

WNY Digital Equity Coalition Full-Member Meeting

2026-01-21

Attendance

- Megan Battista; Learning and Advocacy Coordinator; Liftoff WNY
- Jeremy Besch; Managing Director; Per Scholas Buffalo
- Rachel Bonsignore; Director; Liftoff WNY
- Christine Carr-Barmasse; Executive Director; Mission: Ignite
- Anna DeRosa; Program Research Specialist; NYS Council on Developmental Disabilities
- Nyla Gaylord; Executive Director; Orleans County United Way
- Trent Hamilton; Coalition Community Member; Entrepreneur School of Thought
- Steve Heist; VP, Information Technology & CIO; OneBridge Benefits
- Nestor Hernandez; Vice President for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; People Inc.
- Amanda Horner; Coalition Community Member; New York State Association for Rural Health
- Danielle Jackson; Manager, Recruitment and Admissions; Per Scholas Buffalo
- Hex Kleinmartin; Digital Literacy Coordinator; Literacy Buffalo Niagara
- Don Matteson; Chief Program Officer; Peter & Elizabeth Tower Foundation
- Amy Miranti; Communications & Administrative Coordinator; Liftoff WNY & Nonprofit Support Group
- Nekia Kemp; Executive Director; Police Athletic League of Buffalo, Inc.
- Katie Pieri; Director; Nonprofit Support Group
- Mike Rogers; Regional Organizer; Self-Advocacy Association of New York State (SANYS)
- Sandra Sheppard; Senior Evaluation Associate; CCNY, Inc.
- 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
- Jessica Teng; Technology and Communications Associate; CCNY, Inc.
- Simone Ragland; Co-Founder/CEO; Bits & Bytes STEM Foundation
- Heidi Ziemer; Community Investment Specialist; Mission: Ignite

Announcements

- New York State Digital Equity Network (NYSDEN) Advocacy Day: Heidi Ziemer from Mission: Ignite reported that WNYDEC members were participating in Albany advocacy meetings (via Zoom due to weather) to discuss the importance of funding for digital equity with state legislators.
- Amy Brombos from the US Census Bureau created a comprehensive chart demonstrating how digital skills align with Governor Hochul's State of the State Address priorities across different state programs (health, education, veterans, seniors). Coalition members are encouraged to follow up with local state representatives to emphasize how their programs serve constituents and how digital skills align with community needs.
- New York State Council on Developmental Disabilities Funding: Anna DeRosa announced available funding of up to \$10,000 per project (small grants/purchase orders) for work in Chautauqua County focused on people with developmental disabilities living in poverty.
 - The grant focuses on three areas: expanding social opportunities, expanding community-based supports for families, and enhancing transportation access—all potentially addressable through digital equity work.
 - The grant application deadline is February 13th, with an information session scheduled for January 23rd.
 - Organizations do not need to be located in Chautauqua County as long as they will operate there.
- Literacy Buffalo Niagara Niagara County Expansion: Hex Kleinmartin announced digital literacy programming at the SUNY ATTAIN Lab in Niagara Falls starting in February.
 - A telehealth workshop is scheduled for February 19th from 1-3 PM.
 - A basic computer literacy series will run from February 26th through March 19th, covering devices/operating systems, internet basics, email communication, and online security and safety.
 - All workshops are free and open to anyone, held at the Doris W. Jones Family Resource Building, 3001 9th St, Niagara Falls.
- Per Scholas Buffalo IT Training: Danielle Jackson announced upcoming IT support classes designed to help people land entry-level IT jobs.
 - In-person class starts February 17th, Monday-Friday, 9 AM-4 PM.
 - Remote class starts April 6th, Monday-Friday, 9 AM-5 PM.
 - Classes are located in the Larkin Building, downtown Buffalo, with job placement assistance provided.

- Mission: Ignite AmeriCorps Opportunities: Christine Carr-Barmasse announced availability for digital skills trainers and digital navigators through the Tech360 program, paid through AmeriCorps, seeking those who want to help other nonprofits.

Digital Literacy Survey Update

- The coalition is conducting a digital literacy survey through Clementine Gold Group with a target of 1,200 responses from eight Western New York counties.
- Currently at approximately 508 responses, with the majority from Erie County.
- The survey has been extended through the end of February, with an additional drawing for a \$200 Walmart gift card added as incentive.
- Three drawings have been completed or scheduled, with a fourth planned for late February.
- Mail surveys have yielded minimal responses (approximately 36), despite being expensive to distribute.
- The coalition is doubling down on in-person distribution and location-based approaches.
- Katie Earl from Erie County Senior Services, Jenn Northup from Western New York Library Resources Council, and Sherry Sherrill of Covington Associates were recognized for their excellent work distributing surveys.
- Organizations interested in distributing surveys should contact Mark Glasgow at Clementine Gold Group (mark@clementinegoldgroup.com).
- Clementine Gold will provide surveys, secure drop boxes, training, and support for distribution.
- The survey is currently available only in English; translation funding was not available.
- The survey link is available on the coalition website at <https://wnydigitalequity.org/wny-digital-literacy-survey/>
- The goal is to provide credible community-level data on digital skills across Western New York's population (descriptive data, not statistically representative).

Steering Committee Update

- The following individuals have agreed to continue serving on the steering committee through 2026: Christine Carr-Barmasse, Steve Heist, Samuel Mattle, Simone Ragland, and Bob Spino.
- Al Meyers stepped down from the committee as his position at Connecting Communities in Action was on a state/federal contract that expired.
- One steering committee position is available for interested coalition members.
- The steering committee meets typically for 45 minutes to one hour once per month, the week before the full member meeting.
- Meetings cover financial updates, project progress, and other coalition issues.

- Don Matteson encouraged interested parties to contact current steering committee members for information about the experience.

Workgroup Project Updates

State Digital Equity Technical Assistance Grant Deliverables

- Results-Based Accountability training was completed at the end of last year, with several coalition members now certified.
- The next step is building out performance measures for digital literacy, broadband access, and equipment/device access.
- Several members have volunteered for the digital literacy performance measures group, which is well-populated.
- The broadband access and equipment/device access groups need additional volunteers.
- The goal is to create 3-5 common measures in each domain that any organization can track for apples-to-apples comparison.
- These measures will help identify high-performing programs to understand their successful practices and support struggling programs.
- The data will support organization-level funding requests and community-level advocacy by documenting need and impact.
- The coalition is working on both community/population-level data (American Community Survey, digital skills survey) and program-level performance measures.

Focus Groups

- Focus groups are planned to supplement the digital skills survey and potentially connect to regional meetup goals.
- No focus groups are currently scheduled; the project is in the planning phase.
- Focus groups will target covered populations including low-income individuals, people with disabilities, veterans, rural populations, and immigrant/refugee populations.
- Geographic diversity across the eight counties is a priority.
- Questions will be derived from the survey, focusing on what people want to do but can't, what they can do, obstacles they face, and how they want to engage with digital skills learning.
- Nestor Hernandez suggested using both quantitative measures (Likert scales) and qualitative open-ended questions, and volunteered to help develop the focus group approach.
- Christine Carr-Barmasse indicated Mission: Ignite's digital navigators could help with focus groups if they have a structured format.

- The ideal timeline is to complete focus groups by the end of Q1 or early Q2, no later than the end of April.
- Groups will consist of 8-10 people, with 5-6 total focus groups planned.

Regional Meetups

- In-person regional meetups were identified as a priority goal from the 2025 convening to better engage residents from across Western New York.
- Current virtual meetings at 9 AM on weekdays require work schedule flexibility, digital skills, broadband, and equipment—essentially requiring digital inclusion to participate.
- The coalition needs volunteers to help with scheduling and logistics for regional meetups.
- Don Matteson specifically requested help from members outside of Buffalo to plan and recruit for meetings in their regions.
- No volunteers have yet been identified for this work.

2026 Convening Planning

- The New York State Digital Equity Network is planning their convening for early August 2026.
- The WNY Digital Equity Coalition wants to schedule their convening either well before or well after (a couple months) to avoid conflicts; last year's convenings were one week apart.
- Christine Carr-Barmasse and Heidi Ziemer volunteered to lead the convening planning.
- Sandy Sheppard also volunteered to help with convening planning.
- The convening location rotates annually; it was in Olean two years ago and West Seneca last year.
- Don Matteson requested a few more volunteers to help with planning, noting it is not a heavy lift.

Advocacy Updates

- The coalition has established an advocacy workgroup consisting of Jeremy Besch from Per Scholas and Mike Rogers from Self Advocacy Association of New York State.
- The workgroup welcomes additional members to keep the effort moving forward.
- The group met in November; meeting notes have been written but not yet distributed.
- New York State Assembly Hearing: An Assembly hearing on ConnectALL and its effectiveness was held on January 8th, with Christine Carr-Barmasse providing testimony.
 - The committee invited supplemental testimony through January 22nd.
 - Don Matteson prepared supplemental testimony on behalf of the WNY Digital Equity Coalition highlighting positive work by ConnectALL (infrastructure, technical assistance grants) while raising several concerns.
 - Concerns raised include: scoring and evaluation process for digital equity capacity grants, new BEAD regulations that make it practically impossible for the state to enforce the

Affordable Broadband Act, and desire for more participatory processes in ConnectALL's priority-setting and fund distribution.

- Steve Heist suggested including a recommendation for a community-based advisory committee for ConnectALL using more inclusive processes than the current appointment-based broadband advisory committee.
- The steering committee approved the testimony, which will be submitted and posted on the coalition website.
- Jeremy Besch reviewed Don's testimony and confirmed it is comprehensive, covers necessary topics, and is clear.
- Meeting with ConnectALL Leadership: Don Matteson and two other NYSDEN board members will meet with Joshua Breitbart (ConnectALL director) on Friday to discuss collaboration opportunities between ConnectALL and regional digital equity coalitions and frontline practitioners.