

Western New York Digital Equity Coalition Steering Committee 2025-02-03

Attendance

Present

- Jeremy Besch; Managing Director; Per Scholas Buffalo
- Christine Carr-Barmasse; Executive Director; Mission: Ignite
- Steven Heist; VP, Information Technology & CIO; OneBridge Benefits
- Samuel Mattle; Executive Director; Center for Self Advocacy
- Bob Spino; Director of Technology; Erie 2-Chautauqua-Cattaraugus BOCES

Excused

- Al Meyers; Connected Communities in Action
- Simone Ragland; Co-Founder & CEO; Bits and Bytes STEM Foundation

Absent

- Jessica Teng; Technology and Communications Associate; CCNY, Inc.

Grant Financials and Budget Update

- The Coalition currently has approximately \$74,000 remaining from the Moving Forward Together grant, though these funds are largely encumbered for the Digital Equity Technical Assistance Grant.
- The Moving Forward Together grant originally totaled approximately \$195,000-\$196,000, with \$70,000 earmarked for regranting to member organizations.
- The original work plan was derailed when New York State requested coalitions to focus on listening sessions, surveys, and focus groups for the State Digital Equity Plan.
- The Digital Equity Technical Assistance Grant is a \$100,000 reimbursement-based grant requiring the Coalition to front all expenses before receiving payment from the state.
- Current monthly expenses are approximately \$750 for coalition community member stipends, down from \$1,000 per month previously.
- The Coalition is operating conservatively with expenses until grant reimbursements are received from the state.
- Approximately \$60,000 is earmarked for the digital literacy survey, with about \$20,000 paid out so far and an additional ~\$3,300 recently paid to support the survey.

Coalition Community Members Update

- The Coalition currently has three coalition community members receiving \$250 monthly stipends: Trent Hamilton (Niagara Falls), Hannah Brecher (disabilities community), and Amanda Horner (rural health work and newsletter management).

- Pastor Dennis Lee from Buffalo's east side resigned approximately two weeks ago, reducing the number from four to three members.
- Coalition community members are responsible for sharing Coalition work with their communities and providing intelligence about community needs and issues.
- Monthly stipends are contingent upon engagement, which can include attending coalition meetings or providing additional connections and information.
- The Coalition is not actively recruiting to fill the vacant position due to budget constraints and uncertainty about grant reimbursement timing.

Digital Equity Technical Assistance Grant Deliverables

- The Coalition is behind schedule on several deliverables, with delays partially attributed to the extended timeline needed to reach target survey response numbers.
- Outstanding deliverables include focus groups, covered populations trainings (pending MWBE waiver resolution), and development of program-level common metrics.
- Four Results-Based Accountability (RBA) certifications were planned, with at least one completed and Christine acknowledging she is behind on completing hers.
- The Coalition needs to schedule work group meetings for the common metrics development.
- Don will reach out to Nazeer at Empire State Development to schedule an update meeting and discuss deadline extensions, acknowledging that delays are primarily his responsibility.
- Other coalitions are also behind schedule, though this provides limited comfort.

Digital Literacy Survey Update

- The digital literacy survey is ongoing through the end of February 2025.
- Don expressed pessimism about reaching the target of 1,200 survey responses, estimating the Coalition will be fortunate to reach 700 responses.
- The Coalition continues to encourage partners to promote the survey and collect responses.
- Samuel Mattle reported that the survey was confusing and lengthy when administered to two groups of people with developmental disabilities, indicating accessibility challenges.
- The survey was pilot tested and approved before distribution, so changes cannot be made at this point.
- Don acknowledged the survey will not provide perfect data but should yield sufficient data for the Coalition's purposes.

Focus Groups and Community Engagement

- The Coalition needs to conduct focus groups and listening sessions to complement the digital literacy survey data.
- Brett from Universal Primary Care in Olean has expressed interest in helping organize focus groups in the Southern Tier region.
- Don needs to follow up on organizing and scheduling these focus group sessions.
- Amy Brombos expressed eagerness to help with Coalition work when Christine and Steve saw her at a recent Pre-K Counts graduation event.
- Don will reach out to Amy to identify appropriate tasks she can assist with, particularly around American Community Survey data population in the results scorecard dashboard.

Results-Based Accountability (RBA) Work

- The Coalition needs to populate the results scorecard dashboard with American Community Survey data, which Don estimates is approximately 30 minutes to one hour of work.
- The more challenging component is developing the RBA narrative framework including the story behind the data, factors promoting and inhibiting progress, partner identification, effective strategies, and action planning.
- The Coalition will consider using the monthly coalition meetings to crowdsource the development of a strategic case for digital equity, starting potentially at the next meeting.
- Don recently delivered a training on strategic case-making and now has familiarity with the framework and materials to facilitate this work.
- The previous working group approach for developing the strategic case for digital equity did not gain traction.

Western New York Regional Convening Planning

- The Coalition needs to plan its regional convening for 2026, with discussion of timing, location, and format.
- Christine suggested considering a destination location where attendees and their families could experience the region, potentially holding the event on a Thursday to allow for weekend exploration.
- Christine proposed potentially seeking sponsorship support from tourism organizations if the convening is held in a destination location.
- Previous convenings were held in Buffalo (City of Buffalo), Olean (St. Bonaventure University), and in West Seneca (Erie 1 BOCES).

- St. Bonaventure University was praised for being great to work with and providing good food and space, though the total cost was approximately \$4,000 including space, catering, and insurance.

Niagara Falls Convening Proposal

- Jeremy suggested Niagara Falls as a potential location, noting it offers a destination experience with nice weather expected in June, and proximity to Niagara University.
- Niagara University is a Coalition member and recently received a competitive grant from NTIA, suggesting they have significant resources and expertise to share.
- The university has a Culinary Institute that might provide less expensive catering options and various available spaces for meetings.
- Niagara University's commencement is May 14th at ArtPark, suggesting the campus would be available for events after that date.
- Sam confirmed that Niagara University should be accessible as they have a disability studies program.
- Jeremy offered to connect with Niagara University's Workforce Coalition contacts to explore potential overlap and support opportunities.
- Don will initially reach out to Rolanda Ward at Niagara University to explore venue options and availability.

Convening Date Considerations

- The New York State Digital Equity Network convening is scheduled for the first week of August 2025 in Albany.
- The Coalition wants to avoid scheduling too close to the state convening to prevent overwhelming planning demands and maximize attendance.
- June emerged as the preferred timeframe, being before peak vacation season and after schools complete their academic year.
- May 17th was mentioned as the date of the successful St. Bonaventure convening in a previous year.
- Specific scheduling constraints include Tech Wars on Thursday, May 21st, Memorial Day weekend May 23-25, and Sam's conference on June 11-12.
- The week of May 18-22 was discussed, with preference for earlier in the week to avoid conflicts.
- College venues may have limited staff availability for catering support shortly after graduation season ends.

- Christine suggested late May through mid-June would work well, with Don expressing preference for the third week of June based on his personal schedule.

New York State Digital Equity Network Convening Update

- The 2025 NYSDEN convening will be held in August in Albany, with the location announced before consultation with coalition leaders occurred.
- There was significant frustration expressed about the decision-making process, with both Western New York and Albany coalition leaders surprised by the announcement.
- Don emphasized that "how we do things matters as much or more than what we do" and that decisions made without participatory process erode trust.
- The early announcement broke several agreements made during the previous convening planning process.
- Feedback was provided to NYSDEN leadership about the importance of trust and collaborative process for coalition functionality.
- Unlike previous convenings in various regions, the Albany location decision was made by NYSDEN leadership without consulting the Connect All Office.
- Christine noted that the timing (August) eliminates the benefit of having the convening in Albany for legislative advocacy, as most advocacy occurs in the fall through early spring.

Advocacy Efforts and Budget Priorities

- NYSDEN Advocacy Day was held on January 21, 2025, coinciding with the Coalition's last full member meeting.
- Christine and Heidi participated in 12 Zoom meetings with legislators throughout the day.
- The primary advocacy focus is securing \$25 million in earmarked funding for digital equity in the state budget.
- Sign-on letters are circulating in both the State Senate and Assembly for legislators to support the \$25 million earmark.
- Heidi has been actively contacting the Western New York legislative delegation to encourage them to sign onto the letters.
- Other coalitions across the state are similarly engaging their local representatives.
- Don expressed that success on the first attempt would be surprising, but the effort establishes awareness in the legislature about the need for consistent, earmarked digital equity funding.
- Previous earmarked funding of \$15 million disappeared, with its ultimate use remaining unclear despite efforts by Assemblyman Steve Otis to track it down.

- NYSDEN has an active advocacy committee that interested Coalition members can join.

Asset Mapping Project

- Asset mapping remains a priority identified by Coalition members at the previous convening, but no action has been taken yet.
- Don located the Connect All Office's Airtable base containing assets collected during the State Digital Equity Plan development process.
- The asset inventory was one of three main components of the state planning process, along with a statewide survey and focus groups.
- The Coalition needs to define what "asset mapping" means concretely—whether it requires an actual map, a spreadsheet, or another format.
- Key questions include determining what users should be able to do with the asset map beyond simply acknowledging its existence.
- Once the Coalition identifies a concrete deliverable, it will be easier to determine the necessary steps to complete the project.
- The Connect All Office's existing Airtable base may serve as a starting point or model for the Coalition's work.

Strategic Case for Digital Equity

- Creating a strategic case for digital equity remains an active project, though previous working group efforts have not gained traction.
- Don recently delivered training on strategic case-making and now has materials and framework familiarity to facilitate the work.
- Don proposed using upcoming coalition meetings to build out the components of an overarching case for digital equity through crowdsourcing with meeting attendees.
- This approach would take advantage of the typical 20-person attendance at coalition meetings rather than relying on a separate working group.
- Steve cautioned that facilitation will need to be tight given that the full group can sometimes be non-responsive.
- Jeremy offered to help with facilitation, particularly with managing breakout groups and keeping people on task.
- Don plans to use breakout rooms to encourage participation, as smaller groups make it harder for participants to disengage.
- Breakout sessions would also advance the goal of helping coalition members connect with people they wouldn't normally talk to.

- The alternative approach would be to tackle the strategic case development wholesale at the regional convening.

Regional Meetups and Work Groups

- Regional meetups remain a priority identified at the previous convening, but progress has been limited.
- Christine volunteered Heidi to take a leadership role in organizing regional meetups, noting it aligns with Heidi's interests and strengths.
- A work group for regional meetups exists, currently consisting of Mike Rogers, Jeremy, and Don.
- The work group has only met once, and a subsequent meeting poll was sent out but not completed by all members.
- Don needs to follow up with the regional meetups work group to schedule another meeting and advance planning.

Coalition Priorities Review

- Bob Spino raised the importance of reviewing progress on previously identified objectives at the next convening, ensuring accountability and transparency.
- The three main priorities identified at the last convening were regional meetups, asset mapping, and advocacy.
- Christine emphasized that how progress is communicated and packaged is as important as the substance of the work.
- Jeremy suggested the Coalition should provide a progress check-in to members before asking them to do additional work, demonstrating that efforts are not futile.
- Don acknowledged that repeating the same priorities for three consecutive years without progress would be unacceptable.
- The Coalition needs to maintain focus on identified objectives while remaining flexible enough to pursue opportunistic new initiatives.
- Christine noted appreciation that the Coalition now has many active initiatives compared to previous periods when nothing was happening.