

WNY Digital Equity Coalition Full-Member Meeting

2026-03-18

Attendance

- Ann Battaglia; Executive Director; Healthy Community Alliance
- Hannah Brecher; Coalition Community Member; At Large
- Rachel Bonsignore; Director; Liftoff WNY
- Megan Battista; Learning and Advocacy Coordinator; Liftoff WNY
- Christine Carr-Barmasse; Executive Director; Mission: Ignite
- Trent Hamilton; Coalition Community Member; Entrepreneur School of Thought
- Jeffrey Zane Hansen; Development Specialist; Mission: Ignite
- Steve Heist; VP, Information Technology & CIO; OneBridge Benefits
- Solomon Joseph; Manager of Economic Empowerment; Native American Community Services
- Brett Lawton; Chief Executive Officer; Universal Primary Care/Southern Tier Community Health Center Network
- Don Matteson; Chief Program Officer; The Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation
- Jake Moskal; Director of Employment Services; Journey's End Refugee Services
- Mike Rogers; Regional Organizer; Self-Advocacy Association of New York State (SANYS)
- Sandra Sheppard; Senior Evaluation Associate; CCNY, Inc.
- Ian Sommerfelt; Program Assistant; Center for Self Advocacy
- Bob Spino; Director of Technology; Erie 2-Chautauqua-Cattaraugus BOCES
- Andy Strohmeier; Integrating Special Populations Coordinator, Clinical and Translational Research Center; University at Buffalo
- Eileen Anderson; School Library System Director and Library Automation Supervisor; Erie 1 BOCES
- Heidi Ziemer; Community Investment Specialist; Mission: Ignite

Announcements

- The 2026 Public Health Partnership Conference will be held April 22-24 in Lake Placid, New York, and registration is now open.
- Mission: Ignite will host a board-sponsored open house in June to provide the community with a view of their daily operations, including hardware and software trainings, and to welcome partners, potential partners, and potential investors.

- DD Day (Developmental Disability Awareness Day) will take place on May 28, 2026, at the Niagara Falls Convention Center, running from 8:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.
- Online registration for DD Day opens April 6 and closes at midnight on May 11.
 - Sponsorships and award nominations are still being accepted for DD Day.
 - Don proposed that the coalition consider tabling at DD Day as an outreach opportunity to provide accessibility resources to the disability community.
- The SANYS 2026 Western/Finger Lakes Regional Conference has changed dates to June 25-26 and will be held at the Doubletree in Rochester.
 - Mike Rogers emphasized the importance of people with disabilities attending conferences like the SANYS Regional Conference to learn about options and services that care managers and social workers may not always share.
- Tech Wars at ECC Downtown is scheduled for May 21 from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., expecting about 30 school districts and 770 students competing in various STEM events.
 - Volunteers and sponsors are needed for Tech Wars; interested parties should contact Steve Heist.
- Disability Pride Festival will be held on Friday, July 24, 2026, at Buffalo River Works (earlier than usual, as it's typically held closer to the ADA anniversary date).
 - The City of Buffalo's ADA Coordinator Brittany Montgomery is running Disability Pride Festival, and tables are still available for organizations interested in participating.
- Don requested information about whether digital inclusion content is already planned for the SANYS Regional Conference and DD Day to coordinate coalition participation and avoid duplication with other regional coalitions like Finger Lakes.

Strategic Case-Making: Values Identification and We/Why Statements

- Don reviewed the values identification work completed at the previous meeting and consolidated responses into four core value themes: equity; dignity and respect; education and learning; and collaboration and connection.
- Equity was defined as everyone deserving the opportunity to participate fully in digital life and the digital economy.
- Dignity and respect was defined as everyone having inherent value and worth and deserving to be treated accordingly.
- Education and learning encompassed K-12, higher education, workforce development, and ongoing skills development opportunities for all.
- Collaboration and connection emphasized the importance of people connecting and working together to build stronger communities.

- Don clarified that choosing one core value statement does not diminish the importance of other values, but the coalition needs one primary strategic case that can be adapted for different stakeholders.
- Don presented four "We and Why" statements, each anchored to one of the four value themes, written with slightly different tones to provide options for the coalition's aspirational vision.
 - Several attendees noted that the first three statements felt more individually focused, while the fourth (collaboration and connection) felt more communal and better suited to the coalition's work.
 - Others observed that the first two statements sounded "scoldy" and that collaboration implies a desire for systemic change more than individual rights.
 - People generally agreed that the third and fourth statements were more asset and strengths-based, taking a "glass half full" approach.

Strategic Case-Making: Voting on Core We/Why Statement

- Don conducted a ranked-choice poll to select the coalition's core We/Why statement.
 - The collaboration and connection statement received 63% of first-choice votes.
 - Education and learning had strong showing as a second choice.
 - Equity and dignity and respect received lower rankings overall.
 - Dignity and respect will come through in all choices regardless of which statement is selected, as it's such an important community value.
 - Without everyone working together for change, dignity, respect, and equity might not be attainable for all.
- Community members suggested incorporating Western New York's reputation for innovation and creativity, noting that many inventors came from the area.

Strategic Case-Making: Story of Us Development

- Don presented a draft "Story of Us" statement emphasizing that the coalition brings together organizations Western New Yorkers truly trust, including nonprofits serving refugees, people with disabilities, and Native American communities, K-12 schools and colleges, businesses, government agencies, and philanthropic partners.
- The draft statement emphasized that every coalition member opens doors to communities the others cannot reach.
- Don requested that members identify in the chat which communities their organizations reach that might not otherwise have a voice in digital equity conversations.

- Several populations/communities were identified, including: rural, urban, and suburban communities; the K-12 educational community in the northern half of Erie County; families with young children across Western New York; people with disabilities, particularly those with developmental and intellectual disabilities; people just learning new digital skills; small nonprofits that might not otherwise know how to bring their voice to digital equity conversations; older adults throughout Erie County; adult students who might not have a voice in digital equity through Adult Education Programs; seniors, new learners of all ages, veterans, youth, and young adults; historically underrepresented folks (kids, older adults, and people minoritized by the healthcare system) who might not otherwise have a voice.
- The discussion emphasized the importance of being careful not to single people out and to avoid stepping on toes while trying to reach a broader range of groups.
 - Don confirmed that the coalition's strategic case-making approach will make systems the villain rather than individuals, focusing on inequitable structures rather than taking individuals to task.
 - Don referenced the concept of "backfires" from the previous session, noting that telling someone "we need change and by the way, it's because you screwed us over" is counterproductive.
- Don noted that the Story of Us draft may need some wordsmithing and that it could incorporate the coalition's bench strength in digital skills, skill building, equipment access, digital skills training, and digital navigation (though this might appear later in the strategic case).

Homework and Next Steps

- Don outlined homework for members before the April 15 meeting: think about what the community loses if the digital divide persists, considering various stakeholders (legislators, elected officials, business owners, family members).
- Members should identify one or a couple of myths about digital equity that the coalition needs to dispel when making its case, drawing from a list of objections to digital equity work that Don previously collected from the National Digital Inclusion Alliance email list. Don will share the list before the next meeting.
- The next meeting will focus on building the bridge between the coalition's values and digital equity: why is digital equity the non-negotiable foundation for the We/Why statement?
- Don explained that Strategic Casemaking involves navigating dominant narratives (myths people hold about digital equity) and triggering loss aversion (what stakeholders stand to lose if the digital divide persists).

- The coalition will ultimately paint two pictures: what the community gains if we act to advance digital equity, and what the community loses if we fail to act.
- Don will begin building out the front end of the Case for Digital Equity using the work from this session and will share it with members.
- Members were encouraged to email Don with any questions, ideas, or thoughts that arise after the meeting.
- Questions came up about developing a call to action for various stakeholders (agencies, organizations, elected officials, private partners, funding agencies).
 - Don clarified that the entire case for digital equity sets the stage for an ask, and that the core strategic case can be adapted for different stakeholders across the political spectrum and different organizational contexts.
 - Don emphasized that the case needs to tie to the core vision and not be manipulative, focusing on mission alignment and how different stakeholders fit into achieving the aspirational future.