and human trafficking. These are the kinds of conversations that prepare communities to participate meaningfully and safely online.*
>
> *-- National Digital Equity National Digital Inclusion Alliance Executive Director Angela Siefer, testifying before the House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee*

A key takeaway, and one that helped inform this plan, was that there was a strong desire to form a digital equity coalition. The group recognized the benefits of different perspectives and voices working together on the issue and the power of their collective voices. The overwhelmingly positive response led to the planning of two additional convenings. The first took place in August 2023, leading up to the public comment period, while the second occurred in early December towards the conclusion of the public comment period.

Public Comment Process

The Digital Equity Plan was posted to the Alaska Broadband Office website and the broadbandforalaskans.org website for a month of public comment. The executive summary and key performance indicators were translated into 9 languages. The draft was publicized on ConnectAK social media accounts and emailed to over 600 individuals who provided contact information. Additionally, working group members distributed hard and electronic copies to constituents and communities and more than 10 in-person and virtual public comment meetings were hosted by ConnectAK. In total, nearly 115 public comments were received in 4 languages. Those inputs are being incorporated into a final DE Plan for submission to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA). Public input will also be used to inform the Capacity Grant application.

5.1. Engagement with Covered Populations

ConnectAK engaged with every covered population, including hosting listening sessions that drew feedback from each. These engagements are summarized below:

Covered Population	Engagement at an Event or Meeting	Representation at Summit?
Covered Households	• Alaska Federation of Natives hosted 30 digital equity meetings that included members of covered households. • Alaska Literacy Program hosted seven meetings with covered households. • Alaska Municipal League hosted 15 meetings that included members of covered households. • RurAL CAP hosted 25 meetings that included members of covered households. • Seward Community Foundation hosted 9 meetings that included members of covered households. • Kenai Community Foundation hosted four meetings that included members of covered households. • AARP Alaska hosted 16 meetings that included members of covered households. • Alaska Warrior Partnership facilitated 11 meetings that included members of covered households. • Polynesian Association of Alaska participated in 8 meetings that included members of covered households. • Rasmuson Foundation facilitated 14 meetings that included members of covered households. • Sol de Medianoche facilitated two meetings that included members of covered households. • Korean Community of Alaska facilitated one meeting that included members of covered households. • Special Olympics of Alaska facilitated 12 meetings that included members of covered households.	Yes, through the Alaska Federation of Natives, Alaska Warrior Partnership, Alaska Municipal League, AARP of Alaska, Polynesian Association of Alaska, Korean Community of Alaska, Partners for Progress, Alaska Literacy Program, RurAL CAP, Sol de Medianoche, Seward Community Foundation, Kenai Community Foundation, Special Olympics of Alaska, and Rasmuson Foundation.

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Covered Population	Engagement at an Event or Meeting	Representation at Summit?
Aging Individuals	• AARP Alaska hosted 16 senior-focused listening sessions in 13 communities. • RurAL CAP hosted 12 meetings that included seniors.	Yes, through the Alaska Warrior Partnership, AARP, and S.O.L.V.E. AK.
Veterans	• Alaska Warrior Project hosted 11 veteran-focused meetings in 10 communities. • RurAL CAP hosted six meetings that included veterans.	Yes, through the Alaska Warrior Partnership, AARP, and S.O.L.V.E. AK.
Individuals with Disabilities	• Special Olympics of Alaska hosted 12 events in five communities with members of the developmental disability community. • RurAL CAP facilitated four meetings that included individuals with disabilities. • Rasmuson Foundation facilitated five disability-focused community meetings.	Yes, through Special Olympics of Alaska, Access Alaska, and Alaska Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired.
Individuals with a Language Barrier	• Alaska Literacy Program hosted two Anchorage-based listening sessions in Spanish. • Sol de Medianoche hosted two Anchorage-based listening sessions in Spanish. • Korean Community of Alaska hosted a listening session in Anchorage in Korean. • Polynesian Association of Alaska hosted eight listening sessions in three communities. • Presentation at Alaska Literacy's Health Day in Anchorage. Over 200 individuals with 10+ cultural communities represented.	Yes, through Alaska Literacy Program, Sol de Medianoche News, Korean Community of Alaska, Polynesian Association of Alaska, Alaska Federation of Natives.

Covered Population	Engagement at an Event or Meeting	Representation at Summit?
	• RurAL CAP hosted five meetings that included individuals with language barriers.	
Individuals who are members of a racial or ethnic minority	• Alaska Literacy Program hosted two Anchorage-based listening sessions that included members of racial or ethnic minority populations. • Korean Community of Alaska hosted one meeting that included members of racial or ethnic minority populations. • Sol de Media Noche hosted two meetings that included members of racial or ethnic minority populations. • Rasmuson Foundation facilitated two meetings with the Alaska Black Caucus. • Alaska Polynesian Association hosted eight community meetings that included members of racial or ethnic minority populations. • RurAL CAP hosted 25 meetings that included members of racial or ethnic minority populations. • Alaska Municipal League hosted 15 meetings that included members of racial or ethnic minority populations. • Alaska Federation of Natives hosted 31 digital equity meetings that included members of racial or ethnic minority populations.	Yes, through the Alaska Federation of Natives, Sol de Medianoche, Polynesian Association of Alaska, RurAL CAP, and Korean Community of Alaska.
Individuals who reside in a rural area	• Alaska Federation of Natives hosted 31 digital equity meetings in 21 communities including Unalaska, Savoonga, Gambell, Teller, Dillingham, Manokotak, Nanwalek, Tyonek, Seldovia, Chitina, McGrath, Nenana, Utqiagvik, Ambler, Kobuk,	Yes, through the Alaska Federation of Natives, Alaska Warrior Partnership, Alaska Municipal League, AARP of Alaska, Polynesian Association of Alaska, Korean Community of Alaska, Partners for Progress,

Covered Population	Engagement at an Event or Meeting	Representation at Summit?
	Kodiak, Hydaburg, Klawock, Bethel, Toksook Bay. - Alaska Municipal League hosted 15 meetings in 12 rural communities including Unalaska, Soldotna, Homer, Nome, Kotzebue, Dillingham, Valdez, Bethel, Galena, Yakutat, Kake, and Wrangell. - RurAL CAP hosted 25 meetings in rural communities. - Seward Community Foundation seven meetings in rural communities. - Kenai Community Foundation hosted four meetings in rural communities. - AARP Alaska hosted seven senior-focused listening sessions in rural communities. - Alaska Warrior Partnership facilitated nine meetings in rural communities.	Alaska Literacy Program, RurAL CAP, Sol de Medianoche, Seward Community Foundation, Kenai Community Foundation, Special Olympics of Alaska, and Rasmuson Foundation.
Formerly Incarcerated Individuals	- Hosted a discussion with Partners for Progress Reentry Center, partners, and clients.	Yes, through Partners for Progress Reentry Program.

5.2. Workforce Entities

The ABO has been working with the following entities to develop its Broadband Workforce Development Plan. These organizations will also be key partners in advancing workforce development efforts more broadly through digital equity planning and implementation.

Key Workforce Development Partners for Digital Equity

- Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development
- Rasmuson Foundation
- Alaska Safety Alliance
- Alaska Works Partnership
- University of Alaska
- Iḷisaġvik College
- Alaska AFL/CIO
- Calista Corporation
- NANA Corporation

- Alaska Vocational Technical School (AVTEC)Alaska Workforce Investment Board
- Alaska Telecom Association
- Denali Commission
- Alaska Municipal League
- Alaska Joint Electrical Apprenticeship Program
- National Electric Association of Alaska
- Alaska Primary Care Association
- Alaska Association of School Administrators
- Alaska Association of School Board

The ABO is engaging and partnering with a broad range of entities through a series of strategies outlined in the Alaska Broadband Workforce Development Plan (ABWDP). The ABWDP has three goals and five strategies:

The goals of the plan are:

1: Increase the number of Alaskans qualified to fill broadband construction and operations occupations,

2: Develop a diverse and inclusive regional broadband industry workforce, and

3: Strengthen and expand post-deployment capacity for residents to learn about and navigate education, training, and career opportunities, including self-employment, available using high-speed broadband access.

The five strategies are:

Strategy 1: Implement the Broadband Workforce Development Plan and build a sustainable, standards-based program, with a focus on public-private partnerships to produce a highly skilled and technically trained workforce that can meet industry labor supply challenges.

> **Specific Objective:** The Plan will be adopted by the Alaska Workforce Investment Board, and the Alaska Broadband Office (ABO) will determine what entity will be charged with initial implementation of the Plan to drive and coordinate action and raise and utilize resources to achieve the goals and objectives of the Plan.

> **Actions**:
> 1. The Alaska Workforce Investment Board (AWIB) will review and adopt the Broadband Workforce Development Plan.
> 2. The ABO will determine what agency, entity, or company will initially implement the Broadband Workforce Development Plan in early 2024 and provide resources to start activities.
> 3. The ABO will convene broadband/telecommunications employers and contractors to discuss, deliberate, develop, or assign a Workforce Intermediary organization.
> 4. The ABO will provide start-up resources for a Workforce Intermediary to employ a full-time Coordinator/Director to implement the Plan.
> 5. Plan implementation lead(s) will establish regular methods of communication to, from, and among stakeholders.
> 6. The ABO or the Workforce Intermediary will develop a data collection and analysis system that measures strategy inputs and outputs and create an assessment and evaluation process to measure goal progress and identify areas that need improvement.
> 7. The ABO or the Workforce Intermediary will maintain and refresh the akbroadbandworkforce.org website to provide communication avenues, including user forums, to provide updated information and inform the public.
> 8. The ABO, AWIB, and the Workforce Intermediary will establish sustainable funding to provide ongoing broadband training and workforce efforts.

Strategy 2: Build on the existing construction industry training and workforce efforts.
Specific Objective: Each region will implement a broadband construction and telecommunications workforce development network that involves industry employers, educators, trainers, and support service providers who work together to prepare students and potential job seekers for industry employment**.**

Actions:

1. Connect regional construction training efforts, including secondary and postsecondary Career and Technical Education (CTE), job training, and apprenticeship programs, to form a construction and broadband training network.
2. Determine regional broadband construction and deployment occupational labor gaps and focus outreach and training to prepare workers to fill job demand.
3. Assess the regional training network strengths and weaknesses to identify gaps, challenges, and needs for developing the broadband workforce and develop strategies to overcome deficiencies.
4. Merge new broadband construction and telecommunications CTE programs and training into the regional talent network.
5. Identify transferable skills that students and potential workers need for cross-industry jobs and adjust training to meet those needs.
6. Connect regional and state support service providers and create a process and delivery system to assist students and trainees to attend training in and out of the region and as they transition to employment.

Strategy 3: Increase career awareness and information about telecommunications occupations and employment.

Specific Objective: Create a statewide marketing campaign that increases student and potential worker awareness about the broadband construction and telecommunications industry and broadband expansion employment opportunities, and connect them to career education, training, and services that prepare them for industry jobs.

Actions:

1. Develop a broadband workforce brand and outreach marketing campaign to raise public awareness about industry jobs and careers, including the training, skills, and certifications required for employment and how to access them.
2. Identify effective career awareness models that can be adapted to broadband messaging that increases career awareness among students, school counselors, parents, and job seekers.
3. Develop an industry career guide program to inform and support school counselors, teachers, industry employers, and Type M instructors who engage with students about industry jobs and careers.

4. Expand the Alaska Career Information System ([AKCIS](#)) and [AlaskaJobs](#) to inform students and job seekers about broadband and telecommunications occupations careers and employment opportunities.

5. Train and provide Digital Navigators[48] to help individuals navigate online education, training, support services, employment opportunities, including entrepreneurship, and other personal opportunities available with high-speed Internet access.

Strategy 4: Increase education and training programs that prepare students and adults for apprenticeship and entry-level employment in telecommunications occupations.

Specific Objective: Increase the number of broadband construction and telecommunication apprentices and individuals enrolling in postsecondary education courses to help diversify the workforce and fill the wide variety of occupations needed to construct and deploy broadband and fill cross-industry jobs in every region of Alaska.

Actions:

1. Create a working group of industry employers, educators, trainers, and apprentice sponsors to assist the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) with the creation of a Broadband/Telecommunications Career and Technical Education Program of Study (CTEPS) that can be used by school districts across the state.

2. Identify and/or develop qualified industry instructors, including Type M Certified instructors from industry, to support teachers or deliver instruction in secondary CTE programs.

3. Provide support and technical assistance for industry related registered apprenticeship sponsors to create programs or scale up recruitment and training for existing ones.

4. Provide support services for applicants entering apprentice, postsecondary, and higher education programs.

5. Introduce new broadband construction and telecommunications courses through Alaska Construction Academies and the Alaska Department of Corrections.

6. Support broadband/ telecommunications pre-apprenticeship training.

7. Engage out-of-state industry trainers that offer basic broadband courses to serve every region.

8. Develop a broadband construction and telecommunications train-the-trainer program that can increase the supply of qualified instructors.

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[48] Individuals who address the entire digital inclusion process — home connectivity, devices, digital skills, and digital opportunities — with community members. Navigators may be paid staff or volunteers.

Strategy 5: Put in place recruitment, training, and employment efforts focused on historically underrepresented groups.

    Specific Objective: Alaska's construction and broadband industry will employ a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive workforce to build broadband infrastructure and operate telecommunications systems.

    Actions:

1. Work directly with agencies and organizations that already work with historically underrepresented groups to build avenues to the broadband industry talent pipeline and jobs.
2. Meet with industry employers to learn about their specific workforce needs and develop relationships that lead to employment opportunities for specific populations within historically underrepresented groups.
3. Use agency and partner communications processes to increase system-wide awareness about special population employment opportunities and ways to connect clients to talent pipelines.
4. Develop industry-focused outreach, training, and employment agency and partner action plans that connect clients to appropriate education, training, and support services.
5. Organize and support a coordinated effort with Alaska Job Centers, Alaska Native entities, and other agencies to provide support services for individuals.

5.3. Ongoing Engagement Strategy & Partners

The ConnectAK Planning Team saw tremendous value in groups across the state collaborating around digital equity. With the active participation of over 5,000 individuals in the planning process, the challenge at this juncture is to sustain the current momentum.

Several strategies will be deployed to foster continued collaboration.

5.3.1. Digital Equity Coalition

Nonprofits have been the backbone of Alaska's digital equity outreach endeavors. A core group of 13 organizations have collaboratively tackled this issue for over a year, engaging in community visits, crafting outreach materials, and conducting listening sessions. Post-plan development, these organizations expressed interest in continuing collaboration to collectively advocate for policies and programs that enhance digital equity in Alaska. While each organization may have distinct objectives, their unified goal is to bridge the gaps contributing to the growing digital divide.

The Rasmuson Foundation, committed to advancing digital equity efforts in Alaska, has allocated Year 1 funds to the Alaska Municipal League to serve as the fiscal agent of the Coalition. The Coalition's purpose is to uphold engagement with individuals from covered populations involved in the planning process and to initiate additional efforts to enhance capacity. Effective communication between the coalition and the state is vital for the success of this initiative.

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Membership details and focus areas are still under development; an ongoing process is in place to establish an advisory body comprised of organizations representing covered populations. Nonprofit partners serving covered populations, Native entities, and rural municipal and tribal governments are advising the development of the emerging coalition, showcasing a collective interest in advancing digital equity in Alaska.

In essence, the digital equity coalition aims to unite diverse stakeholders with a shared mission, enabling the consolidation of resources, expertise, and influence to address the digital divide comprehensively and effectively. It serves as a beacon of hope for Alaska's future, marked by equal opportunities, economic growth, improved education, and strengthened community connections. The focus of 2024 will be on further identifying organizations willing to participate in the coalition, defining its goals, determining where the effort resides, and exploring potential financial support to sustain the initiative past year 1.

Rasmuson Foundation has fully funded the first year of the Coalition and Alaska Municipal League will operate as the fiscal sponsor. While the Coalition strives to maintain effective communication and a relationship with the Alaska Broadband Office, the coalition is a distinct entity - neither party has the authority to make decisions over the activities of the other.

Champions of Alaska's Digital Equity Efforts

Alaska's digital equity efforts will be inclusive of the following champions and future champions. These organizations potentially include:

- AARP Alaska
- Alaska Municipal League
- Alaska Federation of Natives
- Rural Alaska Community Action Program (RurAL CAP)
- Kenai Community Foundation
- Seward Community Foundation
- Alaska Library Network and the Alaska Library Association
- Alaska Warrior Partnership
- Alaska Public Interest Research Group (AKPIRG)
- Alaska Literacy Program
- Nonprofit Organizations
- Individuals with Disabilities, including organizations that represent individuals with disabilities (including children)
- Older Adults, including organizations that represent older adults
- Organizations that represent individuals who are English learners
- Organizations that represent individuals who have low levels of literacy
- Organizations that represent veterans
- Civil Rights Organizations
- Workforce Development Organizations
- Public Housing Authorities

Champions of Alaska's Digital Equity Efforts

Alaska's digital equity efforts will be inclusive of the following champions and future champions. These organizations potentially include:

- Special Olympics of Alaska
- Polynesian Association of Alaska
- Sol De Medianoche
- Rasmuson Foundation
- Alaska Broadband Office (ABO)
- Alaska Telecom Association
- State Agencies
- Community Anchor Institutions
- County and Municipal Governments
- SOA Department of Corrections
- Consumer advocates and advocacy groups
- Local Educational Agencies. K12 and Higher Education Institutions
- Alaska Native Entities
- Labor organizations & unions
- Faith-based organizations
- Organizations that serve covered populations
- Community Health Organizations
- Prevention Coalitions
- PTAs and PTOs

5.3.2. Other Outreach

Media Engagement

ConnectAK has engaged with the media on multiple fronts, including traditional news stories, radio interviews, letters to the editor, the BroadbandforAlaskans website, and through social media. When Working Group members travel to a community for a listening session, they draft a press release and reach out to public radio and otherwise engage with the community/media on multiple fronts. For instance, on a recent visit to Bethel, Working Group participants arranged a call-in radio program that was facilitated by the local library director. In addition, ConnectAK created various "one-pagers" to explain the State's goals and efforts and had the language vetted by experts to ensure appropriateness for the populations it is engaging with.

Moving into the implementation phase, the ABO and its partners are committed to sustaining media engagement surrounding issues related to digital equity. During the public comment period, ConnectAK members were featured guests on three radio shows, including one in Spanish. During the implementation phase (starting in 2024), prioritizing op-eds, radio shows, and other letters to the editor will ensure that this issue stays at the forefront of the broadband landscape.

Newsletter

Since the April Digital Equity Summit, the ConnectAK team has been drafting and emailing a monthly newsletter to community members and stakeholders. During the public comment period, this frequency increased to a weekly newsletter. The ABO maintains a growing listserv of 600 individuals and is committed to providing them with a quarterly update throughout the implementation phase.

6. Implementation

6.1. Implementation Strategies & Key Activities

To advance digital equity, Alaskans will need to work together to build the capacity and tools to sustain the work over time.

Investments must be made both in places and people to 1) ensure resources are available in proximity to everyone and at a scale to meet needs, and 2) ensure people who face the most significant barriers have connectivity no matter where they live.

This section outlines the foundational strategies and key activities that will inform Alaska's focus for the Digital Equity Capacity Grant Program. Alaska's implementation strategy includes activities that address the barriers to digital equity identified in Section 3. The goals and KPIs listed in Section 2 provide additional information about Alaska's next steps for the Digital Equity Act grant programs and measurable objectives. The strategies include:

- Develop an affordability initiative,

- Launch statewide digital literacy activities,

- Create a device refurbishment, distribution, and maintenance program,

- Strengthen institutions, and

- And Strategies specific to each Covered Population,

Implementation Strategy	Key Activities
Affordability Initiative	• Identify policy initiatives that advance broadband affordability. • Identify and develop other funding opportunities to sustain affordable access. • Ensure affordability strategies are inclusive of every Alaskan, with specific focus on the covered populations.

Implementation Strategy	Key Activities
	• Increase enrollment in ACP and other affordability programs.

Digital Literacy Campaign	• Create statewide digital literacy programs with a focus on in-person programming that includes:
	    • Train the trainer initiative.
	    • Use of existing digital literacy curriculum and programs.
	• Coordination and support of community partnerships.
	• Expand and support existing digital navigator programs.
	• Leverage existing digital literacy resources and curriculum, as well as resources that could be adapted to support digital literacy.
	• Establish digital literacy partnerships with organizations operating in 75 distinct municipalities and 200 Alaska Native Villages; increase the number of digital literacy programs.

Device Affordability & Refurbishment Program and Technical Support	• Partner with the private sector, philanthropy, government, non-profits, and others to provide affordable devices. • Develop technical support programs. • Identify sources for adaptive device accessories to meet the needs of covered populations. • Work toward access to devices in community anchor institutions and public spaces
Strengthening Community Anchor Institutions	• Provide pathways to increased broadband access at public entities. • Encourage nonprofit and other partners to increase their focus on digital equity. • Enable the equitable delivery of public and nonprofit services. • Institute planning efforts that expand the capacity of community anchor institutions to meet the needs of covered populations.

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Implementation Strategy	Key Activities
Individuals with a Language Barrier	• Complete a survey of websites that offer online public benefits and social services for readability and language accessibility and identify "best practices". • Work with the State of Alaska and other front-line service providers to ensure website translations are available in the most common non-English languages spoken in Alaska, including developing a process for determining how frequently language audits are conducted and websites updated. • Create a database of translated information and share the database with partner organizations, local governments and nonprofits, tribal entities, and groups that work with English Learners. • Ensure public resources like grant opportunities are available to and benefit English Learners. • Establish an Alaska Native Digital Corps to provide trainings conducted in the local Eskimo dialect prominent in Western and Northern Alaska among Yu'pik and Inupiaq peoples.
Incarcerated Individuals	• Improve awareness among policymakers, the public, and prison staff about the importance of access to digital technology for successful rehabilitation and reentry. • Identify opportunities to build and sustain technology infrastructures within correctional facilities. • Expand access to and availability of education programming, [49] internet-based civil justice resources, and workforce development training programs for incarcerated Alaskans. • Expand internet access to facilitate communication between incarcerated Alaskans and their family members to build support networks necessary for reentry. • Expand access to technology for reentry partner organizations, and through the Alaska Court System. • Build capacity for DOC staff to support increased access for inmates to information technology. • Improve awareness among policymakers, the public, and prison staff about the importance of access to digital technology for successful rehabilitation and reentry. • Identify opportunities to build and sustain technology infrastructures within correctional facilities.

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[49] See U.S. Department of Education, Educational Technology in Corrections 2015, available at
https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/policybriefedtech.pdf

Implementation Strategy	Key Activities
	• Expand access to and availability of education programming, [50] internet-based civil justice resources, and workforce development training programs for incarcerated Alaskans. • Expand internet access to facilitate communication between incarcerated Alaskans and their family members to build support networks necessary for reentry. • Engage Halfway Houses (CRC) and Reentry Programs (Transitional Housing) around digital inclusion initiatives, existing programs, and funding opportunities. • Engage Workforce Development partners to create Job Centers within or in partnership with prisons. • Support digital inclusion initiatives and increase awareness of digital literacy programs and access to affordable devices.
Individuals with Disabilities	• Within 12 months, review websites that offer online public benefits and social services to ensure they are compliant with section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act. • By 2027, create a statewide digital literacy program with a focus on in-person programming that includes: • Train-the-trainer initiatives; • Use of existing digital literacy curriculum and programs; and • Coordination and support of community partnerships. • Digital literacy programming for Alaskans with disabilities that aids specific to their disability. • Expand and support existing digital navigator programs. • Leverage existing digital literacy resources and curriculum, as well as resources that could be adapted to support digital literacy. • Expand and support Section 508 and ADA compliance resources for state and local governments and public accommodations. • Development of cybersecurity, online safety & privacy campaigns.
Individuals in Low-Income Households	• Develop technical training programs. • Identify sources of online income options.

Implementation Strategy	Key Activities
	• Increase the number of small businesses and decrease unemployment of Alaskans in covered households.
	• Ensure that all state agencies working with low-income Alaskans make provisions for those without access to computers or lacking computer or internet training. The state government should not require applications to be submitted online unless the agency is prepared to ensure that low-income households have access to a computer and the digital literacy skills necessary to navigate its websites.
	• Ensure that state agencies providing job services do not require individuals to search or apply for jobs online without the requisite access to a computer or the proper training on how to navigate job websites, prepare resumes, and submit job applications online.
	• Provide training for all state agencies working with low-income Alaskans on how to ensure they are not "left behind" because of lack of computers or broadband access or inadequate online skills.
	• Ensure that schools serving low-income students offer a full suite of digital literacy training classes beginning with computer operation to navigating the internet to digital safety and security to computer coding.
	• Work with Alaska Native non-profit tribal organizations that routinely work with low-income Alaska Natives, so they can provide digital skill training and access to computers and affordable broadband connections.
	• Provide regular in-person and online computer and digital trainings for low-income Alaskans, particularly those living in rural communities without access to other alternatives.
	• Create a network of tribal library computer centers in low-income communities that offer free access to a computer, broadband access, and digital skills training.
Aging Individuals	• Encourage senior services providers, senior centers, libraries, and other local sites to become certified in curriculum specifically designed for seniors and begin offering in-person digital skills training to seniors and others in the community.
	• Create a statewide digital literacy program with a focus on in-person and online programming for seniors that includes:
	• Train-the-trainer initiatives or sites licensed to provide training specifically to seniors.
	• Use of existing digital literacy curriculum and programs designed for seniors.
	• Coordination and support of community partnerships.
	• Expand and support existing digital navigator programs to include a focus on working with seniors.

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Implementation Strategy	Key Activities
	• Leverage existing digital literacy resources and curriculum as well as resources that could be adapted to support digital literacy and are designed specifically for seniors. • Work with the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC) and other statewide or regional non-profit tribal organizations delivering services to Native elders or providing housing to Native elders to offer computer and internet curriculum designed for them and begin offering in-person digital skills training including in Native dialects. • Train Native speakers as part of an Alaska Native Digital Corps who can offer digital training to Native elders. • Develop a cybersecurity, online safety, and privacy campaign targeted to seniors. • Create a statewide education initiative which includes in-person and regionally available trainers designed especially for seniors.
Veterans	• Partner with hospitals, healthcare clinics, and the VA to identify barriers to online appointments. • Provide outreach about digital healthcare best practices. • Identify opportunities for digital healthcare and mental health services. • Encourage Alaskan veterans to take advantage of online appointment options and other digital healthcare options. • Partner with hospitals, including the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, the Alaska Native Medical Center, and Indian Health Service hospitals; healthcare clinics, including the 200 Indian Health Service clinics in rural Alaska; and the Veterans Administration to identify barriers to online appointments and means of educating veterans on how to create a patient profile and navigate the patient portal.
Racial and Ethnic Minorities	• Train-the-trainer capacity building. • Partner with CAIs to bring resources to ethnic minority communities. • Work with the Alaska Federation of Natives, the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, Alaska's federally recognized tribes, tribal organizations including Native non-profits and Tribally Designated Health Entities, RurAL CAP, and Alaska Native corporations, especially those that already offer digital and cybersecurity services, to address the unique needs of the 22% of the Alaska population who are Alaska Natives. Particular focus should be given to the following covered population of Alaska Natives: those living in poverty, those who speak Native languages as their primary language, those who are veterans, and those who are incarcerated. Each

Implementation Strategy	Key Activities
	group is served by a unique set of Native based providers, has unique needs, and requires specialized programming.
	• Work with partners, like AFN, to develop a template to help tribes and Native corporations develop their own digital equity plan. Identify Native entities that can provide digital skills and training. Notably, this work will be funded by the Digital Equity Planning Grant funds set aside for Native entities.
Individuals Primarily Living in Rural Areas	• Improve awareness among policymakers and the public about digital inequities in rural Alaska. • Improve local access to devices and repairs in rural Alaska. • Use the Broadband Equity Access and Deployment (BEAD) Program to identify affordability. • Leverage, as necessary and feasible, the State's Broadband Parity Adjustment.

6.2. Funding to Advance Strategies

Alaska, through the ABO, has a once-in-a-generation opportunity to capitalize on available funding to invest heavily in broadband infrastructure, leverage available funds to increase affordability of broadband services and devices, and leverage these significant investments to advance its holistic strategy to improve access, affordability, reliability, and digital equity and literacy throughout the state.

In the near term, ABO will pursue available federal funding opportunities to leverage and catalyze further investment in broadband infrastructure and the Digital Equity ecosystem. Parallel efforts will continue to identify opportunities for public-private partnerships to bring private capital into the infrastructure build-out and create a community benefit from private Internet Service Providers contributing a portion of revenue to advance Digital Literacy.

Federal funds that are currently available to advance the three components of the implementation strategy include:

- Affordable Connectivity Program

- Affordable Connectivity Program Outreach grants

- BEAD, Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program (TBCP), and Middle Mile grants through National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA)

- Digital Equity Capacity Building Grant, and Digital Equity Competitive Grant through NTIA

- State and Local Government Cybersecurity Grants

- Re-Connect Grant program, that leverages private capital through USDA

The ABO will also examine opportunities to extend the benefits of the ACP and create new pathways and programs for device maintenance, repair, and replacement. There are several models of existing programs that refurbish devices and provide them at no or low cost to individuals in covered populations. These opportunities will be explored with private entities in the marketplace, as well as non-profit organizations, educational institutions, and other community-based organizations.

6.3.   Mechanisms to Advance Strategies

DE Coalition

As discussed in Section 2, a key element to advancing the implementation strategies is to encourage formation of a DE Coalition, an independent, voluntary organization comprised of community anchor institutions and other partners committed to advancing digital equity in Alaska, working alongside and apart from the State's efforts. The State envisions a Coalition to be a lynchpin that ensures all relevant organizations and entities are working together efficiently and effectively, and which can leverage additional resources to assist in implementing strategies that help to achieve digital equity goals. Preliminary steps for the development of the Coalition could be:

- Identify key organizations to participate in the DE Coalition.

- Develop group norms, structure, and leadership of the Coalition.

- Determine Coalition priorities and actions.

- Decide which organizations will lead which strategies and actions.

Evaluation Methods

For the ABO to have an even clearer picture of digital equity needs, it will require further data collection. Data collection is challenging because of the rural nature of the state and the difficulty of reaching residents off the road system who do not have access to the internet. With the development of further surveys and effective distribution strategies, the ABO will host on its website a digital equity dashboard that tracks clearly defined access and affordability metrics as well as data on covered populations. An entity to develop evaluation tools and distribute surveys has yet to be identified. Additional evaluation will track and measure progress towards the KPIs outlined in Section 2 and ensure that digital equity programs developed and implemented with future Digital Equity Capacity Building funding will include evaluation requirements for grantees.

6.3.1. Sustainability Measures

Alaska's Digital Equity Act investments will put in place digital equity infrastructure, programs, and partnerships that will sustain the State's work towards digital equity. The DE Planning Working Group reflects the power of committed organizations to propel the State forward.

A sustainability plan, geared toward securing funding, partnerships, and other relevant resources necessary for maintaining newly developed digital equity programs beyond 2030, will be developed following a comprehensive review of activities at the conclusion of Year 4.

6.4.   Collaboration with Key Partners

As discussed in Section 4, expanding Digital Equity in Alaska relies heavily on collaboration with key partners throughout the state. Building a network with trusted communication and relationships will be a mechanism for advancing the three components to Alaska's DE strategy. Key partners include representatives from the emerging Digital Equity Coalition and organizations listed in Section 4.

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6.5. Detailed Timeline

Activities[51][52]	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030
Continuous promotion of the ACP and enrolling households, encouraging use of device subsidy	Q1						
ABO coordinates Digital Equity (DE) and BEAD efforts around affordability	Q3						
Support existing digital literacy programs and explore options for new programs	Q1						
Apply for DE Capacity building grant	Q1						
Establish DE Coalition	Q1						
Determine Partners for cybersecurity campaign	Q3						
Explore options and identify partners for device affordability, refurbishment, and technical support	Q3						
Identify assistive technology needs and funding opportunities	Q2						
Conduct further assessments to determine baselines for KPIs	Q2						
Design and develop policy initiatives around three goals		Q4					
Plan Digital Navigator Programs		Q2					
Plan Statewide Digital Literacy Program		Q2					
Build Roadmap for digital literacy initiative and cybersecurity, safety, and privacy campaign		Q2					
Finalize contracts with device refurbishment/distribution/repair entities		Q1					

[51] Q1: January-March; Q2: April-June; Q3: July-September; Q4: October-December

[52] If an activity is ongoing over several years, only the quarter of onset is identified in the chart.

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Activities[51][52]	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030
Support Alaskan organizations with their applications to the DE Competitive Grants		Q1					
Plan Cybersecurity and online safety and privacy campaign		Q2					
Launch Statewide Digital Literacy Program			Q1	■	■	■	
Launch Cybersecurity and online safety and privacy campaign			Q3	■	■	■	
Launch affordability initiative and statewide literacy program			Q1	■	■	■	
Advocate for policy initiatives around the three goals		Q1	■	■	■	■	
Identify sources for adaptive device accessories to meet the needs of the covered populations, partnering with manufacturers, distributors, non-profits, and others to provide affordable devices			Q2				
Improve and refine new programs				Q3			
Assess success of year 2				Q2			
Assess success of year 3					Q2		
Assess success of year 4 and develop sustainability plan				■	■	Q2	■
Incorporate actions from policy initiatives to advance broadband affordability, apply for funding opportunities to sustain affordable access, expand Digital Navigator Programs, expand Statewide Digital Literacy Program, Cybersecurity and online safety and privacy campaign, Distribution plan for adaptive device accessories to meet the needs of the covered populations, Manufacturers, distributors, non-profits, and others begin providing affordable devices.						Q1	
Outcomes and impact evaluation: Survey and Community Conversations							Q2

6.6.   Digital Equity Plan Review and Update Interval

The ABO considers the State of Alaska Digital Equity Plan as a living document that will need to be revisited on a specific interval to ensure that the plan is either: 1. Being closely adhered to, or 2. Updated to reflect the current state of Digital Equity needs of the State. The ABO will hold a review of the State of Alaska Digital Equity Plan every February in collaboration with the partners identified in section 4 and section 6.4 of this document.

7. Conclusion

Alaskans face many barriers to participating in the digital economy and society. The State of Alaska's Digital Equity Plan provides a pathway for Alaska to work toward meeting the needs of Alaskans within this once-in-a-generation opportunity to achieve digital equity for all.

Throughout the planning process, key barriers to achieving meaningful broadband adoption emerged. These common barriers impact almost all Alaskans in some form: internet outages, educational disparities exacerbated, limited workforce training opportunities, challenges to health outcomes, and difficulty accessing civic and social services.

Alaska's robust digital equity process noted just how important improving on all levels will be to its covered populations. Listening sessions revealed the reality of Alaska's challenges, and the value of digital equity to improving living conditions in Alaska:

- For students to get the information and content they need to do their homework and for schools to disseminate materials and information to parents and community members, everyone needs access to the internet, devices, and the skills to use them. Without a concerted effort to improve digital equity, schools will not be able to engage families and communities to meet the State's goals.

- Jobs with family-sustaining wages often require computer skills and digital literacy, either to do the work itself or to get the requisite training to do the work (and ultimately to get the job). Yet, for many Alaskans, remote learning is the only option to get training. Without ubiquitous connectivity, options for advancement vanish for too many.

- The state's commitment to digital equity will empower underserved and rural communities to connect with high-quality healthcare providers for both physical and mental health treatment and prevention.

- Registering to vote, finding the right polling station, and learning about candidates and the issues are not always easy without online access. Digital equity will mean that Alaskans can participate effectively in the public processes that affect local and state decision-making.

- As with accessing public assistance resources, the digital divide is a barrier to providing early childhood services to Alaskan families. Access to affordable, reliable broadband helps improve equity in access to and outcomes within early childhood programs.

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- Without fast and reliable internet across Alaska, young Alaskans and new graduates may not have the opportunities needed to stay in Alaska or, at least, will continue to leave rural areas for urban ones. By closing the digital divide and leveraging resources and opportunities created by the Digital Equity Act, more people with dreams of living—or remaining—in Alaska will be able to bring their jobs with them and raise their families in the areas they desire.

- Not only will that require high-speed internet connectivity but also an accompanying device to access it. Without an affordable device whose capabilities are understood by the user, the state will not be able to ensure that all Alaskans have equitable access to opportunities to lead healthy lives.

To address these critical concerns, the ABO is aligning the Digital Equity Plan with the BEAD Program to focus both on specific areas of identified need. Due to the gap between projected need and anticipated federal Digital Equity funds, the ABO will leverage BEAD program funding to reach broadband availability and affordability goals through its anticipated broadband deployment grantmaking efforts.

The ABO is also working to use the upcoming BEAD program to increase the online accessibility and inclusivity of public resources and services, as well as to improve the State's cybersecurity. ABO will provide a leadership role on these digital equity issue areas, leveraging additional funding sources including Digital Equity Act funding.

The State of Alaska also encourages the independent formation of a Digital Equity Coalition that will help achieve Alaska's digital equity vision and ensure continuous improvement. The Digital Equity Coalition will build off the strengths and connections of participating organizations and help celebrate successes and identify areas in need of improvement. A strong evaluation plan will allow for a data driven approach to closing the digital divide.

Closing the digital divide and achieving digital equity is not only a matter of providing broadband internet access to all Alaskans — it requires providing the skills and resources needed to fully take advantage of today's digital society and economy. Achieving this difficult goal will require high levels of coordination between and engagement with state, federal, Tribal, and local governments, nonprofits, and industry. Such an approach must also involve the active participation and voices of underserved Alaskans and Alaskan communities. By working together, Alaska can ensure that its approach to digital equity contributes benefits to all residents and closes the digital divide.