



WNY Digital Equity Coalition Meeting Notes

2026-04-15

Attendance

- Ann Battaglia; Executive Director; Healthy Community Alliance
- Hannah Brecher; Coalition Community Member; At Large
- CJ Banks; Vice President for Strategic Partnerships and Career Advancement; Villa Maria College
- Megan Battista; Learning and Advocacy Coordinator; Liftoff WNY
- Rachel Bonsignore; Director; Liftoff WNY
- Christine Carr-Barmasse; Executive Director; Mission: Ignite
- Katie Earl; Project Administrator – Recreation and Wellness; Erie County Department for the Aging
- Danielle Jackson; Manager, Recruitment and Admissions; Per Scholas Buffalo
- Jacqueline Hovey; System Adult Outreach Services - TechKnow Lab; Buffalo & Erie County Library
- Jeffrey Zane Hansen; Development Specialist; Mission: Ignite
- Steve Heist; VP, Information Technology & CIO; OneBridge Benefits
- Trent Hamilton; Coalition Community Member; Entrepreneur School of Thought
- Hex Kleinmartin; Digital Literacy Coordinator; Literacy Buffalo Niagara
- Brett Lawton; Chief Executive Officer; Universal Primary Care/Southern Tier Community Health Center Network
- Don Matteson; Chief Program Officer; Peter & Elizabeth Tower Foundation
- Alan Meyers; Fatherhood Connection Facilitator; Connecting Communities in Action
- Katie Pieri; Director; Nonprofit Support Group
- Mike Rogers; Regional Organizer; Self-Advocacy Association of New York State (SANYS)
- Ian Sommerfelt; Program Assistant; Center for Self Advocacy
- 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.
- Heidi Ziemer; Community Investment Specialist; Mission: Ignite

Announcements

- **Mission: Ignite Open House:** Christine Carr-Barmasse announced that Mission: Ignite will hold a board-sponsored open house on June 11th at 6 p.m., with invitations to be circulated to Coalition members, partners, and investors to showcase their work in digital adoption, digital literacy, and tech training.
- **Mission: Ignite ADA Compliance Updates:** Mission: Ignite is using AI tools to improve ADA compliance in their corporate materials, particularly addressing issues with their bright logo colors for better online viewing and accessibility.
- **Mission: Ignite Claude Subscription:** Mission: Ignite is purchasing a Claude AI subscription at nonprofit pricing. They are using it to audit materials to support their accessibility work.
- **Developmental Disability Awareness Day (DD Day):** Hannah Brecher announced that DD Day will be held on May 28th from 8:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. at the Buffalo Niagara Convention Center, featuring keynote speakers, workshops, and a vendor fair connecting people with developmental and intellectual disabilities to services and agencies.
- **Self Advocacy Association of New York State Regional Conference:** The SANYS regional conference will be held June 25th-26th in Rochester, featuring workshops and tabling opportunities.
- **Disability Pride Event:** The Disability Pride event will be held on July 24th at Buffalo River Works, with opportunities for tabling and performances; interested parties should contact Brittany Montgomery at the City of Buffalo.
- **Literacy Buffalo Niagara Digital Literacy Programs:** Hex Kleinmartin announced multiple digital literacy and telehealth programs in Niagara County, including drop-in sessions at the John A Duke Senior Citizens Center, workshops at the Dale Association covering device basics, internet basics, email basics, and online security, telehealth workshops at the SUNY ATTAIN Lab, and workshops at the Tuscarora Nation Health Center focusing on telehealth and digital health literacy.
- **Villa Maria College Certificate Programs:** CJ Banks announced that Villa Maria College is offering certification courses focused on professional development for nonprofits and organizations, including AI literacy, marketing, and content management courses taught by Villa faculty over the summer, with group discounts and dedicated sessions available for organizations.
- **University at Buffalo AI Summit:** Steve Heist shared information about UB's "Ensuring AI for the Public Good" summit, a two-day event in June featuring speakers from universities across the country, with nonprofit pricing at \$499 and corporate pricing at \$1,999.
- **NSG Collaboration Events:** Katie Pieri announced collaboration events in partnership with the Western New York Forward Fund on April 22nd and May 27th to highlight different types of nonprofit collaboration in the region ahead of the Fund's grant process reopening this summer.

- **AI Impact Report:** Jessica Teng shared a report from the NYC Bar Association on the impact of AI use on people with disabilities, noting it addresses issues of disabled people being stereotyped, objectified, or invisible in AI-generated content.
- **Technology Discounts for Nonprofits:** The group discussed consolidating information about technology discounts available to nonprofits through platforms like TechSoup and other sources.

2026 Convening Update

- The 2026 Western New York Digital Equity Coalition convening will be held on **June 15th from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. at Niagara University.**
- Registration is currently open with only four people registered as of the meeting.
- The morning agenda will focus on finalizing the Coalition's strategic case for digital equity.
- The afternoon agenda is still being developed.
- Christine Carr-Barmasse and Heidi Ziemer are taking the lead on organizing this year's convening.
- There is no cost for Coalition members to attend the convening.

Strategic Case for Digital Equity: We & Why Statement

- Don Matteson presented an updated We & Why statement that incorporates themes from multiple value areas including connection and collaboration, dignity and respect, learning and education, and equity.
- The proposed statement reads: "Western New York is at its best when everyone can participate fully in learning, in work, in health, and in community. That means every Western New Yorker, regardless of address or income, has real tools, real access, and real choice. It means a student can finish homework at home, a job seeker can apply from their living room, a rural resident can join a community they couldn't reach before. Digital equity is how we close the gaps that keep people on the sidelines, and how we build a region where connection and collaboration aren't privileges, but the common ground we all stand on."
- The purpose of the We & Why statement is to anchor shared values with stakeholders and create visible overlap in values to build affinity, familiarity, and trust.
- Coalition members provided positive feedback on the statement, with Hannah Brecher noting it covers what the Coalition needs to accomplish and where digital equity is going.
- Mike Rogers suggested potentially incorporating language about digital equity as a right, noting that without digital equity, people are being deprived of something that should be available to them.
- Don acknowledged this concern and indicated the group would address this theme in a subsequent section of the strategic case.

- The statement was generally accepted for the moment with the understanding that it could be revisited if needed.

Strategic Case for Digital Equity: Navigating Dominant Narratives

- Don introduced the concept of "Navigating Dominant Narratives," explaining that the Strategic CaseMaking framework requires identifying and dispelling myths about digital equity with data, lived experience, and understanding.
- The group discussed "Digital Equity Derailers" - common objections or myths that suggest digital equity work is not important or necessary.
- **Christine Carr-Barmasse** reported hearing that infrastructure is more important than education on technology use and digital tools, representing a narrative that infrastructure is all that matters.
- **Hannah Brecher** shared that in the disability community, there is a perception that people with disabilities don't know how to use technology or websites, when in fact they do know what they're doing, and the issue is more about others' assumptions about what people with disabilities need.
- Hannah also noted the frequent question of why websites need to be accessible, noting pushback about the extra work and cost involved in making websites accessible to people with disabilities.
- **Mike Rogers** emphasized that for people with developmental disabilities, both infrastructure and knowledge are critical because many people lack technology due to cost, may only have phone access where applications don't work well, or have access to devices but lack the knowledge to use them effectively.
- **Jeffrey Zane Hansen** noted the myth that youth are naturals at technology and don't need training, at least for basic skills (the "digital native" myth).
- **Andy Strohmeier** highlighted hearing repeatedly that digital inequity compounds every other inequity, emphasizing the intersectional nature of digital exclusion.
- **Hex Kleinmartin** observed that people aren't educated enough on digital literacy to understand why lack of infrastructure is an issue for others, contributing to the myth that internet is ubiquitous and everyone has it.
- **Megan Battista** raised the objection that telehealth isn't ideal, noting pushback when discussing digital barriers to kids accessing services.
- **Hannah Brecher** mentioned challenges in the deaf community around closed captioning and the need for websites to improve closed captioning functionality.
- Andy Strohmeier noted that access to patient portals is a game changer in healthcare, highlighting the importance of digital access in this context.

- The group discussed telehealth billing and insurance issues, with Mike Rogers sharing that his provider no longer offers telehealth due to insurance company difficulties, and Jackie Hovey sharing experience with unexpected bills when switching to telehealth despite supposed coverage.
- Andy confirmed that much of the telehealth reimbursement authorization that was expanded during COVID has ended and needs renewal from regulators to continue as a standard service.
- Andy also emphasized the accessibility challenges with patient portals as a significant concern.
- Don noted that the best approach for digital equity advocacy is to link arms with groups working on adjacent issues rather than working in isolation, citing telehealth as both an internet issue and a healthcare issue where collaboration would strengthen both efforts.
- Don committed to taking the identified myths and objections and consolidating them into dominant narratives that can be addressed with data and experience in the strategic case.

Strategic Case for Digital Equity: Two Futures Statement

- Don introduced the "Two Futures" concept, explaining that behavioral economics research shows people are more responsive to losing things than gaining things, so the strategic case should paint a picture of both what is gained if digital equity is achieved and what is lost if it is not.
- **What We Gain Future:** Don presented a statement describing what happens when the digital divide is closed: "When we close the digital divide, Western New York gains what every thriving region needs: the conditions for everyone to participate fully. Healthcare reaches patients who couldn't access it before, not just in cities, but in the rural corners of the region where a specialist was always a long drive away. Small businesses compete regionally and globally, and workers can pursue employment on their own terms. Nonprofits and community organizations coordinate more effectively, multiplying their reach. Government services become accessible to the people who need them most. And a Western New York where everyone can fully participate online attracts the people, talent, and investment that grows its success."
- Coalition members generally responded positively to the "what we gain" statement, with several giving thumbs up and affirmative feedback.
- **CJ Banks** raised an important point about remote work bringing financial value to communities because people can now work remotely for higher-paying jobs in other locations (like California) while remaining in Western New York and spending that money locally, rather than having to move away for career opportunities.
- Don validated this point and noted it could be captured as "remote work brings new dollars into our economy."
- Christine Carr-Barmasse emphasized this applies not just within the U.S. but globally, expanding economic opportunities.

- **Heidi Ziemer** (via chat) noted that the language "workers can pursue employment on their own terms" addresses some of CJ's concerns about the financial benefits.
- CJ Banks expressed concern that while individual equity value is addressed, there needs to be a stronger emphasis on financial value for stakeholders who control funding, as they want to know about the money and financial return on investment.
- Don acknowledged this feedback but noted that financial value may be more relevant when customizing the case for specific stakeholders rather than in the core case that needs to work across all audiences, and invited other Coalition members to weigh in on whether financial benefits should be more explicitly woven into the core statement.
- **What We Lose Future:** Don presented a statement describing what happens if the digital divide is not closed: "If Western New York fails to close the digital divide, we lose ground. Workers lose access to today's high-paying remote jobs. Small businesses lose their competitive edge before they enter the race. Communities with the most to gain—people with disabilities, older adults, rural residents—are forced to stay on the sidelines. Community organizations spend their time bridging gaps instead of delivering on mission. The region keeps hemorrhaging people, talent, and potential to places that have done the work to bridge the digital divide."
- **Mike Rogers** suggested the "stay on the sidelines" language needs to be more specific and stronger, noting that so much has shifted from paper to digital that it's not just being left on the sidelines but has become a safety threat, as people can no longer even ask for paper versions and are required to use online systems (such as medical portals for prescription renewals).
- Don acknowledged this as a great point, suggesting the language could be strengthened from "on the sidelines" to "out of the game entirely."
- Mike emphasized that people with internet access don't realize this is happening, and even elderly people's relatives may not realize they're not accessing services because they're stubborn about not being able to use technology or only have flip phones.
- **Andy Strohmeier** (via chat) noted that the "what we lose" statement doesn't include a healthcare angle to parallel the healthcare opening in the "what we gain" statement.
- **Hannah Brecher** (via chat) contributed: "people with dynavox's to talk with would be silent" as an example of what would be lost.

Strategic Case for Digital Equity: Building the Bridge

- Don introduced the concept of "building the bridge" to explain why digital equity is the critical solution for achieving the Coalition's core values (equity, dignity and respect, education and learning, collaboration and connection).

- The key question to answer is: When thinking about all the different ways to pursue these values, why is digital equity the way forward?
- Don asked Coalition members to complete the sentence: "Digital equity is the non-negotiable foundation for our work, because without it _____."
- A form was shared for members to submit their responses: <https://wnydec.link/bridge>
- **Hannah Brecher** responded: "rural communities miss out on opportunities."
- **Hex Kleinmartin** responded: "people can't access all of the vast amount of information and opportunities that the internet can offer them."
- **Ann Battaglia** (via chat) responded: "access to digital tools and the internet is no longer a luxury—it's a basic requirement for participating in modern life."
- Members were encouraged to submit multiple responses and to include anything else they want considered as the bridge section is developed.
- Due to time constraints, extensive discussion of the bridge concept was deferred to the next meeting.

Next Steps and Action Items

- **Coalition members** should complete the "Building the Bridge" form at <https://wnydec.link/bridge> before the next meeting to help develop why digital equity is the non-negotiable foundation for the Coalition's work.
- **Don Matteson** will consolidate the identified digital equity myths and objections into dominant narratives that can be addressed with data and experience in the strategic case.
- **Don Matteson** will send reminders about completing the bridge form before the next meeting.
- **Don Matteson** will register for tabling at DD Day to raise awareness of digital inclusion resources and accessibility tools for people with disabilities, and is seeking Coalition members to join in tabling and to share relevant resources.
- **Don Matteson** will check with the Finger Lakes Digital Inclusion Coalition about tabling at the SANYS regional conference to avoid stepping on their territory, and if they're not interested, may register the Western New York Coalition to table.
- **Coalition members** interested in tabling at DD Day, SANYS conference, or Disability Pride should contact the relevant organizers.
- At the next meeting, the group will discuss systemic villains (framing systems rather than individuals as the problem) and anchoring and credentialing solutions with data.