

Digital Equity for all Residents

Providing digital equity for all residents of New Jersey presents both a major challenge and a tremendous opportunity. The time to act is now.

Governor Murphy announced an ambitious plan to provide \$115 million to assist in bridging the digital divide confronting NJ school students this fall. This is a strong acknowledgement that our “new normal” will require additional resources to ensure all students in New Jersey schools have the technology tools necessary to reach their full potential. This is a wonderful beginning but only addresses the needs of a specific target population. To provide true digital equity, we must make sure that all residents of the state (no matter what age) have access to the technology and training needed for success. As the governor’s planning with telecommunication providers and community funders progresses, public libraries must have a seat at the table.

School students do not live in a vacuum. They are part of a community where their parents, guardians and, in many cases, their grandparents live, too. The services that all residents of a community have access to influence the learning environment and economic future of the entire community. We need a comprehensive digital equity plan for incorporating services such as the following into the fabric of each of our communities. Many of these services are already provided to some extent by our state’s public libraries.

- Workforce development and training
- Telemedicine implementation
- Government services and benefits, such as food assistance and housing
- Emergency Management coordination
- Entrepreneurial opportunities
- Technology support and training (for the elderly and returning citizens unfamiliar with evolving technology)
- Private study rooms for distraction-free work

The New Jersey Library Alliance is proposing that a \$21 million grant program administered by the NJ State Library be established to support the development of a digitally inclusive state. This program will give public libraries in every county of New Jersey the opportunity to receive funding to help their residents bridge the digital divide.

There is no “one size fits all” solution for digital equity, as obstacles vary tremendously. Residents of rural counties, such as Cumberland and Sussex, have limited access to broadband connectivity, while residents of urban counties, such as Essex and Union, have broadband availability but lack the economic resources to acquire the necessary devices and establish connectivity for their homes.

As community anchor institutions, libraries across the state would share the \$21 million and create plans that address the needs of their unique communities. Options for the use of the funds could include creating community Wi-Fi hubs, investing in “final mile” broadband connectivity (the infrastructure at the neighborhood level), purchasing and lending Wi-Fi hotspots and devices, such as Chrome books, and offering training in the use of new and old technologies. Providing technology without adequate training limits the full potential of the residents of New Jersey to build a strong and productive future for themselves and their families.

Submitted by **The New Jersey Library Alliance**. Members are the New Jersey Library Association, New Jersey State Library, and the New Jersey Library Network (LibraryLinkNJ). For more information, please contact Patricia Tumulty, Executive Director, New Jersey Library Association, 609-394-8032, ptumulty@njla.org.

