

Western New York Digital Equity Coalition Full Member Meeting

2025-02-19

Attendance

- Ann Battaglia; Executive Director; Healthy Community Alliance
- Becky Beiring; Student; Buffalo State University
- Jeremy Besch; Managing Director; Per Scholas Buffalo
- Hannah Brecher; Coalition Community Member; At Large
- Katie Earl; Community Recreation Coordinator for the Aging; Erie County Senior Services
- Jeffrey Zane Hansen; Development Specialist; Mission: Ignite
- 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; NYS Association for Rural Health
- Solomon Joseph; Manager of Economic Empowerment; Native American Community Services
- Nekia Kemp; Executive Director; Police Athletic League of Buffalo
- Hex Kleinmartin; Digital Literacy Coordinator; Literacy Buffalo Niagara
- Dinash Lal; ATTAIN Lab Coordinator; The Research Foundation for SUNY
- Jake Moskal; Director of Employment Services; Journey's End Refugee Services
- 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
- Jose Soto; Systems Information Manager; Ardent Solutions
- 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.
- Liz Warkentin; Senior Education Manager; Mission: Ignite
- Heidi Ziemer; Community Investment Specialist; Mission: Ignite

Announcements

- **Developmental Disability Awareness Day (DD Day)** will be held on May 28, 2025, at the Niagara Falls Convention Center, organized by the Developmental Disability Alliance of Western New York. The event is seeking organizations to table at the conference, and a lifestyle nutritionist will serve as the keynote speaker.
- The **Regional Self-Advocacy Conference** is scheduled for June 11-12, 2025, in Rochester, NY, alternating between Buffalo and Rochester locations annually.
- **Disability Pride** has been announced for Friday, July 24, 2025, at Buffalo River Works, offering an opportunity to support and learn about the disability community.
- **Funny Bones Comedy Event** is scheduled for March 10, 2025, at Gypsy Parlor, featuring people with disabilities performing comedy, with details available through Voice Buffalo.
- A **Spread the Word to End the R-Word event** will take place on March 4, 2026, from 10:00 AM to 1:00 PM at the downtown library.
- The **BEAD Non-Deployment Listening Session** had overwhelming response, prompting NTIA to schedule an additional session on February 18, 2025, at 2:00 PM, with registration still open.
- **Women in Tech Western New York** event will be held on March 26, 2025, at Seneca One, organized by Tech Buffalo with no cost to register.
- Literacy Buffalo Niagara is hosting a **Telehealth Workshop** on Thursday, February 20, 2025, from 1:00-3:00 PM at the SUNY ATTAIN Lab in the Doris W. Jones Family Resource Building in Niagara Falls. A four-week **Basic Computer Skills Workshop series** will run Thursdays from February 26 through March 19, 2025, from 1:00-3:00 PM at the same location, covering device hardware, internet navigation, email communication, and online security.

BEAD Non-Deployment Funding Update

- NTIA is seeking input (not formal comment) on appropriate uses for BEAD non-deployment funds, with submissions due by 5:00 PM on February 18, 2025.
- Don has drafted a letter on the Coalition's behalf (approved by the Advocacy and Steering Committees) advocating for non-deployment funds to be used for rural anchor institution connectivity, alternative technologies (fixed wireless, community mesh networks), digital navigation, outreach, digital skills development, equipment, and assistive technology.
- The letter emphasizes that funding structures should not be reimbursement-based to allow organizations to begin work immediately and recognizes these investments as essential rather than supplemental.

- The Coalition's advocacy letter aligns with submissions from the STEM Alliance in Westchester and CanCode Communities, which emphasized keeping non-deployment dollars with states rather than reabsorbing them into the federal budget.

Strategic Case-Making for Digital Equity Workshop

- The Coalition began a multi-meeting facilitated exercise to build a strategic case for digital equity in Western New York, shifting from the previous workgroup approach to full Coalition participation.
- This work builds on Strategic CaseMaking training previously provided to the Coalition and a presentation given at the Net Inclusion Conference in Chicago.
- The core strategic case will be developed over approximately four meetings, allocating a portion of each session to building the outline.

Values Identification Exercise

- Coalition members identified personal and shared values that connect them to digital equity work and considered values held by potential stakeholders they aim to influence.
- Values identified by participants included: community, equity, opportunity, education, equality, communication, dignity, respect, accessibility, autonomy, privacy, growth, trust, collaboration, diversity, agency, freedom, health, inclusion, justice, connection, and affordability.
- Mike Rogers highlighted the necessity of connectivity by sharing a personal experience of being locked out of all accounts when his cell phone was down, illustrating how essential devices have become for basic access to services and security verification.
- Jose Soto emphasized aging in place and strengthening social connections through technology for older adults as a key value.
- Hannah Brecher noted that during COVID, people living in group homes did not know how to connect with family members and advocacy groups, highlighting the importance of connection and education.

Consolidated Core Values

- Through group discussion, the Coalition consolidated the extensive list into four primary value categories:
 1. **Equity** (encompassing accessibility, access, freedom, and opportunity)
 2. **Education** (recognized as vital for enabling people to learn how to use devices and technology effectively)
 3. **Collaboration** (emphasized as essential because without accountability in collaboration, other values cannot be fully expressed)

4. **Dignity** (encompassing respect)

- Bob Spino suggested that accessibility, access, freedom, and opportunity could be consolidated under a single umbrella term.
- Jessica Teng noted that equity could technically serve as an umbrella for accessibility, access, freedom, and opportunity.
- Bob Spino used Gemini AI to suggest "empowerment" as a potential single word to capture accessibility, access, freedom, and opportunity.
- Participants discussed how education connects to opportunity, with the type and quality of education being critical factors.

What's Next for Strategic Casemaking

- At the March meeting, the Coalition will review the drafted "we and why" statement and make any necessary tweaks, changes, or overhauls before moving to the next section of the strategic case-making framework.
- The Coalition will continue building out the strategic case for digital equity over the next several meetings, with the ultimate goal of creating a single core case that can be customized for different stakeholders.

Next Steps

- Don will consolidate the value categories into single terms where possible and draft a "we and why" statement for review at the next meeting.
- Don will finalize and submit the Coalition's letter on BEAD non-deployment funding by the 5:00 PM deadline on February 18, 2025.
- Coalition members can access strategic case-making training videos through a private YouTube playlist available upon request.