Digital Equity Initiative Action Plan: Phase One — Building the Foundation

Progress Report
July 2015

City of Seattle

"Seattle is a city known for technology and innovation, yet too many residents do not have sufficient Internet access or the skills necessary to participate fully in our high-tech jobs and community.

Working together, we can make Seattle a leader in ensuring digital equity and opportunity for all our residents."

— Mayor Edward B. Murray

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Executive Summary

The City of Seattle launched a new Digital Equity Initiative in January 2015 to research and develop a new plan to help ensure all Seattleites have access to and proficiency using internet-based technologies.

The Initiative has three phases:

1. Conduct research, create a vision and goals for the plan;
2. Define achievable strategies and complete the initial Digital Equity Action Plan; and
3. Implement the Plan.

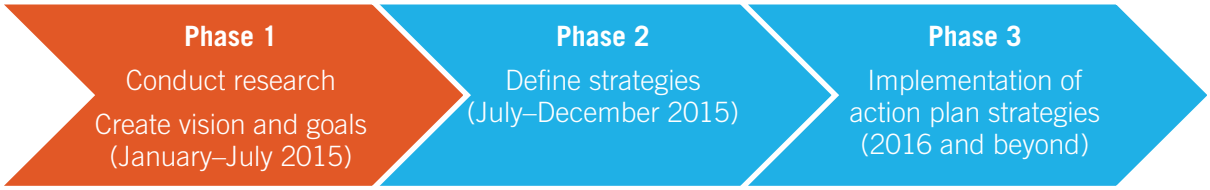
This report outlines the results from phase one.

Over the last six months, the City engaged with more than 100 community members, technology leaders, civic and education leaders, businesses, and City department staff to develop a new digital equity vision, principles and goals. These were formed through in-depth stakeholder interviews, four roundtable discussions throughout the city, our Community Technology Advisory Board, and feedback from a City of Seattle interdepartmental team and external Digital Equity Action Committee working together.

We identified barriers to digital equity for individuals, as well as small businesses and community organizations. An initial set of possible action strategies was also developed. A scan of other city and regional digital equity plans was collected for guidance and the first ever City department inventory was conducted, which identified programs that support digital equity goals.

The community and department engagement coupled with our research, led to a strong vision for digital equity, principles and a set of goals that set the stage for phase two of the Digital Equity Initiative Action Plan roadmap: developing specific strategies to complete the Plan, leading into the third phase of plan implementation.

Digital Equity Initiative Action Plan Roadmap



Background

For two decades, the City of Seattle has worked to provide community members with equal opportunity to use and access technology. The City has strived to ensure that residents have access to Seattle.gov and the ability to contribute content and interact with public services online. Starting in the 1990's, we partnered with community-based organizations to launch a number of innovative programs to close the digital equity gap (or "digital divide"). These include the Technology Matching Fund grants, setting up public access sites and training (in libraries, community centers and other city facilities), providing cable broadband for community organizations, and launching the Technology Indicators for a Healthy Community project to measure technology and broadband access and adoption. The City's past and current programs are closely linked with the City's Race and Social Justice Initiative (RSJI) as we work towards eliminating racism, for equity for historically underserved and vulnerable communities, and to break down structural barriers that limit opportunity.

Every four years, our Community Technology Program conducts community research based on the Technology Indicators to update the data about technology use and barriers to adoption in Seattle. Last year, we released the latest findings (See *www.seattle.gov/tech/indicators*). The research showed we are making great strides in technology use and access, but it also revealed significant gaps and barriers to technology access, digital literacy, and online civic engagement. At the same time, in early 2014 when he took office, Mayor Murray established technology goals that included making Seattle a national municipal leader in championing technology access and affordability for all. The Mayor's goals also encompassed increasing broadband capacity and launching this Digital Equity Initiative. The Digital Equity Initiative was launched in 2015 by the Mayor with the Department of Information Technology and the Office of Civil Rights as co-sponsors. The Initiative created the opportunity to establish new City-wide strategies with achievable goals, review investments, and to identify partnership opportunities.

Defining Digital Equity

Digital equity seeks to ensure all residents and neighborhoods have the information technology capacity needed for civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services. The framework for digital equity encompasses three areas: access, digital literacy, content and services. Working towards digital equity implies intentional strategies and investments that reduce and eliminate historical barriers, furthering race and social justice.

Digital equity can:

- Offer better quality of life and empowered communities through civic and cultural participation;
- Allow family and friends to connect through social networking and mobile devices;
- Create educational and economic opportunities and economic success for all residents;
- Give everyone the opportunity to use necessary health, consumer, legal, and social services; and
- Enable more self-sufficient residents, community-based organizations, and small businesses.

"When I think about digital equity, I think of the concept that all do well. Everybody comes out ahead and in a better place than they were before."
— Stakeholder Interview, April 2015

Vision, Guiding Principles and Goals

The vision statement, principles and goals below are the key result of phase one and will guide the development and selection of action strategies. They represent many hours of deliberation with internal and external stakeholders. They are designed to be inclusive – particularly in historically underserved communities – and reflect the best practices learned through our research and community participation. Finally, they explicitly call out the barriers that need to be addressed in order to achieve digital equity.

Vision

Digital Equity for All

We envision Seattle as a city where technology's opportunities equitably empower all residents and communities – especially those who are historically underserved or underrepresented.

Guiding Principles

These overarching values and intentions apply to our goals and strategies:

1. **Eliminate barriers:** Identify and eliminate the historical and structural barriers to digital equity for vulnerable, historically underserved or underrepresented residents, small businesses, organizations and communities.
2. **Align and integrate:** Link digital equity work to strategic areas, including education, jobs and economic development, health and human services, justice, safety, race and social justice, and civic engagement.
3. **Be a leader:** As a leading city, strive to be stewards and innovators of digital equity.
4. **Coordinate:** Work together in partnership with government, cultural and community organizations, libraries, schools (Pre K-12 and higher education), and business to build resources, maximize investments, and employ best practices in digital inclusion.
5. **Ensure equitable development:** Plan technology infrastructure and services in coordination with community development to maximize public access, broadband capacity, digital education and innovation opportunities in disadvantaged neighborhoods and for vulnerable residents.

Goals

These goals describe the digital outcomes we want to achieve and serve as the foundation for developing the action strategies:

1. **Outreach and accessibility:** Make it easy for all residents and communities to know about, find, understand, and use appropriate services and information. Recognize the specific needs of our vulnerable residents, including those with disabilities, low literacy and limited English skills.
2. **Skills training:** Create and deliver educational opportunities for all residents to gain the technology skills necessary to be successful in employment, entrepreneurship and technology leadership, in lifelong learning, in civic engagement, and in use of essential online services.
3. **Connectivity:** Ensure there are sufficient options for affordable and available internet connectivity for all disadvantaged residents, small businesses, organizations, and communities.
4. **Devices and technical support:** Ensure there are affordable, available and sufficient devices and technical support for all disadvantaged residents, small businesses, organizations, and communities.
5. **Build community capacity:** Build the capacity and sustainability of digital equity program providers to deliver quality services, to implement best practices and to adapt to emerging technologies.
6. **Inclusive engagement and empowerment:** Develop digital tools and the use of tools to maximize diverse, inclusive civic engagement, sense of community, and participation in decision making.

Research and Engagement Approach

Our vision, guiding principles, goals, and potential action strategies were informed by research and the diverse and deep knowledge shared by outreach participants. We interviewed stakeholders, hosted roundtable discussions, and formed internal and external committees to gather input. City staff sought models and comments about the following topics:

- Views regarding digital equity
- Existing digital equity programs and services
- Challenges or barriers to achieving digital equity
- Best practices
- Draft vision statement and goals
- Recommendations and solutions

These are the specific components of the research and engagement. The Race and Social Justice Inclusive Outreach and Public Engagement tool was applied to assist in identifying diverse participants.

Research:

- Gathered other regional and government digital equity plans to identify approaches and common elements that could inform the City's Digital Equity Initiative.
- Conducted an initial City inventory of programs that identified departments with programs that support digital equity goals and some of the community-based efforts.

Internal and External Committees:

- Formed a committee within the City of Seattle with representatives from 15 departments.
- Created a Digital Equity Action Committee with members from key community organizations, businesses, educational institutions and governmental agencies.
- Held an initial meeting of each, followed by two joint committee meetings between March-June 2015.
- Committees worked together to help the City shape a vision and goals for digital equity as well as identify an initial list of possible action strategies.

In-Depth Interviews:

- Interviewed 17 individuals with diverse experiences and backgrounds in digital equity.
- Interviewees shared the best existing programs and practices for digital equity in Seattle and also discussed barriers.

Community Roundtables:

- Hosted four open roundtable discussions at the Seattle Public Library New Holly Branch, 2100 Building, Google and Youngstown Cultural Arts Center.
- Thirty nine individuals from a broad cross-section of organizations engaged in the discussions.
- Participants discussed best practices, the draft vision, and barriers to digital equity.

Findings

Presented here are some of the barriers, valuable programs and successful strategies identified in the stakeholder interviews and discussions.

Barriers

Individual barriers: Stakeholders identified multiple barriers to digital equity. Common themes included:

- Fear of failure, feeling inadequate for lack of knowledge, and afraid they will break equipment.
- Need to be able to find appropriate training, understand the pathway and select from a range of training from beginner job skills to advanced technical skills (STEM, coding, computer science).
- Lack of internet access at home and affordability of sufficient service (home access and mobile data plans).
- Full equity and opportunity requires high-speed, affordable access at home and via mobile phones.
- No access to technology or use limited by old devices.
- Lack of transportation to classes or computer labs.

Some groups had specific concerns:

Elderly	Youth	Immigrants / Refugees	Low-income residents	People with disabilities
Computer classes that move too quickly and require repeating	False sense of digital literacy because they know how to navigate mobile devices, but they do not know how to research or write for the digital age Limited knowledge of high-tech skills for the Seattle job market	Computer classes that move too quickly and require repeating Lack of English and/or literacy to attend classes or learn online content English-only websites	Limited knowledge of high-tech skills for the Seattle job market	Web sites that are not responsive

Organizational barriers: Community-based organizations also identified their barriers to achieving digital equity:

- Lack of sustainable funding that results in high staff turnover which also reduces instructional program delivery, and limits partnership development volunteer management.
- Outdated, inadequate devices necessary to deliver programs.
- No funding or consistent qualified volunteers to ensure ongoing IT infrastructure and support.
- Limited training for staff and volunteers.
- Expensive internet access.

Structural barriers: Stakeholders also identified structural barriers that prevent digital equity:

- Low-income housing development plans that do not include up-to-date wiring for broadband.
- Inadequate system to match and train volunteers.
- Confusing or unknown low-cost internet plans.
- No central place for listing and finding training.
- Lack of specific information to help refer participants to next level training and resources.
- Area development does not integrate innovation centers, tech offices and community tech learning and opportunity centers in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Valuable Programs and Successful Strategies

There were a few programs cited frequently as valuable by stakeholders.

Type of Program	Why it's Valuable
Digital literacy programs that offer training in multiple formats (e.g.: Seattle Goodwill and the Seattle Public Library)	Providing training options that meet a diversity of learning styles is essential. Some digital learners fare better in a community-based classroom setting, while others thrive with one-on-one assistance tailored to their specific needs.
Technology grants (e.g.: The Technology Matching Fund)	Technology-focused funding fills an area of need not well addressed by other funding sources. Many community organizations do not have the resources to buy technology, which is often seen as an overhead expense. They also lack adequate staffing to consistently deliver quality digital literacy programs. Technology grants help nonprofits build and maintain their technology infrastructure and provide quality training.
Low-cost or refurbished devices (e.g.: InterConnection)	Programs that provide low-cost or refurbished devices are in high demand. Many digital learners cannot afford devices and these programs provide quality products at affordable prices.
Low-income internet programs (e.g.: Comcast Internet Essentials, CenturyLink Internet Basics)	Digital learners are more successful if they can access the internet at home. Low-income internet programs help make internet connectivity affordable for those who might not otherwise have access. These programs could be even more useful, if they were widely promoted, terms were more affordable, and if qualifications were not so complicated and restrictive.

Stakeholders also cited several key approaches for delivering successful digital equity programs:

Meet people where they are

- Share training in their community;
- Teach classes and provide information in their language;
- Ask communities what they need;
- Offer diverse community-based public computing and internet locations that are trusted and convenient;

Provide high-quality teaching

- Break content into "bite-sized" pieces;
- Provide one-on-one training;
- Teach skills that can be transferred between platforms;
- Identify successful curriculum and share teaching expertise;

Look to existing best practices as well as other areas and countries for what is possible

- Look internationally to set standards on affordability and speed;
- Consider a range of public and public/private/non-profit and interagency models to guide strategies;
- Grow and leverage existing program models locally, nationally; and
- Ensure measurable, achievable strategies with continued evaluation and adaptation.

"I know we will have achieved digital equity when every person has equal access to current hardware and software, an unlimited, high-speed internet connection, and the energy to power the needed equipment; and is able to participate in civic, employment, education, and social life without barriers."

— Stakeholder Interview, April 2015

Possible Action Strategies

There were a number of possible action strategy ideas generated toward the end of phase one. These ranged from short-term options, like holding an educational forum with low-income housing developers to share building requirements for broadband readiness, to longer term strategies, like developing a joint fund that would support digital equity programs and scholarships or service vouchers. These are still evolving and phase two work will further develop these with the internal and external committee members and potential partners.

The initial brainstorm of action ideas below is from interviews, roundtables and meetings of the City interdepartmental team and community Digital Equity Action Committee. This is not a prioritized list. All ideas will be evaluated in the next phase of the project based on criteria that includes the measurable impact, resources needed and available, realistic and achievable, timeliness, and whether or not it complements other goals and work underway. Stakeholders also cited several key approaches for delivering successful digital equity programs.

Goal 1: Outreach and accessibility

- Raise community awareness about the digital divide and benefits of digital equity.
- Create a central, strong brand to help residents know where to go for information and services.
- Expand the *Get Online* campaign to increase awareness of relevant content and resources.
- Develop a central calendar of classes and programs and a marketing campaign.
- Ensure that online services are designed for people with disabilities, low literacy and limited English.

- Broaden awareness and the application of universal design principles that respond to diverse individual user differences, including multi-lingual services and disability access. Increase use of these accessible elements on Seattle.gov.
- Create convenient and affordable solutions for families whose children need to do homework.

Goal 2: Skills training

- Develop or roll-out skills competency standards and certification.
- Create a joint working group on tech skills pathways, standards, and measurement.
- Map who offers what training to whom. Improve existing mapping of tech access sites.
- Increase online and training/mentoring via videoconference.
- Develop more training for small businesses.
- Increase technology education availability in a range of settings and formats, at home, on the go, and at community-based locations providing quality training assistance.
- Develop a Seattle Schools' parent/guardian tech training program so they are better able to assist their kids.
- Require computer science as part of the core curriculum in the Pre K-12 school system.
- Increase the availability of tech tours and speakers for youth groups and others, with a focus on role models for people of color and immigrants.
- Develop a program where companies hire youth to create posters, websites, or other materials for the company.

Goal 3: Connectivity

- Develop additional low-cost Internet plans.
- Create "scholarships" for service for low-income residents.
- Create free Wi-Fi and charging stations in the City's parks and public spaces.
- Sustain and expand Wi-Fi in Seattle Housing Authority and other low-income housing; create a fund for Internet services to these residents.
- Hold an educational forum for low-income housing developers about how to design and modify buildings for gigabit service and multiple providers.
- By 2016, update building codes to ensure adequate wiring to each unit for at least two providers to ensure options for residents.
- Create Wi-Fi hotspots for people who are homeless (note 2015 City Human Services program for wifi at homeless encampments).

- Expand the library Wi-Fi device program to more locations with more devices for longer check-out periods.
- Continue and strengthen the City and cable companies' "Access for All" broadband for non-profits program.
- Look at options to reduce connectivity costs for small businesses or share bulk purchasing of connectivity.
- Expand the Seattle Center Microsoft "white space" Wi-Fi zone to vulnerable business districts and community gathering places in low-income neighborhoods.
- Develop gigabit demonstration sites in disadvantaged neighborhoods, in partnership with the universities and tech industry.

Goal 4: Devices and technical support

- Expand computer refurbishment and reuse programs.
- Create a tech support buddy program and/or community tech support clinics (like Minneapolis Fix-It-Tech sessions).
- Give laptops to students in Seattle Public Schools.
- Create a grant/needs request program for tech lab and other organizations' equipment upgrades (with a means for them to post their need to upgrade (perhaps on a three to four year cycle).
- Improve availability of assistive devices, software and support with grants/ donations to individuals, loaners, and development.
- Finance the upfront costs for digital equipment for low-income residents, like modem costs.
- Develop programs for high school and college students to provide tech support for community members and small businesses.

Goal 5: Build community capacity

- Create a digital equity/tech enterprise zone strategy aimed at target neighborhoods.
- Create a digital equity opportunity joint fund that would allow contributors from public and private sources to support digital equity programs with multi-year funding, and scholarships or service vouchers. This could be an expansion of the City's Technology Matching Fund, or a spinoff non-profit organization or fund within a current community foundation or other entity.
- Develop a broadband adoption/digital literacy volunteer training and placement program.
- Create a Seattle/King County Digital Inclusion Fellowship program and an internship program.
- Create an "adopt a community site" opportunity for businesses and individuals to develop a relationship with specific groups and help sustain the programs.

- Create a mentor program for staff.
- Create an evaluation/assessment team to conduct, monitor and assist others in collecting and analyzing metrics.
- Apply a system like EDGE benchmarks to assess the capacity of digital equity service providers.
- Develop a strategy to develop the "rec-tech" computer labs in Parks' community centers into sustainable, world class gigabit training, innovation and enterprise centers.
- Grow some of the existing community centers with labs into economic opportunity centers using the computer labs to produce and market local products with a portion going back to support the labs (like the APEC Digital Opportunity Centers).
- Further develop a regional library/portal for the collection of digital equity resources that would tie into national libraries. Model this on the existing DoIT Community Technology and UW resource directory and taxonomy of terms.
- Hold an annual awards event to recognize the strong work of companies, institutions, teachers, trainers, non-profits and volunteers in digital equity.

Goal 6: Inclusive engagement and empowerment

- Develop a diverse digital engagement working group that helps the City select tools, and advises the City and others on the development of effective, inclusive tools, best practices and how to measure inclusive online engagement.
- Conduct a series of development hackathons or charrettes on inclusive engagement designed by and for people with disabilities, low literacy and limited English.
- Develop high-speed community engagement centers in disadvantaged neighborhoods as centers for online participation and events.
- Create a community education campaign on how to use Seattle.gov; incorporate this into school and community learning curriculums.
- Develop a training for city staff on how to use electronic tools effectively for diverse inclusive engagement.

Acknowledgments

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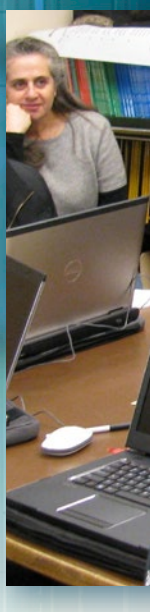

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