

WNY Digital Equity Coalition Full Member Meeting Notes

2025-05-21

Attendance

- Eileen Anderson; School Library System Director and Library Automation Supervisor; Erie 1 BOCES
- CJ Banks; Vice President for Strategic Partnerships and Career Advancement; Villa Maria College
- Ann Battaglia; Executive Director; Healthy Community Alliance
- Jeremy Besch; Managing Director; Per Scholas Buffalo
- Rachel Bonsignore; Director; Liftoff WNY
- Hannah Brecher; Coalition Community Member; At Large
- Courtney Deuro; Data Analyst; Center for Self Advocacy
- Katie Earl; Community Recreation Coordinator for the Aging; Erie County Senior Services
- Trent Hamilton; Coalition Community Member; Entrepreneur School of Thought
- Kimberly Herrington; Founder; Western New York WiFi Warriors
- Amanda Horner; Coalition Community Member; At Large
- Nekia Kemp; Executive Director; Police Athletic League of Buffalo, Inc.
- Talisa King; Project Coordinator; Livewell Erie
- Hex Kleinmarten; Digital Literacy Coordinator; Literacy Buffalo Niagara
- Dennis Lee; Coalition Community Member; Hopewell Baptist Church
- Don Matteson; Chief Program Officer; Peter & Elizabeth Tower Foundation
- Jake Moskal; Director of Employment Services; Journey's End Refugee Services
- Deborah Porter; Founder & President; YES Workforce
- Colleen Reedy; Director of Talent Solutions; Per Scholas Buffalo
- Abigail Smith; Digital Literacy Program Coordinator; Cornell Cooperative Extension, Orleans Digital Literacy Initiative
- Bob Spino; Director of Technology; Erie 2-Chautauqua-Cattaraugus BOCES
- Andy Strohmeier; Integrating Special Populations Coordinator, Clinical and Translational Research Center; University at Buffalo
- Robb Szczesniak; Senior Vice President - Technology Manager; M&T Bank

Announcements and Upcoming Events

- **North Country Leadership Summit:** Amanda Horner shared information about the Adirondack Health Institute's North Country Leadership Summit on September 24-25 in Lake Placid. The summit includes a topic on achieving health equity through digital inclusion and broadband improvement. [Event details](#)
- **Digital Literacy Meeting for Older Adults:** Katie Earl (Erie County Senior Services) announced a meeting on June 10 at 10 AM at Cheektowaga Senior Center to bring together organizations providing digital literacy programming for older adults, aiming to coordinate efforts and prevent duplication of services.
- **Per Scholas IT Training Cohort:** Jeremy Besch announced recruitment for their next 13-week IT support class offering CompTIA A+ certification and job search support. Applications are being accepted until early June, with spots filling quickly. Contact: Danielle Jackson (djackson@perscholas.org)
- **Disability Community Events:**
 - Hannah Brecher thanked everyone who attended the 35th Annual Developmental Disability Awareness Day.
 - The Self Advocacy Association of New York State's regional conference will be held on June 20 at the Niagara Falls Convention Center.
 - Disability Pride will be held on Saturday, July 26 at Buffalo River Works, with opportunities for organizations to register for tables through Brittany Montgomery, ADA coordinator for the City of Buffalo.
- **Aging Advocacy Resources:** Katie Earl shared information about [Aging NY](#), an advocacy organization for older Americans.
- **Medicaid Cuts Advocacy:**
 - Hannah Brecher shared information about ongoing advocacy efforts against Medicaid cuts in New York State, noting that over 100 people showed up at the state capitol to protest a late-night vote on cuts.
 - Rachel Bonsignore shared a [one-pager about Medicaid cuts impact on WNY](#)

Digital Equity Act and Federal Funding Updates

- Don Matteson reported that the Trump administration has declared the Digital Equity Act unconstitutional and moved to terminate it, affecting approximately \$2.75 billion in federal funding for digital equity projects. He shared a [Perplexity summary](#) of the current status.
- The grant that WNY Digital Equity Coalition has from New York State is not federal pass-through dollars, so it's not directly affected.
- Nationally, 24 NTIA Competitive Grant projects were approved, including one in Niagara Falls. The four projects with executed contracts had their contracts terminated, while others like Niagara Falls that never received contracts are in limbo.
- The New York State Digital Equity Network created a petition through [ResistBot](#) for people to advocate for the Digital Equity Act. Meeting participants were encouraged to sign it, noting it takes about 60 seconds to complete.
- The Broadband Equity Access and Deployment funding is not eliminated but has shifted from strong fiber optic preference to include satellite options like Starlink on fairly equal footing.

Digital Rights and Technology Trends Discussion

- **Digital Ownership Issues:** Courtney Deuro raised concerns about the trend of companies moving away from ownership models to licensing models:
 - Nintendo's upcoming Switch 2 will link games to specific devices, requiring multiple purchases for multiple users.
 - Systems can be remotely deactivated if companies decide users violated terms of service.
 - Physical media increasingly requires internet connections to function.
 - Discord is getting a new CEO with concerns about potential shifts to more paid features.
 - Don noted that Kindle e-book readers are licensing books, not buying them - if an Amazon account gets closed, users lose access to their books.
 - Courtney mentioned that Amazon recently changed their settings so users can't download books off Kindle anymore.
- **Right to Repair:** The group discussed the importance of right to repair laws to allow consumers to fix their own devices, noting that these laws are stronger in the European Union than in the US.

AI and Workforce Discussion

- **AI Impact on Employment:**
 - Kimberly Herrington (a senior analyst for data analytics and AI at a major research firm) shared insights about organizations cutting employees and implementing AI, with some companies now requiring proof that AI couldn't do a job before allowing hiring.
 - She shared [an article about Shopify's CEO implementing "AI-first hiring"](#)
- **AI in Education:**
 - Courtney Deuro mentioned that colleges are using AI to grade and check for plagiarism, with students sometimes getting erroneous flags, linking to [an article on related mental health impacts](#)
 - Hannah Brecher noted that AI has positive applications for people with disabilities, such as aiding those with speech problems and helping produce prosthetic limbs and assistive devices.
- **AI Literacy and Human Skills:**
 - Don Matteson shared a video explaining [Generative AI in a Nutshell](#), also included in the April WNYDEC Newsletter.
 - Courtney Deuro stressed the importance of not trusting AI blindly and always reviewing content for corrections.
 - Kimberly Herrington shared a resource on [being the human in the loop](#)
- **AI Task Force Creation:** CJ Banks (Villa Maria College) announced that Villa Maria and the KORP Foundation are creating an AI Task Force focused on equity in AI. The initiative aims to:
 - Create curriculum for teaching students about ethical AI use and prompt engineering.
 - Address "AI phobia" through education.
 - Work with students from kindergarten through college to ensure digital citizens know how to use AI.
 - Provide services to teachers and company owners to support AI integration.

Upcoming Convenings

- Registration for the Western New York Digital Equity Coalition convening will be available by Monday.
 - The event will be held on July 28th, 9 AM to 3 PM, at the Erie One BOCES Education Campus (355 Harlem Road in West Seneca).

- The New York State Digital Equity Network will also hold a statewide convening on August 5th at Stony Brook University's Center for Excellence in Wireless and Information Technology.
 - Last year's statewide convening in Syracuse drew 70-75 people, with hopes to reach 100+ attendees this year.

Digital Equity Technical Assistance Grant Update

- The coalition received four proposals for the Digital Literacy Survey project.
- The steering committee will review proposals, schedule interviews, and make a final decision.
- A check-in meeting with the ConnectALL office is scheduled in the coming weeks to discuss minority and women-owned business enterprise (MWBE) compliance.
- The coalition is in a "holding pattern" for financials, saving resources for when they need to pay out for the technical assistance grant before reimbursement.

Action Items and Next Steps

- Don will share instructions for creating ResistBot petitions as a follow-up to the meeting.
- Members interested in the AI Task Force should contact CJ Banks (cbanks@villa.edu), with a recommendation from Kim Herrington (kbuchner@gmail.com) to connect with Joaquim Carbonara from Buffalo State for coordination.
- Registration for the July 28th WNY Digital Equity Coalition convening will open next Monday.