



Digital Equity Planning Past, Present & Future

January 23, 2024



Digital Equity Planning: Past, Present, and Future Next Century Cities Webinar - January 23, 2024

Corian Zacher: Thank you all so much for coming. We're really excited to be here to talk about digital equity planning, especially with so many states that have put their plan out for comment. A lot have wrapped up the comment period. And a lot of local governments are also thinking about how they can be a part of the process, including some who already have digital equity plans established, those that are planning now, and those that are just getting started for the first time, so we're really excited to have so many wonderful allies with us.

We've got people from the Next Century Cities team who will start off with just a little bit of an intro, and then later on, we'll get into our panel with Amy Huffman from NDIA, Grace Tepper from Benton, Leah Mims from the Tennessee Broadband Office, and Brian, from the City of Boston.

So, just to get us started. If we could just do a quick round of intros with the NCC team, and sorry Stacey, I'll have you hold off for the panel to introduce yourself. Andy you want to take it away?

Andy Stutzman, NCC: Sure, yeah. Thank you everyone. I'm Andy Stutzman, I'm the Executive Director of Next Century Cities, going on my fifth month now, fourth month now. So proud of the team and what we've put together today, and just to see the great response. I think we've had close to 140 people registered for this event today, and I think the topic's really critical, and thanks to our guests today as well part of this too, so thank you, everyone.

Brittany-Rae Gregory, NCC: Hi, everyone. I'm Brittany Rae Gregory, and I'm the Communications Director at NCC. I have been with the team almost four years now, so I obviously really like it here, but very excited to be having this conversation with y'all today.

Ryan Johnston, NCC: Good afternoon, everybody, or good morning, depending on where you're coming from. My name is Ryan Johnston, and I'm the Senior Policy Counsel for Federal Programs here at Next Century Cities. I've been with the team much like Brittany Rae about almost four years, it'll be four years in March, and I'm very excited for the discussion that we're going to have today.

Thank you.

Corian Zacher: I'm Corian Zacher, Senior Policy Counsel for State and Local Initiatives. I'm super excited to be helping organize this webinar. I'm going to turn it back over to Ryan really quickly. If you could just give us an overview of what's happening at the federal level and what people need to keep an eye out for.

Ryan Johnston, NCC: Yeah, absolutely, there is a lot going on at the moment. So, as of yesterday morning, we officially have rules from the Federal Communications Commission on the digital discrimination, or digital redlining, rules that they were proceeding that they were started last year, but effectively finished the comment period at the end of last year, and now we have rules.

Yesterday marks the beginning of a 10 day period where anyone who is interested will have 10 days to file potential lawsuits against the FCC, so we're expecting to see some movement around that, just depending on who is filing. It'll be very interesting to see what issues folks are interested in pushing back against.

So, that will happen, but, as of right this very second, we are expecting the FCC to start making changes, making updates to their consumer complaint portal, all surrounding digital discrimination, and how that is impacting communities nationwide. So, if there are certain things that your residents are bringing to you, or that you are noticing in your communities, as you are beginning to gear up for the deployments, this is now certainly the time to start sending both that information to your state broadband offices, as well as to the FCC as well.

That said, we are also about five days off of the deadline for the reply comments for the second round, or I guess this current round, of net neutrality comments. The FCC decided last year that it would reinstate the broadband Internet access service or BIA service as a telecommunication service, which would allow it to apply its rules to broadband only providers a little bit more stringently than it was able to do in the past, so, therefore, we're looking at how the FCC is going to do that now. We've had comments, reply comments, and now we're in the phase where we're waiting for what those final rules are going to look like.

So, if there are things on that docket that are of interest to anyone, we have some materials available for that, and I'm happy to share those with anyone who might be interested.

And then I will say really quickly, finally, we are also in the middle of the implementation period for the broadband consumer nutrition label, that is one of the biggest things that happened last year. Any provider that creates a new broadband plan after October of 2022 is required to create a broadband nutrition label for that, where they are required to say what the price of that is, what the general network management statistics for that are, so what your speed will be, what your average latency will be, things like that, and then have a pretty significant breakdown of the prices, so what your base price is, what your taxes and fees should be, what those fees are, and then what, if any, discounts are being applied to that.

So we are currently, like I said, in the middle of implementation for that, and really what we're looking at is the large providers, like our major mobile carriers, or the major fiber providers, or the folks like Comcast or Charter or Spectrum, what have you, will be required to have that done by April or May, and then the smaller third party resellers, and smaller local providers or regional providers, will have until November of this year to get those labels sorted out and made available to their consumers.

Those all have to be available at the point of sale, which means if you go to a brick and mortar store, or you go online, as soon as you are about to click the purchase button, you have to be able to see that label in its entirety without jumping through any hoops to get to it.

So, I think those are really the 3 biggest digital equity pieces that are on the table right now, but there's certainly a whole lot more going on at the state level.

So, I'll turn it back to you, Corian.

Corian Zacher: Thanks, and yeah, obviously there's a lot happening at the federal level, I think also everyone right now is thinking about their own state's plan. No matter where you're at, your state has a plan. It's either done with comment, or if you're in one of the few states on the screen, California, Arkansas, Illinois, Arizona, Iowa, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island, and I think there are a couple of others that are not on here, that you still have time to comment on, definitely these few. Even if it's just a few words, I think taking time to read your state's plan and make sure that you're... I know that Benton has a great article about what you should be looking for.

If you don't have a lot of time, just making sure to say what's missing, who's not included that needs to be there, and how people can work together to really understand what you're looking for, make it a sustainable solution in the long run, are some of the big things that I've been hearing from community leaders. I'm sure we'll get into lots more from our panelists later on.

For now, though, really excited to have Brittany Rae to talk a little bit about communications around digital equity planning and just equity in general.

Brittany-Rae Gregory, NCC: Hi, everyone. So I'm, again, communications director at Next Century Cities, and when I'm not doing daily comms for Next Century Cities, where we do try to focus on equity in our communications, I'm researching things related to equity. So, this is right up my alley, and this is very important to my ability later on.

So, whatever your equity looks like, you want to make sure that you're intentional about how you're communicating with the communities that you intend to serve, and also ensuring that your communication is good, because you have good intentions and you want it to be. You want to get across what you want to get to these particular communities and populations, but equity based communications always acknowledges these 5 things.

That systemic racism and inequities exist. That people have individual experiences and disparities that affect their day to day lives. You want to make sure that communications follow the expertise and the voices of authentic community members. So, again, you're not necessarily speaking at people, but really truly trying to have a cohesive communication with them. You want to make sure that you're investing in community infrastructure and solving for particular barriers and gaps that exist.

Something that you want to always think about, as you are working on creating communications plans, whether big or small, because you can have obviously a big plan that's maybe looking at the whole year, you might have a small plan that feeds into the larger goals of your organization or your operation, is how can you [Inaudible] fostering an equity centered communications plan?

These are a few things that I'm choosing to highlight, you want to be interacting with local leaders, also think about other advocates, and if you're not sure of who those advocates are, really looking in non-traditional places, and also influential residents. So people that are vocal about what's happening in the community. The more non-traditional, in my opinion, the better.

You want to make sure that you're connecting with media and influencers on your beat, this is where social media really comes into play. Because of social media, we know it's been around for quite some time now, a lot of people who may not have had the platform to elevate their voices now have platforms, and people that listen to what they're saying. So, even aside from legacy publications, you want to make sure that you're finding people who are, again, speaking out on behalf of the communities that you're serving.

Social media is a great place to start, and I would suggest that you use layman's terms when you're searching public conversations for sentiments. So, like I have here, instead of maybe using something that's a very jargon when you're looking for public

conversation, like Digital Divide Huntsville, maybe you can get really down to the basics, and just put, like, no internet Huntsville, and you'll find conversations online about people talking about what their issues are in your community.

So you just want to make sure that language that you're using is lifting communities, in all senses. When you're talking about someone's identity and culture, it's preferred that you ask them how they would like to be identified. You want to use people first language. So, instead of, for example, saying disabled person, you might say a person with differing abilities.

You want to keep in mind that terminology does change frequently. So, every few months, always checking back to ensure that you're using the most up-to-date terms to describe populations, especially marginalized populations. You also want to make sure that you're writing with the 6th to 8th grade reading level in mind.

These are just some helpful resources, that you all can use to ensure that you're up on current language, and that you're really working to center your community and your communications.

Thank you.

Corian Zacher: Alright, and now is the moment we've all been waiting for. Andy, did you want to do just quickly jump in and say what's important for someone who's a practitioner to pick up on from this conversation? Or is there anything that we would feel helpful to know before jumping into this?

Andy Stutzman, NCC: Yeah, thanks, Corian.

As a practitioner, as many folks know, I ran digital navigator programs in Philly and have been involved in that work for quite a long time. States are talking about planning for digital navigator programs, planning for digital skills programs through their digital equity plans, and that's something important for communities and organizations to pay attention to, where that funding is going, and also looking for specificity on that as well. A lot of the plans we're seeing right now are a little bit vague in many ways, and they don't necessarily explain what digital navigators are, so looking for more specificity on that, because digital navigators do different work depending on what organization they're coming out of, so we see that a lot too.

And then just making sure that states talking about being intentional about working with the communities they're in, that's something that definitely be looking for, talking to communities about what their needs are before just assuming that. Some of that work has gone on already with some of the outreach that's been going on through the state broadband offices, but not always to the extent that it needs to be done before this work's done.

So, and the other thing I'm just encouraging states and folks that as they're going through this is, Okay. Don't talk about creating resources necessarily, talk about trying to find, using existing resources as well, and talk to partner organizations that are currently doing the work and see what resources they have and what their needs are as well.

So, try not to start from scratch, there's a lot of resources out there. A lot of folks that can partner with on doing this work going forward too.

But great. I'm so glad to hear the panel here today and I'll let you take it from here.

Stacey Baxter, NCC: Thank you. I want to introduce myself. I'm Stacey Baxter, I'm the program manager for Next Century Cities. I'm very excited to be here and to welcome our panelists, and we are so appreciative that they're here today. We have Grace Tepper from the Benton Institute for Broadband and Society, Amy Huffman from the National Digital Inclusion Alliance, also known as NDIA, Leah Mims from Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development, and last, but certainly not least, someone very special to NCC's heart, our former Deputy Director, who now is Brian Donoghue at the City of Boston in Massachusetts.

Thank you all for being here today, we're so excited to talk with you guys, and to hear a little bit more about your inputs on state digital equity plans. We do have a few questions geared up for you, and we also have some audience questions that we're hoping to get to. So, without further ado, maybe we can take down our slides, there we go, and show our panelists here.

So, the first question, and feel free to jump in whenever you feel the need to answer, is what sticks out to you from your state plans, or the plans that you've reviewed? Is there anything that you were surprised to see in those digital equity plans?

Amy Huffman, NDIA: I'll jump in Stacey. I think Grace is the one amongst us that has reviewed more plans than anyone else, so she can probably speak most eloquently to this, but I'm based in North Carolina, so I have read North Carolina's plan, I've read a couple other plans as well, and there's some really exciting things that I've seen in several plans.

So, in Hawaii's, I loved the way that the plan not only looked like Hawaii, but felt like it too, and that really came from what Andy was talking about, that they did a really robust community engagement to make sure that the voices of the various different community members were heard throughout, and so their recommendations for implementation really reflect the people of the state.

I also really enjoyed Massachusetts, Brian's based in Massachusetts now, Massachusetts plan has really solved asset mapping. So, states were asked to provide

asset mapping, or a list of assets, so that, again to Andy's point, when you get to implementation, you know who's in the states, and the resources in the state, and who they are, so that you can leverage those to implement your plan.

And then, in Maine they're thinking already about sustainability, so they're already thinking beyond the 5 years, and know that the digital equity dollars are finite and they need to think about the future, and so they're planning to support the creation of a foundation for digital equity in Maine.

So, those are some highlights that I've seen that I've been really impressed by.

Brian Donoghue, City of Boston: I'm also happy to jump in and bounce off of the nice compliments that Amy gave to the Massachusetts plan, which I'm the most familiar with. Probably my favorite thing about that plan was that they led with a glossary. I know that a lot of the states have put that for the tail end, but I think it's one of the suggestions that we'd made to a couple of different organizations while I was still in NCC, so it was great to see. You didn't have to keep flipping back and forth and familiarize yourself with these core topics at the top.

I've also looked at a couple of our neighbors. I did really appreciate that most of the plans had very clear tables with KPIs, and the goals that they're working toward. The one that I did appreciate probably the most was the way that Vermont cut it up and had a current state, the state in a couple of years, and then a 2028 future state, kind of analysis.

So, those were some of the bigger picture things that I appreciated, but being clear about the goals that the states are aspiring to was something that I thought was great to see in a couple of different plans that I've reviewed.

Grace Tepper, Benton Institute: To go off what you said, Brian, the KPIs are really important to the plans. When I'm reading these plans, I look at the vision statement as the first way that the state is saying, this is how we're going to accomplish this process, and this is how we're going to set up digital equity while we're executing these plans in the Digital Equity Act, and also beyond.

And then, the KPIs are the last part where they're saying, this is what we're committing to doing, and this is how we're going to show it and report back to you as we do this process, and how we're following up with that. There were a couple states that did really great KPIs. I actually thought that Tennessee, in particular, as I was reading, had great KPIs. Also to what you said, Amy, about coalitions, a lot of the plans that I felt were really strong had great coalitions representing the local digital equity work that's already been happening, and also some took the time to set up coalitions throughout this process to make sure that that action on the local level's sustainable in the long term.

Some that have already had this really crucial community coalition organizing happening, or Hawaii with the Broadband Hui, fantastic. They, through every step of the digital equity planning process, reported back to the community and made sure that everybody understood the process and had every chance to submit feedback.

But also states like Minnesota, they set up what are called Digital Connection Committees for the sole purpose of executing the digital equity plan and also to be sustainable, and remain where they are after the plan is finished. That was something else that I saw that was really strong, to make sure that everybody had a voice in the digital equity planning process.

Leah Mims, Tennessee DECD: And I'll just quickly add, as someone who worked a lot on the digital equity planning, it was very validating and reassuring to see in other states plans how detailed their asset inventories were in the stakeholder engagement, because it takes a lot of work. And just seeing the assets that were identified.

I know in Tennessee it was often, doing that process of identifying assets, we learned there's a lot of organizations that are doing work, but they don't frame it as digital equity, so it was learning a lot how to frame these conversations, how to identify work that's being done, and be able to put that in a plan, like Andy and Amy said, so we can know who the actors are, and who to support when that implementation funding comes down the pipeline.

Stacey Baxter, NCC: Yeah, I love that you guys gave some really clear, concrete examples for our audience members to go back and look at, and what I'm hearing is that representation really means a lot in these plans, so thank you for that.

Our next question's a little bit broader, but feel free to specify as much as you'd like, but how have local digital equity plans informed state efforts in your opinions?

Grace Tepper, Benton Institute: I can start by just saying that I noticed in Washington's plan, they had a similar coalition, the Broadband Action Teams and those were across, I think, 39 counties and 11 tribes, and many of those Broadband Action Teams put together local plans to reflect what they're experiencing, and that was a big part of Washington's plan, so I think that the local plans can get sort of granular data representing their own specific locales, that can only help to support what the state is doing on the statewide level.

We see that also in Illinois, where I'm based, with doing the listening tours that all the states are doing, and gathering those plans and all that data that local communities can submit to say, hey, this is what we've been seeing, and this is the work that we've been doing to inform the long term strategic plan, so I think they're a really important part of it.

Amy Huffman, NDIA: It was one of the requirements, too. I don't know how many of you have read the notice of funding opportunity that released around what was to be included in the plans? It is both specific, and then not specific in areas, but one of the things that it does specify is that the states were required to detail how they intended to incorporate the local plans into their plans.

They didn't necessarily have to include them, but they needed to detail how they would if they were going to their. Some states have more local plans than others, and probably there's more in process right now that just weren't done in time for the plans, but, for instance, in Connecticut I think there were one or two local plans, whereas in North Carolina, there's 50, so it varies widely across the country.

Stacey Baxter, NCC: Yeah, that is the blessing and the curse sometimes of having some smaller areas and trying to get as many voices as can be at the table as possible.

In terms of the digital equity experience, what recommendations would the panelists have for preventing broadband access from eclipsing the other aspects of digital equity, so having that not be the only thing that takes up the conversation about digital equity being accessed. What are some of the ways that we can still keep it on the table, but prevent that from overshadowing the other elements?

Amy Huffman, NDIA: I don't know who wrote this question, but whoever it was, I really feel this on a very deep level. I've been in this field for a long time, and that is the dominant conversation, and rightly so. If you're talking to residents, and someone does not have access to the Internet, it's really hard to see beyond that, and it's really hard to get them to talk about all the other aspects of digital equity, but it's incumbent upon us, and policymakers, to make sure that those other aspects are addressed simultaneously, because we don't want to solve one digital divide, just to have another.

In the other aspects of digital equity, making sure we have devices and skills, and all those things that we talk about, are going to be ongoing, no matter if we get every single person in the country wired access.

I find it's best to be a little gentle, I've been rude at times and that just hasn't worked, so to be gentle in steering the conversation back to those other things that prevent people from being online, because there are real things that prevent people from being online, and talking about those, to give a little bit of time and space for people to talk about the access challenges that they have, because they're real, and they're really hard, and it's really frustrating for people who experience that.

But then, to cap it, so we're going to talk about this for this amount of time, and stick to the agenda, and to make sure that that you have a strong moderator who can do that.

Leah Mims, Tennessee DECD: I definitely agree. I'll piggyback off of that, when we were doing listening sessions across the state, that was the top issue that came up, and so, like Amy said, validate that's a reality for many people, but also frame these conversations, and trying to be broad, so we tried to do a lot of envisioning, so what would your community look like? What does digital equity, digital opportunity mean to you?

And, from there, yes, access came up, but other things like safety or workforce development came up, and then we could really tease out those ideas and steer this conversation to make sure that voices and those feelings are valid, but we're also being productive and identifying avenues that we can start plugging in and offering support.

Brian Donoghue, City of Boston: Yeah, we've seen a lot of success in focusing on the applications, like Leah was talking toward. Again, telehealth is a big piece of the puzzle, workforce development, those types of things, are the ways that we can pretty quickly get out of the just strictly access discussions, but also maybe paint those in more of a human light of, these are the types of things that, if we do lose access, that are going to be more difficult for the communities that we're trying to get connected.

So, I think focusing on the application side of it has been helpful for us.

Stacey Baxter, NCC: Yeah, there are many components to digital equity, and as important as access is, if you have access, but you don't have the digital skills to use that access in an appropriate way, or a way that actually helps you, what does that access mean? So, thank you for that.

Just changing gears a little bit, we know that the ACP is a big topic, Affordable Connectivity Program, and we're looking for continued funding from the federal government, but, without that funding, it will sunset later on this year. So, some of my attendees are wondering, what are local and state governments doing to provide low cost Internet options for residents beyond the ACP, if, in fact, that does not get the funding pushed through?

I know that's a scary question, because a lot of us are looking at the ACP as such a great component of our digital equity plans, but interested to hear what your thoughts might be on low cost options.

Brian Donoghue, City of Boston: I can jump in, because we're doing the all hands on deck, throw everything at the wall that you possibly can.

As soon as I started in this job, I started talking to the folks at the Massachusetts Broadband Institute about this as an inevitability. That was something that was concerning, that we knew that ACP was likely to run out, and that there were some states that were able to come in, I think Maryland is one of them, that have some

affordability... some of the subsidy for that piece of the puzzle. At this point, we're now, as a larger group of the local coalitions, still in that same space of advocacy and lobbying, and trying to sort out what that actually means.

The Broadband Institute itself can't really take that advocacy role, so it's come down to there's a lot of work on the eastern part of Massachusetts, and then large coalitions that are taking part in it from the western part of Massachusetts, and trying to figure out how we reach out to the state legislature and talk about these discussions, but it is pretty dire from our perspective. It seems like it's around 7 or so million dollars that it would be on a monthly basis from the state of Massachusetts.

So, that's a big lift in a time when they're having revenue shortfalls, but we're not going to stop advocating. One thing that we've started to do is go to all the individuals that have been connected through our FCC-funded digital navigators, and ask them for testimonials about what are the types of things that are going to be put at risk if they aren't able to continue with the ACP.

From our standpoint, it's a full court press, and would welcome anyone else's thoughts because that is a significant number that we're going to keep advocating for, but it is looking less and less likely that they'll be able to come up with it.

Amy Huffman, NDIA: Yeah, I'll just say that's one of the things I've been trying to advocate to Congress, and explain to lawmakers, is that you can't put this on the back of states and cities. States and cities will step in and try to fill the void, however, like Brian just detailed, there's so many barriers to that. Budgets, one of them, politics are another. It is just not going to be palatable in some state houses to provide, quote, unquote, a subsidy, even if you call it benefit, it won't matter. That won't be palatable to some state houses at all, or governors for that matter.

So then who does that leave? Local governments, and local governments are also strapped for cash all the time, in perpetuity. I Really think that the solution is a federal benefit, and then states, if they have additional funds or have the ability, can supplement it, but we don't have that guarantee at this point. Many of the state plans that I've read, again, I have not read them all, but many of them talk about leveraging ACP to address affordability in their states.

And so, in a world where ACP doesn't exist, we have to then figure out how to retrofit that, which could look like negotiating with the ISPs that are local to the state, to try to get them to offer low cost plans. It could look like, perhaps encouraging a foundation to come in and support, but it's Brian's description, all hands on deck is what's needed here, and it's just really difficult, in all this uncertainty, for states and local governments.

Grace Tepper, Benton Institute: I would just add to what Amy just said about the state plans and affordability. For many of the state plans, the first major goal and strategic part of the plan is to do outreach and enrollment for ACP, so it is a hard time to live in,

to have all these states creating these amazing plans in all sorts of different aspects, but especially for affordability, and to not really know if that's going to work out.

There are some states who do include contingency plans in case ACP is not around, but the majority of states that are fully committed in that affordability aspect, so it is just something that's really important that I know everyone wants to see continue.

Leah Mims, Tennessee DECD: I'll just add real quick, Tennessee is in the boat with most states with ACP, but we also considered a grant opportunity with capacity funds to support nonprofits or service organizations, to subsidize or offset costs for Internet access.

So, we're trying to think through ways, but there's going to be needs to be a larger conversation across states and how to make this more sustainable with ACP running out.

Stacey Baxter, NCC: Yeah, and I think we had a great comment in the chat talking about, what is a low cost option? How do you define that? If any of our panelists could jump in, and maybe talk about how your states have discussed working through that definition, and if they plan on defining that themselves.

Amy Huffman, NDIA: So, prior to ACP, if you've been in this field for some time, you might remember that some providers had a low cost plan. Comcast, for example, it was called the Internet Essentials Program, they still have it, and then some others do as well. The language was varied, sometimes it was a low cost plan, sometimes it was a low cost option. The BEADS plans require states to create definitions of what a low cost plan would be, that is also going to vary state to state, which may be good. Well, actually, I think that is good, because what's not affordable in Tennessee, isn't necessarily so in North Carolina, so those plans are intended to be designed around the what's going on in each individual state. That does create some level of uncertainty and difficulty in coordinating across the country, but that's another story.

But, yeah, I think the question around, what is affordable, it really varies from person to person.

Stacey Baxter, NCC: Yeah, thank you. That makes sense to tailor, but also that double edged sword of what that means for the national conversation.

Are there any insights on solutions that ISPs might be offering, Internet service providers? And I know that might be a stretch, but have there been any talk about ISPs offering solutions to that, knowing that there is a market for affordable Internet access?

Brian Donoghue, City of Boston: I just talked to the folks from Comcast yesterday, and obviously, like Amy mentioned, they have Internet Essentials, so that is the one that

everyone holds up as, this is the clear low cost solution that's there. We've been in conversations with our other providers to see where there's space inside of their pricing structure for that type of thing.

But, right now, the one that's very clear and on the table is, moving everyone over to Comcast Internet Essentials and trying to sort that out. More news on that hopefully soon, but that's something those are ongoing conversations with the city of Boston and our providers.

Grace Tepper, Benton Institute: To add to that, Brian, I believe one of the requirements of an ISP participating in the ACP originally was to create a plan that was little to no cost or free within their structure, so, if the ACP runs down like we're expecting it to, I would like to see some of those providers keep those plans as well, those low cost.

Of course, they won't be free because the subsidy won't be there, but because that was part of the creation process, to make those lower cost plans, I hope that they find it in their pay structure to keep those.

Amy Huffman, NDIA: We hope so too, and we have a low cost plan page on our website that we keep updated, but we're going to be creating a model of what a good low cost plan might look like, and encouraging providers to adopt that if and when, or if, ACP is not extended. We would love to see the providers to step forward and continue providing some good service to low income households across the country.

Stacey Baxter, NCC: Good being the operative word there, right? Reliable fast Internet access.

Well, thank you. I know that ACP is a hard topic for us to talk about, not knowing what the future might hold, but we appreciate all of that insight.

So, I wanted to switch into wondering how the states are going to look at oversight and accountability at local levels for ensuring that BEAD and digital equity funds are allocated and spent in the right areas to achieve maximum societal impact.

Brian Donoghue, City of Boston: I can hop in on this one, because it actually [inaudible] off of one of the comments that was asked about earlier, but the state in Massachusetts has taken in all of our inputs from the Boston digital equity assessment, and then all of that asset mapping work. Actually, the name he was complimenting was done at the local boots on the ground level, so, Austin actually completed that for the state, and then just handed it up.

But, what the state has done is set up a program where they're funding digital equity planning efforts for the cities that need that support through a municipal digital equity

planning program. That's one of the aspects, from my understanding, that they're using to ensure that those types of efforts are going to be able to be executed on, is by providing that technical assistance, and that funding resource, to ensure that that they come out on the other side of the program with a number of executable plans they could do.

So, a chicken and an egg situation, but we're happy to see that funding go to some of the communities that were sitting in a situation where they needed that funding and technical assistance.

Stacey Baxter, NCC: Thank you, Brian. I don't know if any other members of the panel wanted to jump in on that, or if you see any accountability measures that are sticking out to you?

Leah Mims, Tennessee DECD: At least, on the the BEAD side of Tennessee, are not as plugged in on, but one thing that our office historically is, for any ISP application, require applicants list out an adoption plan, or how are they going to address broadband adoption and community support, and that's something they definitely want to continue.

So, as we go into BEAD, making sure that applicants are being thoughtful on how they're spending, and how they're engaging with the communities that they intend to serve, I think is going to set the track right for how the funds are going to be implemented at the local and state level, and make sure that all actors are coordinating together.

Amy Huffman, NDIA: I think it's going to vary from state to state, what the accountability measures are. I'm just much more well versed in the Digital Equity Act's plans than the BEAD plans, but I really think that the accountability measures are those measurable objectives, so what it becomes is, if you're in on the ground, that's your tools to say, state, this is what you said you'd meet and how can we help you get there? Achieving those goals are going to be the accountability measures.

We have not yet seen a notice of funding opportunity from NTIA for the second part of the Digital Equity Act, which is the capacity awards to implement the plans, but I think we can all expect that to have some performance measurement requirements in it, for states. They'll have metrics that they need to meet, and reporting deadlines and all sorts of things, so that will hold them accountable for actually implementing the plans.

Stacey Baxter, NCC: We love to hear about the transparency and accountability, because we know that, historically, we want to make sure that groups are being supported, and that the work that we're doing towards digital equity actually goes to those communities, so, thank you.

Just quickly, if any of you could talk about what states might be planning for to reach out to senior communities, and not just in healthcare access, but specifically just senior communities and populations and in digital equity.

Leah Mims, Tennessee DECD: One thing we did, when we were doing our listening sessions, we did regional sessions across the state and through our development district, so we actually ended up engaging a little bit with the human resource agencies, which often have an aging division within there, so being able to connect locally with those groups was helpful to gather insight on the needs and barriers.

I think that's something we're definitely planning on continuing, as we get further along with the implementation process, to, again, identify not just healthcare needs, but also digital skills, workforce development, those types of stuff.

Stacey Baxter, NCC: Thank you so much, we look forward to seeing how that works out.

Our last question for the panel, before we open it up to the audience, if you could ask your legislators for one thing to support digital equity, what would that be?

Brian Donoghue, City of Boston: Right now, it would probably be to backfill the ACP, but if you would ask me this maybe two weeks ago, I would have pointed toward digital literacy training, and then, on the other side of that, would be digital navigators, are two areas that seem to be in need across the state, and in demand across the state, but there isn't a clear source of funding for those types of programs, for example, our two digital navigators that we have on board, that have been really successful, are funded through the FCC's outreach grant, so understand that type of funding goes away.

I would really appreciate, from the state, seeing a statewide program that funds maybe two folks in Boston, and then one person in uh, I'm trying to think, there's a specific name for the smaller cities in Boston that they use, but basically a person for each of those communities, and then some folks on the Western side of Massachusetts would be a really helpful thing.

Getting sustainable funding for that approved through the state legislature would remove it as a barrier for some of the local governments that aren't able to carry those funds. Maybe Boston is in a little bit of a better position, we could probably fund one, but that's maybe my 2 cents, or 2 or 3 cents.

Grace Tepper, Benton Institute: I would say that, through reading the plans, one of the biggest challenges in collecting data and information for the states, was reaching currently incarcerated people. There are a lot of security issues with getting equitable data about people who are currently incarcerated, and just being able to hold meetings and talk to people, who that's their experience, is really difficult.

So, one of my biggest recommendations would just to be able to connect with as many organizations that are working with that covered population. I know a lot of states were able to talk to families, or people who are experiencing reentry, and returning citizens, but workforce opportunities, and being able to extend devices to incarcerated people, is a really big issue, and one of the more challenging ones, and something that states are working very hard on. I just wanted to raise it as something that I think is really important.

Amy Huffman, NDIA: Mine would be ACP, because we're a national organization, so I'll direct my ask directly to Congress: please fund ACP and extend it through the end of the year, and also find a long term solution for it as well, because we know that we need more than just this year with the program.

I really say that, given our previous conversation around, putting this on the backs of states and local governments, puts this affordability in a really precarious situation, not because states and local governments don't care about affordability, but there's just so many challenges to making sure that happens at the state and local level, funding being a huge concern.

Our goal, really, is for Congress to fund that, and then that takes that burden off of the states and local governments, and they can direct their funds to things like Brian was talking about, digital navigators, digital skills programs, that sort of thing, that should be tailored to the individual communities.

Leah Mims, Tennessee DECD: I echo everyone's points and just say continued investment and support of this work, not just over five years, but for the long haul, because this technology will continue to change, needs will continue to change, and we need to have continued investment in this work, and supporting the people on the ground doing the work, for the near future.

Stacey Baxter, NCC: Thank you all, you brought up some terrific points, and I think it leads into one of the comments or questions that was added in the chat, and specifically to what Grace was speaking about, about covered populations, and maybe populations that are not receiving as much notoriety around these issues, but the specific question was around the experience of people with disabilities, and the lack of access to assistive technology and training to use it. How do we bring those conversations up to a forefront of the digital equity plan?

Brian Donoghue, City of Boston: I can go ahead on that one, because we are, as the city, working closely with our Council on Disabilities to move that ball forward, and try to get some training going around that with our digital navigators. The biggest piece of the puzzle that we're trying to solve is, from the government services standpoint, to ensure that all of the services that are being provided, and that are migrating to a digital environment, are making sure that, on every spot check, every heat check, every time

that we go to deploy a new service, that it's been vetted through that type of a council to get feedback.

That's maybe the benefit of being in a place like Boston, where that's been a focus from different mayoral administrations, to put those types of councils in place, but we do have great partners that are working with us specifically on that effort.

Stacey Baxter, NCC: Thank you so much for that response, Brian, we appreciate that. One of the reasons why we're asking about it is because it's not brought up as much and why people want to hear some more, so that's something to keep in mind for us as well as we move forward.

I just want to appreciate all the work that our panelists have done in their respective communities and also all the attendees that we have today. This is an ongoing battle, and we know that two heads are better than one, and five are better than two, and so it's going to take coalition building, and a lot of connection and sharing our successes, in order to be able to reach this on a national level, so we appreciate all the work that you all are doing, not just the panelists, but for everybody that came into attendance today. So, thank you all so much

So, yes, I will turn it back over to Corian. Thank you again to our members of our panel Grace, Amy, Leah, and Brian. We really appreciated the time that you took today to come out and all of your incredible insights.

I know that I definitely learned a lot, and there's it's generated a lot of great chats throughout the webinar. So just thank you so much for your time and for your inputs.

Corian Zacher: Well, thank you all so much to the panelists. I can't think of a better panel to be talking about this, because you all did such a great job and hit on a lot of the really important things. I know that key performance indicators are a word that I've been hearing a lot from a lot of different states, and surprising that's an unusual thing to have in a plan, so glad to hear that things are going well.

And then, also, I just wanted to queue up that we have another event next month. We're really excited to have Doctor Ali talk about his book, Farm Fresh Broadband. If you haven't already checked it out, it's definitely worth a read. Andy, did you have little bit more to mention about the book club?

Andy Stutzman, NCC: Yeah, this is something that just came up on a whim a couple months ago, and having talked to Chris a couple of times, we thought this would be a great idea. We're hoping to do at least four this year, we hope that you can join us. We'll provide a link to where you can get the book, and we'd love for folks to read along and just join in the panel conversations we're going to have on the discussions, and we hope to continue this a few more times this year after this, and thanks to Chris for being a

willing participant in this experiment, and I hope you all enjoy it, and look forward to everyone joining us next month.

Corian Zacher: And you can also stay in touch. Stacy does a great job putting together Instagram reels from all of the events we go out to, so definitely check out the Instagram. We'll have this and other things on YouTube. We're also pretty active on LinkedIn.

And then, we're really excited about our Bipartisan Tech event in April, so hope you can all make it in person to that.

I think that's it from us on the webinar today, thank you all so much for coming. Thank you especially to our speakers for speaking with us. I know that these are hard times, with the way that ACP is going, so really glad that you hopefully got a little bit of joy out of talking about some of these state plans, and just the fact that I think we're all in this together, even if things don't always go the way we want them to, so really glad and thankful for you all for your work.