

# **Recommendation for the FCC to host a Digital Inclusion Workshop**

**Submitted by**

**Digital Empowerment and Inclusion Working Group  
Advisory Committee on Diversity and Digital Empowerment**

**June 24, 2019**

## **Introduction**

For the last few months, the Digital Empowerment and Inclusion (“DEI”) Working Group of the Advisory Committee on Diversity and Digital Empowerment (“ACDDE” or “Committee”) convened researchers and digital inclusion experts to gauge their opinions on the extent of the current digital divide. Our goal was to glean the most appropriate, actionable recommendations that the Federal Communications Commission (“FCC” or “the Commission”) could take to close the digital divide. As a result of these conversations, the DEI Working Group offers a set of key findings, which take on definitional approaches to the problems associated with the digital divide and potential programmatic considerations. The findings are presented at the end of our report on the key takeaways from each presenter.

The DEI Working Group also makes the following formal recommendation to the Commission that the ACDDE convene a **Digital Inclusion Workshop**, which would bring together public and private stakeholders from academic, industry, government, and civil society organizations. The proposed workshop would allow like-minded experts to review and define what constitutes digital inclusion today and how we can adequately provide more opportunities for online access at the national, state, and local levels.

## **Goals of the Digital Inclusion Workshop**

The workshop’s primary objectives would be to:

- Facilitate information-sharing about how different stakeholders view the challenge of addressing the digital divide and create a new and relevant definition of digital inclusion that is relevant to the realities of today versus the 1990s when the digital divide was first defined;
- Provide opportunities for community leaders from previously underserved communities to learn from digital inclusion practitioners about place-based strategies for advancing broadband adoption once the infrastructure is in place; and
- Highlight community success stories in developing and implementing comprehensive digital inclusion plans that advanced adoption for vulnerable populations.

As demonstrated in the report, this recommendation is a byproduct of the DEI Working Group’s robust discussions with a variety of digital inclusion experts, whose feedback is shared in the next section.

## **Report on DEI Working Group Engagements with Digital Inclusion Experts**

The ACDDE recognizes the objective of “universal digital access” that ensures the availability of broadband service to all Americans. All Americans should have the opportunity to participate in the digital economy and take advantage of the educational, entrepreneurial, civic, and job opportunities afforded by access to broadband. While universal digital access is a fundamental element to digital equity, the ACDDE also recognizes that digital equity won’t be realized by only addressing challenges associated with broadband deployment. Consequently, this DEI Working Group sought to identify ways to focus on programs and policies that motivate people towards digital action, especially those from lower-income, predominantly minority, older, and LGBTQ communities.

### **Meetings with Digital Inclusion Experts and Researchers**

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the demand-side barriers to broadband adoption, the DEI Working Group engaged with scholars and subject matter experts. The experts provided help in defining and exploring the critical factors contributing to and/or narrowing digital disparities. In particular, the experts helped DEI Working Group members understand:

- The scholarly and/or policy definitions of the “digital divide,” which rely upon the most current research and statistics.
- Quantifiable metrics that contribute to digital disparities, especially amongst low-income and other vulnerable populations.
- Other scholarly research and policy papers that offer recommendations and solutions for narrowing the digital divide and promoting digital equity.

The goal of these expert meetings – of which there were three - was for DEI Working Group members to gain insights into actual and perceived issues that affect the ability of disadvantaged individuals and their communities to get online. The DEI Working Group chose to engage the following three experts: (1) Dr. Roberto Gallardo, Assistant Director at the Purdue Center for Regional Development, Purdue University; (2) John Horrigan, Senior Fellow at the Technology Policy Institute; and (3) Angela Siefer, Executive Director at National Digital Inclusion Alliance. Due to time constraints, we were unable to speak with the vast number of experts working on this topic.

The summary reports from each expert conference call is below.

#### **1. Dr. Roberto Gallardo, Assistant Director at the Purdue Center for Regional Development, Purdue University**

The DEI Working Group met with Dr. Roberto Gallardo, Assistant Director of the Purdue Center for Regional Development and a Purdue Extension Community & Regional Economics Specialist. Dr. Gallardo authored more than 70 articles, including peer-reviewed and news-related articles, regarding rural trends, socioeconomic analysis, industrial clusters, the digital divide, and leveraging broadband applications for community economic development. In the meeting with representatives of the DEI Working Group, Dr. Gallardo argued that the “digital divide” does not only exist for those that don’t have access to broadband, but also exists for those that cannot afford the service or do not have the skills to use the service meaningfully. Dr. Gallardo also discussed the “intelligent community”<sup>1</sup> concept in discussing

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<sup>1</sup> The concept was developed by the Mississippi State University Extension Service's Intelligent Community Institute.

the role of community leaders in providing opportunities for residents and communities thrive in this age of digital technology. The intelligent community concept embraces “digital age–related indicators—broadband connectivity and digital equality—with traditional community economic indicators, resulting in a more robust lens through which to examine a community.”<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Gallardo stressed that in order to tackle the digital divide, communities must use the intelligent community concept to better understand the state of broadband access and adoption locally – in addition to other socioeconomic conditions. Then they should approach any challenges associated with the digital divide with place-based strategies or custom programs. Additionally, communities would have to promote broadband adoption in their communities, create a local trusted champion(s), and collaborate with local public and private organizations.

Finally, Dr. Gallardo discussed the “Digital Divide Index (DDI)” which helps to highlight that complexity of the digital divide in how it impacts specific socio-economic indicators in urban and rural communities. In a report titled *Research & Policy Insights. Digital Divide in the U.S.*, Dr. Gallardo and others state that the DDI has two critical components: broadband access and adoption indicators and “socioeconomic characteristics known to affect technology adoption such as age, poverty, educational attainment, and any kind of disability.”<sup>3</sup> The DDI is based on a census track with a score range of 0 to 100 where a higher score indicates a higher digital divide.<sup>4</sup> As the architect of the DDI, Dr. Gallardo intended for it to be used to better understand a community and begin to implement place-based digital inclusion strategies. In his conclusion, Dr. Gallardo reiterated infrastructure investments need to be coupled with place-based digital inclusion strategies that would allow communities to fully realize the benefits of broadband access and maximize innovation.

## **2. Dr. John Horrigan, Senior Fellow at the Technology Policy Institute**

The DEI Working Group met with John Horrigan, Senior Fellow at the Technology Policy Institute. Dr. Horrigan previously served as senior researcher at Pew Research Center,<sup>5</sup> focused on libraries, technology, and communities -- as well as open data and open government. He was also the research director for the development of the National Broadband Plan at the FCC in 2010. The DEI Working Group invited him to present because of his background in broadband access and adoption research. Dr. Horrigan began by describing the “digital divide” as a term first invoked around 1997 by Larry Irving who was serving as the Assistant Secretary in the U.S. Department of Commerce’s National Telecommunications and Information Administration. At this time, only 15% of the U.S. population was Internet users. But, despite a significant increase in broadband adoption since then, the term “digital divide” is still used and relevant when highlighting the challenges of getting everyone connected.

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<sup>2</sup> Roberto Gallardo, Andy Collins, & Elizabeth Gregory North, *Community Development in the Digital Age: Role of Extension*, 56 JOURNAL OF EXTENSION (2018), available at <https://joe.org/joe/2018august/a2.php>.

<sup>3</sup> Roberto Gallardo, Ph.D., Lionel J. Beaulieu, Ph.D., & Indraneel Kumar, Ph.D., *Research & Policy Insights. Digital Divide in the U.S.*, Purdue University, March 2018, available at <https://pcrd.purdue.edu/files/media/003-DDI-US.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Visit Purdue University Center for Regional Development to learn more about DDI methodology. See *2016 Digital Divide Index (DDI)*, PURDUE CENTER FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT, <https://www.pcrd.purdue.edu/signature-programs/digital-divide-index.php>.

<sup>5</sup> See *Publications by John B. Horrigan*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER, <https://www.pewresearch.org/staff/john-b-horrigan/>.

According to Dr. Horrigan, as broadband adoption continues to trend upwards, changes and new developments in Internet technologies will continue to disrupt the technology ecosystem. Most notably, the rapid rise of smartphone usage increased the opportunities for accessing the Internet. A study conducted by Pew Research Center in 2018 found that 20% of U.S. adults use a smartphone for Internet access and do not subscribe to traditional broadband service at home.<sup>6</sup> While there have been reports of some data flaws in this study, the reliance on smartphones for home broadband access has been especially evident among racial and ethnic minorities.<sup>7</sup> The same study showed that 72% of survey respondents who identified as White subscribed to a home broadband service, compared to 57% for African-Americans/Black, and 47% for Hispanics/Latinos.

Dr. Horrigan also discussed his concept of “digital readiness,” which focuses on preparation among subscribers to engage in routine online behaviors and functions, including email. He has argued in that past that the digital divide conversation narrowly focuses on broadband subscriptions or just getting people to adopt the Internet, while ignoring fears, attitudes, and behaviors that that impact meaningful engagement with Internet technologies. As part of the discussion, he outlined two key factors of digital readiness:

- The ability of an individual to carry out online tasks in an efficient manner; and
- The ability of an individual to determine the trustworthiness of online information.

Mr. Horrigan recommended expanding digital readiness outreach and the use of public community spaces for providing training that helps to alleviate the anxieties that some feel about adopting the Internet and helps them understand how to safely navigate the Internet. He also acknowledged that community anchor institutions, such as libraries, community centers, religious institutions, and schools were leading the charge in digital skills training. However, most of these institutions lacked adequate resources to expand services. Further, he recommended the study of the impact of digital readiness training in urban versus rural areas.

### **3. Angela Siefer, Executive Director at the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (“NDIA”)**

The final convening was led by Angela Siefer, Executive Director of the NDIA, a non-profit that offers a unified voice and platform for grassroots digital inclusion practitioners. With over 15 years of experience working on digital inclusion, Ms. Siefer helped found NDIA to help bridge the gap between grassroots organizations and policymakers via policy and advocacy. NDIA engages with affiliates and other partners to develop policies that impact local digital inclusion programs.

NDIA defines digital inclusion as broadband availability, affordable home access, digital literacy skills, access to appropriate devices, technical support, and applications. NDIA notes that it is aspiring to achieve digital equity with digital inclusion. NDIA refers to “digital equity” as the “condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our

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<sup>6</sup> Some researchers report that there have been some overstatements on the percentage of Americans who are smartphone-dependent. The U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (“ACS”), which utilizes a rigorous methodology, and covers roughly the same time period as the Pew study, found that 11% percent of U.S. households subscribe to a cellular data plan with no other type of Internet subscription. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, *Types of Computers and Internet Subscriptions*, available at [https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS\\_17\\_1YR\\_S2801&prodType=table](https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_17_1YR_S2801&prodType=table).

society, democracy and economy.”<sup>8</sup> In its effort to empower local community practitioners, NDIA made references to the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey data and Pew Research Center data as reference points for highlighting issues that disadvantaged communities faced. She also discussed that many of their affiliates are local community practitioners that provide services to disadvantaged populations in local communities. They tend to be the trusted sources for running digital inclusion programs in the local community that lead to digital equity. Ms. Siefer noted that some of the affiliates were participants in the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (“BTOP”),<sup>9</sup> which allowed them to expand their services to those left behind in the technology economy. Following the BTOP grants ending in 2016, Ms. Siefer stated that most organizations have struggled with limited resources and have had to pursue other sources of funding.

Ms. Siefer also discussed the importance of local communities developing their own coalitions that consist of municipalities, local digital inclusion practitioners, libraries, private technology companies, Internet Service Providers, and representatives of other economic sectors. These coalitions help to address digital inclusion as a matter of public policy and community action. They also help to raise awareness of the local barriers to adoption.

In response to the query about which surfacing policy proposals would help to advance the work of digital inclusion practitioners and local coalitions, Ms. Siefer discussed the Digital Equity Act. The Digital Equity Act of 2019 (S. 1167) was recently introduced by U.S. Senator Patty Murray (D-WA). The Act would authorize more than \$1 billion in Federal grant funding over the next five years to support digital inclusion programs throughout U.S. states and territories. The Digital Equity Act’s goal is to address technology adoption and use gaps by promoting a diverse array of digital equity projects at the state and local level. These projects would range from providing digital literacy and digital skills education to low-income populations, improving the online accessibility of social services for individuals with disabilities, or more accurately mapping broadband access and adoption in rural communities. Ms. Siefer reiterated that, if passed, this program would substantially increase the capacity of practitioners to expand their work toward bridging the digital divide.

Ms. Siefer offered the following recommendations to the Committee:

- Since cost continues to be a barrier to broadband adoption in vulnerable communities, low-cost broadband programs<sup>10</sup> are essential for urban and rural communities alike. While many Internet Service Providers were leading the charge providing these services – some of which are mandated by the Commission – Ms. Siefer urged the Committee to recommend the FCC continue to encourage such programs.
- In order to overcome cost barriers to adoption, Ms. Siefer reinforced the importance of the Lifeline Assistance Program in assisting low-income households to adopt broadband service. While some important changes were adopted in its modernization, it was important to maintain

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<sup>8</sup> *Definitions*, NDIA, <https://www.digitalinclusion.org/definitions/>.

<sup>9</sup> The Broadband Technology Opportunities Program is an approximately \$4 billion grant program funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 and administered by NTIA to help bridge the technological divide; create jobs; and improve education, health care, and public safety in communities across the country.

<sup>10</sup> NDIA and Public Knowledge developed a guidebook to help digital inclusion practitioners in their digital inclusion outreach activities. Bill Callahan, Angela Siefer, Alisa Valentin, Daiquiri Ryan, Benjamin Austin, *The Discount Internet Guidebook* (2018), available at <https://www.discounts.digitalinclusion.org/pdfs/Discount%20Internet%20Guidebook%20v3.1.pdf>.

the core value for which it was created, and that was helping low-income households stay connected via telephone and then via broadband.

### **What did we learn?**

The engagement of the external experts, along with the general knowledge of the members of the DEI Working Group resulted in the formal recommendation to have the Commission convene more discussions of this sort. Our proposal to have the next iteration of the ACDDE convene and connect digital inclusion practitioners will advance the vast amount of information around the subject of digital inclusion, which can potentially lead to more robust policies and programs devoted to closing the digital divide.

In addition to this formal recommendation, we also found that the meetings in cumulative form revealed the following other highlights:

- While significant gains have been made in increasing broadband adoption in the United States, there is still a persistent digital divide that still exists among certain communities, thus suggesting the need for place-based strategies to mitigation.
- The issue of digital inclusion is not binary, mainly focused on the “haves” versus “have nots” of online access. As explained by DEI Working Group member, Dr. Nicol Turner Lee, the current digital divide is more complex and nuanced as an issue that goes beyond supply-side realities of making broadband infrastructure universally available. It involves addressing demand-side realities in vulnerable communities with basic skills and digital readiness training. Additionally, it entails addressing affordability challenges and the application of digital technologies for key social service provisions. Finally, it will be impacted by the emerging technologies, which now require additional collateral, including a bank account, to participate.<sup>11</sup>
- Place-based strategies for mitigating the digital divide are also best led by local practitioners that may include local governments in partnership with digital inclusion practitioners, Internet Service Providers, and other local stakeholders. Additionally, communities should meet the challenge of overcoming the digital divide via policy and new innovative ways of engagement with vulnerable community members.
- Finally, digital literacy training and digital readiness services are important, and efforts to build capacity among anchor institutions, as well as to make services affordable for more vulnerable citizens are necessary, prompting the need for the continued support of the Lifeline program.

The DEI Working Group respectfully offers these insights as part of our presentation and highly recommends that the Commission work with the ACDDE to plan and convene a signature digital inclusion conversation.

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<sup>11</sup> Dr. Nicol Turner Lee has a forthcoming book on the issue, “Digital invisibility: How the internet is creating the new underclass.” Forthcoming 2020 (Brookings Press).