

WNY Digital Equity Coalition Full-Member Meeting Notes

2026-05-20

Attendance

- Megan Battista; Learning and Advocacy Coordinator; Liftoff WNY
- Christine Carr-Barmasse; Executive Director; Mission: Ignite
- Trent Hamilton; Coalition Community Member; Entrepreneur School of Thought
- Steve Heist; VP, Information Technology & CIO; OneBridge Benefits
- Jacqueline Hovey; System Adult Outreach Services - TechKnow Lab; Buffalo & Erie County Library
- 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
- Fileve Palmer; Regional Development Specialist; Southern Tier West Regional Planning and Development Board
- Katie Pieri; Director; Nonprofit Support Group
- Colleen Reedy; Director of Talent Solutions; Per Scholas Buffalo
- Ian Sommerfelt; Program Assistant; Center for Self Advocacy
- Andy Strohmeier; Integrating Special Populations Coordinator, Clinical and Translational Research Center; University at Buffalo
- Liz Warkentin; Senior Education Manager; Mission: Ignite

Announcements

- **Hex Kleinmartin** shared multiple upcoming digital literacy events and workshops in Niagara County and surrounding areas, including programs at John A Duke Senior Citizens Center, SUNY ATTAIN Lab, University Express locations, Tuscarora Nation Health Center, Lancaster Senior Citizens Center, and Summit View Place.
- **Colleen Reedy** announced that Per Scholas graduated their latest IT support help desk professionals class on Monday and has several graduates actively seeking employment in IT support, entry-level, and tech-adjacent roles, noting that participants completed a solid 13-week, five-day-a-week program focusing on CompTIA A-plus certification, Google IT Support, and ServiceNow.

- **Christine Carr-Barmasse** announced an open house on June 11th starting at 5:30 PM for cocktails and networking, followed by a facility tour showcasing resources available for nonprofits, community members, and how Mission: Ignite can support digital inclusion, digital adoption, and digital skills training.
- **Don Matteson** reminded attendees about the upcoming convening on June 15th at Niagara University from 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM (with breakfast and networking at 8:30 AM), noting that approximately a dozen people have registered with a goal of reaching 20-25 or possibly 30 attendees. The June convening will replace the regular online monthly meeting for June.

Strategic Casemaking: Bridge Statement

- Don presented a draft bridge statement addressing why digital equity is the non-negotiable foundation for Western New York's success, synthesizing responses from previous surveys.
- The draft statement emphasized that digital equity enables young people to enter adulthood prepared for the future, creates economic prosperity opportunities, provides access to innovations designed to help underserved populations, supports engaged citizenry, and accelerates various community agendas.
- **Brett Lawton** raised concerns that the statement appeared tilted toward young people and students, questioning whether it adequately represented the coalition's commitment to serving all age demographics.
- **Hex Kleinmartin** pointed out the challenge of balancing the heavy focus on job-related and education-driven digital equity work (which often drives funding) with the needs of seniors and people outside the workforce.
- Don acknowledged the feedback and committed to revising the Bridge statement to broaden age representation, incorporate more demographics beyond workforce-focused populations, and de-emphasize (while still including) workforce elements.

Strategic Casemaking: Making Systems the Villain

- Don led a discussion on "making systems the villain" to avoid the advocacy traps of backfires (triggering defensiveness), backpacks (token solutions), and bedtime stories (outdated beliefs preventing meaningful action).
- The exercise focused on identifying where people are being locked out or excluded from systems that assume they are already digitally connected.
- Participants identified multiple examples of exclusionary assumptions across various sectors:
 - **Healthcare:** Systems assume people have cell/broadband service and devices to access healthcare, that portals are mobile-friendly (when they often aren't), that seniors have

- technological resources and skills to navigate medical, insurance, and mental health portals, and that alternatives to telehealth exist in rural communities.
- **Commerce:** Businesses eliminating cash payment options and requiring online reservations or electronic payments.
 - **Employment:** Job application systems assuming fair and equal access to online opportunities and resources.
 - **Travel:** Air travel, hotel booking, car rental, and flight changes all assuming digital access and literacy.
 - **Government Services:** Assumptions that people can navigate complex digital systems to access public services.
 - **Digital Safety:** Assumptions that people can navigate well enough to avoid online scams.
- Christine Carr-Barmasse noted the fundamental assumption that having a phone equals knowing how to use all digital systems, and that people with knowledge and access don't understand the barriers faced by those without.
 - Ian Sommerfelt emphasized that having a phone or internet does not automatically mean someone knows how to navigate healthcare portals, insurance systems, or online resources.
 - Brett Lawton highlighted that small non-profit healthcare organizations lack the resources to maintain both electronic and non-electronic access systems simultaneously.
 - Jacqueline Hovey raised the issue of people being referred to libraries for digital help instead of agencies helping their own "customers" directly.

Strategic Case-Making: Identifying Systemic Villains

- Don facilitated brainstorming to name the systems creating barriers to digital equity, noting that systems must be named concretely to be addressed effectively.
- Participants proposed various systemic issues:
 - **Technology evolution/Digital mindset:** The rapid pace of technological change outpacing people's ability to consume and learn new systems.
 - **Digital invisibility:** Systems designed for resourced populations that don't consider people with additional barriers.
 - **Misaligned incentive structures:** Economic incentives that don't align with universal access goals, such as ISPs not building infrastructure in areas with lower profit potential, and politicians gaining political points for one-size-fits-all policies that address emotional aspects rather than difficult implementation challenges.
 - **Digital diffusion/osmosis:** The way digital technology has permeated nearly every aspect of life.

- **Out-of-touch policymakers:** Those with power and privilege, policymakers and planners who may benefit from arrangements favoring certain businesses, but who are generally under-informed rather than maliciously intended (as Megan Battista noted).
- **Information overload and misinformation:** The difficulty of distinguishing quality information from noise, misinformation, and incorrect information.
- Don referenced work by Amy Brombos through the New York State Digital Equity Network, which analyzed the governor's State of the State document to identify digital inclusion assumptions underlying every major initiative, concluding that nearly every proposal presumes a level of digital access and fluency that millions of New Yorkers do not currently have.
- Steve Heist described a "closed digital system that places political views and profits over fair and equal access to 'publicly available' resources that are 'privilege available' to only those that can afford them."
- Christine Carr-Barmasse noted that ISPs are not aligned with a "build it and they will come" philosophy and pointed out the funding relationships between ISPs and politicians, and the lack of regulations outside of "faster and more."
- Lisa Keck highlighted the defunding of social infrastructure projects and the privatization and individualization of needs to benefit capitalist systems, emphasizing that "economy is not the end all be all."
- The discussion synthesized three primary themes: **misaligned incentives, ongoing stratification/compounding inequalities, and out-of-touch policymakers.**

Next Steps and Future Convening Agenda

- Don committed to synthesizing the discussion and revising the bridge statement to address the identified gaps in age representation and non-workforce populations.
- Don will work on naming and defining the systemic villain based on the meeting discussion.
- Don will send out the full stack of Strategic Casemaking work completed to date before the June 15th convening so attendees can review the developing narrative.
- The June 15th convening agenda will include:
 - Finalizing the strategic case for digital equity.
 - **Anchoring and credentialing solutions:** Identifying how the coalition addresses the systemic challenges identified.
 - **Social math exercises:** Putting costs and benefits into everyday terms people can understand.
 - **Results-based accountability (RBA) work:** Developing performance measurement metrics.
 - Assessing the past year's work based on outcomes from the 2025 convening goals.

- Don requested that attendees bring the following to the convening:
 - High-level data about the communities they serve.
 - Their organization's specific value proposition (what they do that nobody else can do in their community or region).
 - Program data including numbers served, costs, and outcomes showing how people benefited.
- Don expressed excitement about potential uses for the completed strategic case, including creating a series of small videos about the coalition, social media collateral, and frameworks for arguments to bring to different stakeholders to encourage engagement in digital equity work.