



## *Guiding Principles for Digital Inclusion Policies*

### **Digital Inclusion:**

Beyond investing in physical infrastructure, states need to invest in education and community media infrastructure to overcome the digital divide. The digital divide is commonly used to refer to the gap in broadband adoption between the general population and certain demographics, particularly low-income households, racial minorities and seniors. The term, also refers to imbalances in the resources and skills needed to effectively participate as a digital citizen. Groups frequently disenfranchised in other parts of society, such as low income individuals and minorities, often have fewer opportunities to gain essential digital skills.

As more businesses, government programs, education and health care institutions take advantage of technological advancements, individuals who do not have access to broadband and the digital skills to use advanced technology will be effectively isolated from information, advanced employment opportunities, services, products, and means of entrepreneurship. In other words, they will be unprepared for the demands and unable to take advantage of many of the opportunities present in our 21<sup>st</sup> century society. State broadband initiatives that focus on increasing affordable access to broadband only help address the supply side of the digital divide equation. In order for states to ensure that all citizens can take part in the digital age, it is important that states also educate individuals on the importance of broadband and teaching them how to utilize the technology.

### **Under-Served Populations Need to be Identified and Targeted:**

The ultimate objective of effective digital inclusion strategies is to make access to a digital society a routine part of every citizen's life. The most successful digital inclusion initiatives engage in aggressive outreach initiatives that are designed to target all major underserved groups, including low-income families and individuals, children, seniors, people with disabilities and non-English-speaking immigrants. The underserved community should learn to see access to digital resources as a way to improve their economic and social lifestyle.

### **Overview of Strategy:**

Initiatives to increase digital inclusion and the everyday use of technology must meet three major requirements. First, states need to educate the public on the benefits and opportunities provided by 21<sup>st</sup> century technologies. This includes discussions about how technology is tied to economic development, better health care, implementing environmentally friendly policies, better access to information and increased opportunities.

Second, individuals access to technology and digital skills training which will teach them how to utilize and reap the benefits of 21 st century infrastructure. Third, any digital inclusion initiative must be tied to the overall goals of the state to ensure long term sustainability.

**Digital Empowerment:** Many individuals without broadband access do not understand the benefits and practical applications of broadband and new technology. Any strong digital inclusion program needs to educate the public on the uses of broadband and related applications and a community outreach program that helps residents, particularly those from underserved communities, understand the personal value they can derive from an investment in information technology. The most successful digital inclusion initiatives engage in aggressive outreach, designed to target all major underserved groups, including low-income families and individuals, children, seniors, people with disabilities and non-English-speaking immigrants. These underserved communities should be shown how broadband and related application can improve their economic and social lifestyle, as well as expand their employment opportunities. The ultimate objective of effective digital inclusion strategies is to make access to a digital society a routine part of every citizen's life.

**Affordable Access to Technology and Digital Training Programs:** Community technology centers, tutoring, and other educational initiatives are a vital part of a digital inclusion initiative. Just as providing books to people who cannot read does not solve functional illiteracy, simply offering access to technology does not bridge the digital divide. The goal is to equip the targeted population with the digital skills needed to either enhance employment opportunities or, as in the case of the disabled or the elderly, to positively impact their daily lives with relevant access skills. Any digital inclusion program must have an integrated set of strategies to bring hardware, software, and high-speed Internet access services to underserved communities. Below are elements that help increase access to technology and digital skills.

- **Community Technology Centers (CTC):** A community technology center offers resources to help bridge the digital divide, primarily through public access to computers and the Internet. These centers are a key part of what is now being referred to as digital inclusion programs. Many centers provide training that range from basic computing skills to digital media production as well as applied skills (e.g., online job searching). While some CTCs are freestanding operations, many others are located in public libraries, schools, social service agencies, neighborhood centers, and religious centers. If states incorporate CTCs with other objectives which have sustainable funding streams, such as work-force training and health care, they may be able to qualify for public dollars. For example, it has been demonstrated that digital skills are necessary for the 21st century workforce. Therefore, states could direct more federal dollars (e.g., Workforce Investment Act) towards programs that teach individuals basic and advanced technology skills necessary for many 21 st century jobs.
- **"Technology Refresh" strategy:** When states or cooperating organizations replace desktop and networking technologies in their offices, older machines may

be refurbished and reconfigured to be placed in public facilities or offered at significant discounts to qualified residents.

- **Use state buying power:** Negotiate bulk buys from technology suppliers and thus getting a discount on purchases and making technology more affordable.
- **Public / Private Partnerships:** The support of the public-sector and private-sector partnerships, the philanthropic community, and other not-for-profit organizations in the community, along with strong relationships with the board of education and higher-level institutions, build a sustainable infrastructure that provides a variety of access alternatives for citizens.

**Long-Term Sustainability:** Digital inclusion initiatives should be seen as long-term components of a community's offerings to its citizens and an ever-present vehicle to help states meet a variety of economic, health care, environmental and educational goals. Long-term sustainability is a critical factor to ensure prolonged access to economic opportunity in our digital economy. For state governments it is the opportunity and the challenge that will influence economics, policy, and politics.