

November 20, 2023

Governor Inslee
Office of the Governor
PO Box 40002
Olympia, WA 98505

Re: Digital Equity Investments

Dear Governor Inslee,

Our cross-sector coalition is driven by the unprecedented opportunity to bring together resources from federal, state, municipal, and tribal governments, as well as community and business assets, to close the digital divide. The 10-Year Plan to Dismantle Poverty includes digital equity as a foundational component of Washingtonians' well-being and Executive Order 22-04 established digital equity as a priority. An equitable and robust digital equity ecosystem is vital for Washingtonians to thrive and reach their maximum potential.

Our goal is that every Washingtonian has access to the internet capacity they need, at a price they can pay, with the tools and training to understand how to use it safely and for the benefit of work, education, self and community care. You have said "access to broadband is the single most important economic development tool in our toolkit right now, and the most necessary to our state." We are grateful for this acknowledgement and for the federal and state investments in broadband expansion, digital skills, and devices. This letter invites a closer consideration of the magnitude and type of support that is needed to fully embed digital equity best practices in state agency and tribal government services so that we reach Washingtonians across the lifespan with critical services for education, health, safety, and economic opportunity.

Washington State is making great strides in strengthening our digital equity ecosystem through broadband deployment and adoption and by reaching residents in need with digital skills and devices. For example, House Bill 1365 funded the Office of Superintendent's Digital Equity and Inclusion grants that funded 18.6 million dollars in educational technology to schools across the state. This funding also supported districts' efforts in focusing on meeting students' needs with inclusionary and adaptive technology. We are also inventorying our existing assets, making them discoverable by our communities, and strategizing how to address digital divides sustainably. The State Broadband Office is currently developing two plans that represent an unprecedented planning and investment opportunity to provide digital equity for all, the Broadband Equity Access and Deployment Plan (BEAD) and the Digital Equity Plan.

We have identified key areas of need that require state leadership to further advance digital

equity in Washington. Only 29% of eligible Washington households have enrolled in the Federal Communication Commission's Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP). Enrollment in ACP means that hardworking families across Washington, small business owners, veterans, and seniors are all able to receive financial assistance to afford high-speed internet. An NTIA report finds factors that influence non-use of ACP include lack of digital skills or issues with accessibility. This is why trusted community digital navigators are necessary to reach the most vulnerable in our community. We believe we can increase ACP uptake, thereby increasing access to services and reaching more eligible Washingtonians with benefits, by fully equipping our state agencies and directly investing in tribal governments to embed digital equity into their services. This work needs to occur in collaboration with community partners, Tribes, and local jurisdictions, especially in areas where digital navigation has recently lost funding.

Last year's investment in Digital Navigator Program grants demonstrated how we reach more people and provide better support when we coordinate across state, local, and tribal governments and with community-based organizations. The Digital Navigator Program was only partially funded in the current operating budget, and it remains unclear how programs like this will be sustained through an economic downturn. The anticipated Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) funds for digital equity implementation are not coming to the State immediately and fall very short of the needs.

Agencies across state government have submitted decision package proposals that taken together begin to embed equity in state government. We ask you to approve furthering the decision packages that allow state agencies to advance digital equity. Below is a sampling of these decision packages and their projected impact:

- **Washington State University Extension:** 2 statewide FTE, \$950,000 per year includes Broadband Action Team support. Support for technical and project applications, digital equity, special focus on un/underserved, tribal communities, through statewide capacity and 40 local offices.
- **DSHS/Technology Innovation Administration:** \$1,908,000 and 10 FTEs to support Digital Equity Coordination, provide equitable information technology access to the public and state employees, including individuals with disabilities, and drive DSHS toward becoming a digitally equitable agency.
- **Commerce:** 0 FTE, \$15,000,000, Digital Equity-focused Navigation. These funds will be used to fund new and existing Digital Navigator programs by contracting with organizations that have a track record of successfully deploying digital navigation and literacy activities with underserved individuals and households, serving an estimated 213,000 additional clients with digital navigation services. Digital navigation is critical to ensure those furthest from opportunity in our community have the support they need to access quality low-cost internet, a device, and digital skills.
- **WaTech:** 2 FTEs, \$1,031,000 for FY 2025 and \$531,000 annually FY 26 and beyond (1,562,000 initial ask) This proposes establishment of an IT accessibility program within WaTech to assist state agencies in meeting state and federal obligations to provide reasonable accommodations to people with disabilities, thus making Washington State's public services truly accessible to all.
- **Washington State Library:** 0 FTE, \$500,000, Supplemental budget: LibTech. Funding will continue the LibTech consortium program started in 2022 with ARPA funds, WSL

has been purchasing and working with rural libraries to purchase updated routers, switches and wireless access points, allowing the consortium to apply for discounts of up to 90% through FCC's E-rate program.

We know that digital equity has the potential to better the lives of Washingtonians across the lifespan and in every corner of the state. Digital equity is necessary for re-entry of older adults into the workforce post-pandemic; reaching the elderly with telemedicine and virtual case management so they can age at home; reaching eligible but unenrolled Washingtonians with key public benefits; serving refugees and immigrants seeking a job; helping returning citizens reintegrate into the community after incarceration; and meeting the educational needs of K-12 and post-secondary students.

Thank you for considering our recommendations in the development of your proposed supplemental budget. We look forward to working with you in shaping a fair and visionary broadband future for Washingtonians of all ages and incomes both to address short term and long term needs of our state.

The moment is now, to create internet for all.

Sincerely,

Washington Digital Equity Partners

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Clark M. Brekke, President/CEO, Goodwill Industries of the Inland Northwest	Rhonda Kristoff, Tacoma Public Library
Caroline Chan, HR Executive in Life Sciences	Jamie Boyer, Clinic Director, Three Rivers Family Medicine
Sylvia Rubio, Human Services Director, El Centro de la Raza	Cheryl Heywood, Timberland Regional Library
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