



To: Health Equity Task Force
Re: Digital Equity and Inclusion

Co-chairs Michael Curry and Dr. Assaad Sayah, Senators, Representatives and staff, we thank you for the critical and collective work to advance health equity during this time. We also appreciate that you identified cross-sector digital equity as the subject of an expert panel invited to comment at a recent hearing. On behalf of the hundreds of organizations and communities that partner with and support the Massachusetts Healthy Aging Collaborative, we are writing to encourage the inclusion of older adults as part of any cross-sector and cooperative approach to achieving digital equity.

Simply put, technology is a social determinant of health. Where we reside matters for our health, well-being and even impacts our longevity. Likewise, our access to affordable and reliable internet, as well as aptitude in device usage can influence whether we can work remotely, conduct a telehealth visit, and socialize with friends and family. According to research from Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) with support from the Humana Foundation, Massachusetts is grouped with states in the second highest quartile for broadband disparity by age when comparing older adults age 65+ and adults age 18-64 (the disparity of this quartile ranges from 15.3%-17.5%).

During the pandemic, the importance of internet access and skill with technology has been fully realized. While social isolation and loneliness have long been issues of concern for older adults, people of all ages now have a very real understanding of social separation and the role technology can play in keeping people connected.

The opportunities are immense for bringing about a cross-sector strategy that addresses equity across all communities and across all ages. As such, we offer the following thoughts and suggestions based on our work with engaging a broad continuum of organizational partners, municipalities and older adults all over the Commonwealth.

- Any approach to addressing digital equity should not only consider older adults, but all sectors of a community including, but certainly not limited to schools, libraries, public and subsidized housing, healthcare, local government, business, faith communities and councils on aging. In other words, people of all ages interact and engage with all parts of community life, so we need to consider the entire community or any approach we take will risk falling short.
- Any programs from internet service providers focusing on low-income populations must be fast and reliable for the consumer to utilize video chat and other vital functions for remote work, remote learning and telehealth. The programs should also loosen any restrictions to allow for easier enrollment. Additionally, these programs must also be promoted across all communities given research from the Essex County Community Foundation that “families with incomes under \$35,000 struggle with digital access, regardless of whether they live in affluent or economically disadvantaged places.”

- Older adults live in a variety of residential settings and many live in an intergenerational household. Many still are responsible for raising grandchildren or care for their adult children. These facts should be taken into account when we think about and craft policies and programs promoting access to internet and devices, as well as digital literacy, among school-aged children and older adults alike.
- Internet access is an equity issue. OATS and Humana research also found that, if you are over 65 and lack a high school diploma, live in poverty, are non-White or foreign-born, live alone, suffer from poor health or physical disability, are female, or live in a rural area, then digital privation is likely added to any burdens you endure.
- According to UMass Boston's Gerontology Institute, single older adults in Massachusetts are among the most economically insecure compared to peers across the country. Technology represents an opportunity to connect older adults to food, transportation, medical services, socialization, civic engagement and informational resources.
- Skill-building policies and programs can be flexible and use existing community strengths. Some communities utilize high school students as community tech support and others have library staff and computer facilities that help educate residents, including older adults. Such programs should also promote the benefits and value technology can have for older adults, including accessing a growing list of virtual opportunities for socialization, remote work and volunteerism and physical fitness.
- During normal times, and especially during the pandemic, we rely on technology for improving government transparency. Those without access to internet cannot access public meetings on the state and local levels. The census and the initial phase of COVID-19 vaccine registration are two recent examples of a heightened convenience people with internet service had over those that do not.
- With a growing number of technology and internet consumers, there is a growing risk of fraud and scams. We suggest policies and programs to expand internet access, affordability and literacy consider privacy and safety concerns and involve state agencies and offices that already work to educate older adults and consumers of all ages to prevent these malicious acts from occurring (Attorney General's Office, Office of the State Treasurer, Office of Consumer Affairs and Business Regulations, and District Attorneys).
- There is an additional equity concern that data caps imposed by internet service providers would have a disproportionate impact on many different households, including multigenerational households and older adults. While some internet service providers have suspended data caps during the pandemic, older adults and multigenerational households will continue to rely on technology for a range of needs and uses.

- Many older adults are proficient users of technology and can serve as a resource to their peers. We should be recognizing the potential contributions everyone can make to address the digital divide.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments and please let us know if we can be helpful in advising or supporting this work moving forward.

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