

WNY Digital Equity Coalition Full Member Meeting 2024-06-26

Attendance:

- Ann Battaglia; Chief Executive Officer; Healthy Community Alliance
- Christine Carr-Barmasse; Executive Director; Mission:Ignite
- Isaac Carrasco-Ortiz; Digital Inclusion Coordinator; Action for Boston Community Development Elder Services
- Courtney Deuro; Program Assistant; Center for Self Advocacy
- Katie Earl; Community Recreation Coordinator for the Aging; Erie County Senior Services
- Maddie Fecio; Program Coordinator; Center for Self Advocacy
- Trent Hamilton; Community Coalition Member; Entrepreneur School of Thought
- Amanda Horner; Outreach Specialist; Americorps and Mission: Ignite
- Kaylyn Kensinger; Project Director; Niagara University Rose Bente Lee Ostapenko Center for Race, Equality & Mission
- Hex Kleinmarten; Digital Literacy Coordinator; Literacy Buffalo Niagara
- Dennis Lee; Community Coalition Member; Hopewell Baptist Church
- Cole Massaro; Intern; Center for Self Advocacy
- Don Matteson; Chief Program Officer; Peter & Elizabeth Tower Foundation
- Alan Meyers; Fatherhood Connection Facilitator; Cattaraugus Community Action
- Jeff Sanderson; Vice President of Strategic Initiatives; People Inc.
- Sherry Sherrill; Coalition Community Member; Covington Associates
- Bob Spino; Director of Technology; Erie 2-Chautauqua-Cattaraugus BOCES
- Andy Strohmeier; Integrating Special Populations Coordinator, Clinical and Translational Research Center; University at Buffalo
- Rolanda Ward; Director; Niagara University Rose Bente Lee Ostapenko Center for Race, Equality & Mission
- Heidi Ziemer; Outreach & Digital Equity Coordinator; Western New York Library Resources Council

Guests

- Meghan McDermott, Associate Vice President for Digital Equity, NYS ConnectALL Office
- Nazeer Jeffries, Digital Equity Program Manager, NYS ConnectALL Office

Announcements

- Sherry Sherrill shared an update on Covington Associates' work with the Eastside Parkways Coalition to oppose the NY State Transportation Department's Kensington Expressway project, a billion-dollar project, part of which involves building a \$56 million tunnel
- Don shared that the workgroup that has been working on the Coalition's mission statement has made some good progress building on the results of last month's convening. He expects there might be one more meeting to hammer out final details before there's a product to share with the broader Coalition membership.
- Don also encouraged members to [subscribe to the Coalition's monthly newsletter](#) and [submit updates](#) to be included in the newsletter.
- Don reminded the Coalition that project updates can be found on the [Coalition's projects page](#). This is still a work in progress, but it's reasonably up to date.

ConnectALL Discussion

- Don introduced Nazir Jeffries, Digital Equity Project Manager and Meghan McDermott, Associate Vice President for Digital Equity from the NYS ConnectALL Office (CAO).

Context

- NY State is moving into implementing the recently-approved State Digital Equity Plan.
- CAO is in the process of meeting with the various digital inclusion/digital equity coalitions across the state, including the NYS Digital Equity Network.

- The goal of these meetings is to get a sense of the digital equity issues on the ground in each region, given the geographic and demographic diversity across regions.
- The purpose of this meeting today is to get a sense of where Western New York's digital equity practitioners are seeing the biggest gaps to ensure that dollars are being put to the best possible use filling the gaps and being the most effective
- New York State has been approved for around \$37 million in the notice of funding opportunity in the first tranche from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA).
- CAO has recently opened applications for its Digital Equity Technical Assistance Fund. There's an application information session scheduled for tomorrow (Thursday, June 27).
 - Here are links to the [recording](#) and [slides](#) from the June 24 information session.

Coalition Structure

- Nazir asked how the Coalition is structured, how is it registered in the state or not, what is its legal standing, and anything that will help us better understand the functioning of this coalition.
- Structure and Legal Status
 - Not a formal entity or nonprofit corporation
 - No official legal standing or state registration
- Funding
 - Received grants from Schmidt Futures for digital equity planning
 - Obtained grants from Western New York COVID-19 Response Fund (Moving Forward Together)
 - Uses fiscal sponsors: Mission:Ignite for Moving Forward Together grants, Healthy Community Alliance for Schmidt Futures grant
- Leadership and Organization
 - Don acts as facilitator, and is working hard to reduce the Coalition's dependency on him to keep things moving.
 - Recently formed steering committee (as of March)
 - Has held two full-member convenings (August 2022 and May 2024)
- Membership
 - Approximately 45 organizations and 80 individuals
 - Diverse representation: business, academia, public schools, nonprofits, libraries, faith institutions, funders, etc.
 - Currently have 3 community members (previously 4) who receive stipends for their participation
 - Share coalition's work with their communities
 - Provide feedback on digital equity/inclusion challenges and opportunities in their localities
 - Ensures representation and input from those most affected by digital equity challenges
 - Aligns with the coalition's central tenet of hearing from impacted communities
 - Stipends are \$250 per month per community member, currently funded by Schmidt Futures grant. Moving Forward Together grant will cover stipends when Schmidt Futures funds are exhausted.
- Activities
 - Various projects in different stages of progress
 - Works on alignment through steering committee meetings
 - Keeping people informed is a high priority.
 - Community newsletter
 - Website
 - NYS Digital Equity Network

Challenges

Dedicated Regional Coordinator Role

- Lack of a dedicated regional coordinator to help facilitate contacts with government entities. We need someone to help the Coalition and its members bridge the gap between government and nonprofit/educational institutions.
 - We were working on a project to build better digital skills for graduating high school students to be able to address practical day-to-day needs. Conducted a survey of various school districts via a Coalition member from Erie1 BOCES who has since needed to step away from the Coalition due to other responsibilities. This project has stalled because we don't have the authority to connect with school administrators.
 - We also wanted to connect to a government agency, but we couldn't navigate bureaucracy to figure out who we needed to contact.
- Need help facilitating work between what government agencies do to help provide services to people and what these members of the coalition have the capacity to do.
- Nazeer identified the [Regional and Local Assistance funding opportunity](#) as a resource that municipalities might be able to tap in order to create liaison/coordinator positions similar to what's been identified as a need. This fund has been allocated \$10 million and is open exclusively to NYS local and county government, municipalities, Tribal governments, and other government entities/entities created by units of government.

Diverse Populations

- Geographic diversity yields different needs. The WNY Digital Equity Coalition represents the eight counties of western New York, which contains urban, rural, and suburban communities alike. One thing we've really tried to do is make sure that we have that representation from all of these different communities. One example is how we move our coalition convenings around. Our last retreat was in southern Cattaraugus county, while the first was in Erie county.

Data Analytics

- We need to be able to establish data analytic tools and metrics to see if we're having the desired impact on our communities.
 - Don reminded attendees that the Coalition did some exercises relating to [goals and measures in different populations](#) back in the end of 2020 and into early 2021.
- We need to identify a set of community level indicators so we can look at overall progress for everybody in western New York, but also a set of outcome measures at the program level that supplement and complement the measures people are already using.
 - So that gives us both the ability to have common shared metrics that we can look at across the state and sort of look at programs, but also let every program retain its individuality and autonomy.
- Nazeer pointed out that this is the type of need that can possibly be addressed through the Digital Equity Technical Assistance Fund. The Coalition could apply for this through a fiduciary agent

Need for Operational Support/Capacity-Building

- Don noted that it's difficult to speak to Coalition capacity without also considering Coalition member capacity.
- Replicating what works in one region across the state is not something that's happened well. In part, this is a function of grant funding and associated restrictions. It's both a sustainability issue and a restrictions issue. This is a real challenge, even when we have decades of data supporting a program's effectiveness.

Lessons from Previous Grants

- Funding for convenings and opportunities to connect with each other in person have been really important. Opportunities to build relationships across geographies, across sectors, and just meeting people who are approaching the same issues from different points of view are incredibly valuable. These meetings are where trust is built, and trust is what makes coalitions work.
- Regranting dollars allocated based on Coalition members' priorities has gone well, even when dollars were fairly small. That said, once that money went away, either the programs would go away or it would have to take a form that had less impact.

- In our second Moving Forward Together grant, funders specified that any regranteeing dollars need to be used to promote systems change. It is, however difficult to make systems change with a grand total of \$70,000.
 - Clarification: The Coalition is using the [Water of Systems Change](#) framework for thinking about systems change.
- Funding to solicit community voice, community input, beneficiary voice has been essential.
- Having flexibility in the grant is critical. As priorities evolve, as Coalition members get added and new opportunities arise, having a grant or a funder allow for flexibility in the use of those funds, I think has been critical.

Well, I mean, part of the challenge is no two people agree on what that means. So I think fundamentally what we're talking about is, well, we have a specific framework that we're starting to try to roll out a little bit. It's called the water systems change. And there's a downloadable white paper, or I can send it to you separately. But fundamentally, it basically looks at six levers of change at the sort of, well, again, the systems level. The easiest to do and least durable are things like changes in policy practice or funding streams, because all it takes is a change of administration or a change of administrator, and those things go up in smoke. More durable and longer lasting are changes in power dynamics and relationships.

Federal Digital Equity Capacity Grants

- Meghan and Nazeer shared information about the upcoming federal Digital Equity Capacity grants.
- The federal government is working on a five-year time horizon. CAO and the state commitment is on a ten-year time horizon.
- In order to achieve systems change, achieve digital equity across NY State, and ensure that resources are relevant, resilient, and reliable for all residents, funding needs to be on a time horizon that allows organizations and coalitions to grow. This is ultimately the purpose of the Regional and Local Assistance grant program and the Digital Equity Technical Assistance fund.
- Together, they are a bridge to support entities to go from where they are to where they need to be to truly access and inform the next five years of funding. Think about these in terms of what organizations and entities need now to be prepared to take on future grant opportunities that will open mid next year directly to the federal government.

Experience Working In SDEP Goal Areas and with Covered Populations

- Erie 2-Chautauqua-Cattaraugus BOCES has been dealing a lot with cybersecurity, mostly internally, but also branching out to the local school districts. Currently the focus is on giving them an overview of available options (e.g., Arctic Wolf, which is a managed third-party detection and response system that manages cyber threats). There's also been focus on employee training (e.g., phishing). Cybersecurity is a very high priority. Current focus is employees, but plan to start reaching out to students as well.
 - Works with 27 districts, mostly very rural. Some districts serve as few as 100 students but has a lot of districts in which students do not have access to Internet at all at their homes. The school districts themselves all have Internet, but the residents do not have Internet access and have no way of getting it.
- Literacy Buffalo-Niagara mostly focuses on digital literacy. They've been doing a lot of one-on-one tutoring, which is their core model (and has been since the sixties). They have done some small classes, and have been working with the aging population, people with language barriers, low literacy learners, low income populations, and minority populations. There hasn't been much recent work with rural populations. They're building the community partnerships to get into more community centers and working with some of the healthcare professionals to try to work with seniors to help them get to be able to use telehealth and related resources.
- Erie County Senior Services mainly provides educational programming, specifically wellness and recreation at various senior centers and connecting with people at home. Their staff can teach people how to do things, but it's essential to build out community partnerships and get those classes out to increase that digital literacy and confidence. Seniors vary dramatically as far as where they are on their technological journey.
- Covington Associates is in the early stages of working to convert an abandoned, large, beautiful classical architecture building into a neighborhood community learning center. This would increase

access to affordable, reliable, high speed internet and devices, and improve digital literacy and skills. There are some challenges associated with working through the City of Buffalo. They recognize that, being a predominantly black and African American neighborhood and community, it would be an excellent location for a central community computing lab.

- University at Buffalo Clinical and Translational Research Center focuses on underserved populations. They've been addressing digital equity with aging populations, specifically those that are low-income and that are racial minorities. They've developed a learning curriculum that provides participants with their own digital devices, and then we lead what ends up being about a 15-to-20 week or so curriculum covering health equity, health literacy, and digital literacy as well as anything that they might want to learn, especially when it comes to addressing social determinants of health. This can range from online grocery shopping, streaming music, watching Netflix just to keep themselves sane while they're at home; these are things they're happy to teach.
- Center for Self Advocacy, which serves people with disabilities, developed its Let's Connect program, a 13-unit curriculum that walks through everything, including using computers, smartphones, and other digital skills. It's broken down in an easy-to-read, easy-to-learn fashion. They use that program to meet one-on-one with people and see where they are and what it is that they want to learn and then go from there.
- Orleans Digital Literacy Initiative, which is not represented on today's call, has done a lot of work on digital literacy, broadband and equipment access.
- Niagara University's Rose Bente Lee Ostapenko Center for Race, Equality & Mission works with a health equity task force. They mainly use the coalition as a way to learn more and push out digital equity information to our task force members. For instance, the community they serve struggles with access to mental health services in Niagara Falls for pediatrics. They took a big portion of their last task force meeting. They'd like to get UB's program to help them think about how to use digital equity strategies to get the services that are needed inside of the city. They don't offer digital equity services themselves, but they're working to use digital equity tools to solve other issues.

Wrap-Up

- Nazeer and Meghan highlighted that the goal is not to make everything digital equity, but to think long term about how digital equity can be a systems change strategy that enables impacts and outcomes for residents across key areas of required improvement and change. These include health, education, employment, civic engagement, and accessible, navigable access to government benefit and services.
- Nazeer provided an overview of CAO's short-term timeline:
 - CAO has submitted an application to the federal government for the second tranche of NTIA funding (\$37 million). They're making revisions and will resubmit shortly. They expect to hear back within the next few months.
 - They anticipate opening applications for the Digital Equity Capacity Grant program within Q4 of this 2024, with awards in Q1 2025.