

What Your Library Needs to Know: Developing Your State Digital Equity Capacity Grant Funding Program!

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The Digital Equity Act (DEA) allocates \$2.75 billion over three grant programs to promote digital inclusion and ensure that all communities can access and use affordable, reliable, high-speed internet to meet their needs and improve their lives.

The first program supported the development of state digital equity plans. The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) has approved all state digital equity plans and released the [Notice of Funding Opportunity](#) (NOFO) for the second program: State Capacity Grants (Program), in late March 2024.

In the coming year, states will begin implementing their digital equity plans through these capacity grants. The implementation process for each state will be on different timelines and [with different funding amounts](#) based on a formula established by the NTIA. Grants will fund programs to achieve and sustain the state's digital equity goals.

Libraries are well positioned to assist states in achieving their goals and receive funding to support and expand their digital equity work. This document will assist libraries in developing a program idea, identifying program partners, formalizing relationships, and building a program proposal with collaborators and stakeholders that align with the Program requirements and the state's digital equity goals.

How to Prepare for the State's Capacity Grants

States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico had until May 28, 2024, to apply for their Capacity Grant funding. Once funds are awarded by NTIA, states will likely announce funding opportunities to implement their digital equity plans at the state, regional, and/or local levels. Each state will determine its own process for releasing funding and likely will have varying deadlines to apply. States have up to nine months from the award date to submit to NTIA the Specific Projects that will be part of their implementation strategy for this round of funding (NOFO p. 28); however, states can submit that list sooner if they choose. Future NOFOs are expected to make an additional \$300 million available in fiscal years 2025 and 2026 (NOFO, p.4).

There are steps your library can start taking now, however, to get ready to apply when your state's funding opportunities are announced later in the year.

If you think your library or coalition will submit a proposal to your [State Broadband Office](#) for funding, we recommend reaching out to them soon so that you are on their radar! Share information by email and/or schedule a meeting to learn more about how the funding will be distributed, strategize with them how the work your library does (or could do) can be leveraged to advance the state's digital equity goals and advocate on your behalf.

Step 1: Read Your [State's Digital Equity Plan](#) So You Can Align Your Program with Your State's Plan. If your state's plan is not listed, [visit your state broadband office website](#) for updates. Each plan includes:

- The state's vision for digital equity goals and strategies.
- Key performance indicators (KPIs) will be used to measure progress.
- A list of unique assets, plans, and programs that promote digital equity for each [covered population](#).
- A needs assessment.
- The strategy and key activities that will inform the implementation process.

Review the State's plan to see how libraries are included. Identify how your library's services and programs align with the State's digital inclusion goals. Start to think about the details of what you could do to reach the goals you identify as relevant for your library/community if you had the necessary support. You may also want to contact the State Library to learn more about how they are engaged in the statewide digital equity efforts and what support they might provide as you develop your program idea.

Your proposal should support the goals of the Program, including (NOFO, p. 33)

- Focus on serving covered populations.
- Long-lasting and meaningful change that addresses the systemic barriers and gaps to digital access.
- Measurable implementation strategies.
- Engaging stakeholders who are directly affected by the proposed strategies and interventions (i.e., covered populations).

Your proposal(s) will also need to reflect the goals and/or address gaps in the State's plan. If you notice a local community need not identified in your state plan, contact your state [broadband office](#). NTIA allows states to use up to 20% of their grant amount to update and maintain their plans. If you see a gap in the plan the library and partners could address to improve digital equity for covered populations in your state, you can make the case for an update to the state's plan.

Step 2: Explore the Digital Equity Ecosystem in Your Community.

Reading your state’s digital equity plan is a great way to learn more about the state’s goals and identify barriers, assets, and potential partners. However, dig deeper and learn more about the community you serve, especially if you are thinking of a proposal to support [covered populations](#) at the local level. Asset mapping helps community organizations like libraries identify resources, barriers, and gaps in service, build partnerships, and plan for future work.

Check to see if an asset map has been conducted locally. There may be a regional, county or city-level digital inclusion office or a coalition that has already created an asset map or digital equity plan. Connect with these groups! If you can’t find an asset inventory, consider conducting one. Check out these resources to help you get started:

- [Asset Mapping: Data Equity Gathering Best Practices](#) from the NTIA
- [Asset Mapping for Digital Inclusion](#) from the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA)

Step 3: Identify Your Role

After reviewing the state’s plan and exploring your local digital equity ecosystem, identify where your library can make the most impact in advancing the state’s implementation plan. What are your library’s strengths? What are your digital equity goals? What expertise and experience do you bring that will advance digital equity in your community? What services do you currently offer that need additional capacity to meet the community's need? How can you work with one or more partners to fill gaps in service? If your capacity is already limited, can you participate in a joint application with other libraries and/or digital equity providers? What programs could be developed to support one or more covered populations? NTIA provides some examples of eligible activities, and they include (NOFO p. 34-35)

- Digital literacy and skills training.
- Device distribution programs. Important note: Digital literacy and skills training must be an integral part of any device distribution program to ensure that the beneficiaries receive training on how to use the devices effectively.
- Economic development.
- Online access to health and mental wellness services.
- E-government and civic engagement.
- Online accessibility.
- Access to affordable broadband services.

Reflect on these questions and activities as you begin to identify which program idea(s) you want to explore further. In addition, one of the Program goals is to “co-create the conditions necessary for long-lasting and meaningful change to ensure a sustainable future.” (p. 3) so you should also start to think about how you can sustain the program once the grant ends.

Step 4: Identify Collaborators and Stakeholders

One of the program goals includes “Engaging stakeholders who are directly affected by the proposed strategies and interventions” (NOFO, p. 33). That means proposals must include partnerships that strengthen the project goals and representation including leadership of the covered population you wish to reach.

- What partnerships do you already have that could be leveraged?
- What local, state or regional partnership can be leveraged?
- Are there organizations you respect but have not partnered with yet?
- Which organizations can connect you to and/or represent the covered population(s) your library wants to reach?
- Which groups in your community support digital equity work but may not categorize themselves as digital equity organizations, such as churches, food pantries, parks, etc.?
- Which collaborators and stakeholders can provide community connections, resources, expertise, etc., that you do not have to boost your library’s capacity and improve the program's effectiveness and reach?
- Which stakeholders are directly affected by the proposal? How will they be engaged in the planning process? How will you continue to engage them and incorporate their feedback during the program?
- Which partners can help sustain the program after the Program is done?

Reach out to these potential stakeholders and explore potential partnerships. Here are some resources to help you get started.

- [Digital Inclusion Coalition Guidebook](#) from NDIA
- [Digital Equity Community Outreach and Engagement](#) from NTIA
- [New Digital Equity Act Population Viewer Shows Broadband Access and Demographic Characteristics](#) from the United States Census Bureau

In addition, consider reaching out to your state library or regional library consortium to identify if there are any existing plans and resources e.g. data dashboards, reports, etc. that you can leverage to achieve your digital equity goals.

Step 5: Start Planning with Collaborators and Stakeholders

Start building your program proposal with your collaborators and stakeholders.

1. Identify the project scope.
2. Decide and document what role each partner and stakeholder will play.
 - a. Who has the programmatic expertise?
 - b. Who can do the evaluation?
 - c. Who has space and technology?
 - d. Who can manage and administer the program?
 - e. Who has the capacity to manage the federal reporting requirements?
 - f. What other assets do partners bring that will strengthen the program, support the digital equity plan strategy in the short term, and set it up for long-term success?
 - g. Formalize your partnerships for the proposed project with an agreement like a memorandum of understanding (MOU).
3. Identify measurable goals.
 - a. What are your program goals? Are they measurable, achievable, sustainable, timebound, and designed to address identified disparities directly and logically?
 - b. How will you measure progress toward achieving short-term and long-term goals, both qualitatively and quantitatively?
 - c. What data will you need to collect, how will it be collected, and where will it be stored?
 - d. How will you gather the necessary data while still protecting patron privacy?
 - e. The digital equity plan includes the state's goals. As you develop your proposal, consider how you will measure your program's outcomes in relation to the state plan.

Step 6: Stay Informed

1. **Check your [state's broadband office website](#)** for updates and see if they have a newsletter you can sign up for to keep up with the latest news. The office or its partners may also provide opportunities to connect virtually and in person, webinars about their activities, meeting updates, resource, and more. You may also want to reach out to the state office that created the digital capacity plan and advocate on your behalf. Finally, reach out to the State Library to learn how they are engaged in the state's digital equity efforts and what assistance they can provide you.
2. **Watch [Building Your Digital Equity Capacity](#)** and other archived webinars from NTIA.
3. **Watch [NDIA's Senior Programs Manager Paolo Balboa's plenary session at Net Inclusion 2024](#)**, where he discusses the Digital Equity Act and the steps to take to

prepare for the grant process. The [slides](#) are available. NDIA also [posted a summary of the program](#).

4. **Review ALA's** resource [What Your Library Needs to Know: Technical Requirements for Seeking State Digital Equity Capacity Grant Funding!](#) which provides an overview of the State Digital Equity Capacity Grant [Notice of Funding Opportunity \(NOFO\)](#) and [grant application materials](#).
5. **Check out ALA's** [Digital Equity Resources for Libraries web page](#), which includes best practices, toolkits, guides, best practices, and resources from libraries and partner organizations to support your digital equity work.

These steps will help you collaboratively design digitally equitable programs for groups within your community who have been disproportionately impacted by digital inequity. Libraries have been doing this work for decades and have the resources, expertise, experience, and community connections to leverage these funds. ALA strongly encourages libraries to connect with partners to leverage these funding opportunities. Begin planning now so you are ready to work with your local digital equity coalition to leverage state funds to build a digitally inclusive community today that is sustained in the years to come.

Digital Equity Competitive Grant Program

In addition to the funds states will make available at the local level to support digital equity, the federal government also will announce the Digital Equity Competitive Grant Program in 2024. Libraries will be eligible to apply directly for this \$1.25 billion grant funding administered by the NTIA to support digital equity initiatives. ALA will continue to add updates as information becomes available.