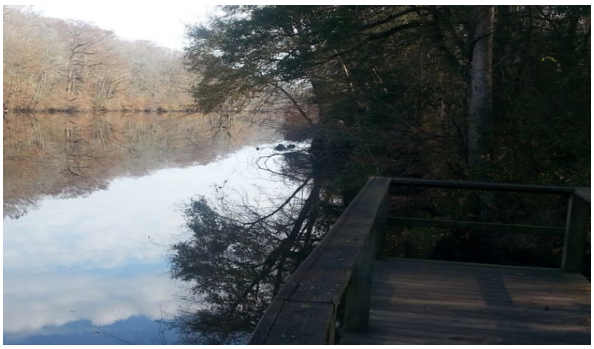
MID-EAST REGION

MID-EAST COMMISSION

DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN



Historic • Agricultural • Recreational • Industrial
1712
Beaufort County, N.C.

BERTIE COUNTY
1722
NORTH CAROLINA

COUNTY of HERTFORD
1759

MARTIN county

PITT COUNTY
est. 1760
Agriculture Education Health Care Industry
NORTH CAROLINA

BAND NC
Building a New Digital Economy in NC

NC STATE UNIVERSITY
Institute for Emerging Issues

Adopted _____ 2025

Mid-East Region Digital Inclusion Plan

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Member Governments

Beaufort County
Aurora, Bath, Belhaven, Chocowinity, Pantego, Washington, Washington Park

Bertie County
Askewville, Aulander, Colerain, Kelford, Lewiston/Woodville, Powellsville, Roxobel, Windsor

Hertford County
Ahoskie, Como, Cofield, Harrellsville, Murfreesboro, Winton

Martin County
Bear Grass, Everetts, Hamilton, Hassell, Jamesville, Oak City, Parmele, Robersonville, Williamston

Pitt County
Ayden, Bethel, Falkland, Farmville, Fountain, Greenville, Grifton, Grimesland, Simpson, Winterville

Executive Summary

The Mid-East Region (or Region "Q") is located in Northeastern North Carolina but not in the extreme Northeastern corner of the state. The region is comprised of Beaufort, Bertie, Hertford, Martin and Pitt Counties. The total regional population is approximately 277,350 persons (2022 American Community Survey five-year estimates) with Pitt County containing approximately 61.7% of the population.

The Mid-East Region Digital Inclusion Plan was graciously funded through Building a New Economy in NC (BAND-NC), which is part of the Institute for Emerging Issues at NC State University. The Mid-East Region Digital Inclusion Steering Committee was developed to guide the planning process. In total there were 99 Steering Committee members representing a diverse group of stakeholders.

The NC Dept. of Information Technology's Digital Equity Survey was used as the public survey for the planning process. There were three Public Open Houses and two Focus Groups held to obtain additional public input around digital inclusion priorities and needs in local communities.

The digital divide is the issue. Digital equity is the goal. Digital inclusion is the work. The digital divide is the gap between those who have affordable access, skills, and support to effectively engage online and those who do not. Digital equity is where all individuals and communities

have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy, and economy. Digital inclusion is the work and includes activities necessary to close the digital divide and achieve digital equity.

A Digital Inclusion Plan is a community strategic plan that addresses the components of digital inclusion and works to close the digital divide (National Digital Inclusion Alliance definitions).

The Vision Statement for the Mid-East Region Digital Inclusion Plan is:

A digitally inclusive Mid-East Region where every individual has equitable access to affordable and reliable internet, digital skills training, essential devices, and support services - fostering economic growth, education and quality of life for all communities.

The Mission Statement for the Mid-East Region Digital Inclusion Plan is:

North Carolina's Mid-East Region is dedicated to bridging the digital divide by ensuring that every resident, regardless of background, demographics, geography, or socio-economic status, has equitable access to essential technology and skills needed to thrive in the digital age. By leveraging local partnerships and resources, we will provide broadband infrastructure, affordable, high-quality internet access, digital skills programs, essential devices, and support services that empower our community members to overcome barriers, enhance educational and economic opportunities, and improve their quality of life. Together, we strive to build connected and inclusive communities, where every individual has the tools and opportunities to fully participate in the digital economy and society.

Goals for the Mid-East Region Digital Inclusion Plan include:

- Access to Devices: Increase the number of residents in the Mid-East Region who have access to an affordable device that meets their needs and allows them to fully participate in the digital landscape.
- Affordability: Increase access to low cost or no-cost broadband across the Mid-East Region through stipend or subsidy programs and services.
- Availability: Improve and increase broadband connectivity throughout the Mid-East Region to provide residents and businesses access to reliable, high-speed broadband service.
- Digital Skills: Develop technology support and educational programming that meets a variety of needs and accommodates all skill levels; empowering community members to gain the necessary skills to fully participate in the digital world.

- Implementation Resources: Build structure and organization to support long-term Digital Inclusion success and to empower partners to create their own digital inclusion programs and partnerships.

Priority projects for the Mid-East Region Digital Inclusion Plan include the following:

Access to Devices
- Device Access Program
- Device Repair and Technical Support Program

Affordability
- Internet Subsidy Program

Availability
- Cell Tower Infrastructure Expansion
- Improve the Quality of Broadband Networks
- Resiliency Back-Up Networks
- Broadband Infrastructure Expansion
- Public Access Locations

Digital Skills Training
- Digital Skills Training
- Workforce Development Program Integration

Implementation Resources
- Advocacy Coalition
- Coalition of Churches
- Digital Skilling Coalition
- Implementation Resources Portal
- Public Informational Portal

Introduction of Mid-East Region

The Mid-East Region (or Region "Q") is located in Northeastern North Carolina but not in the extreme Northeastern corner of the state. The region is comprised of Beaufort, Bertie, Hertford, Martin and Pitt Counties. It is a wide, essentially flat, coastal plain lying within the inner coast along the Albemarle and Pamlico Sounds. The region is dominated by rural undeveloped agricultural and woodland that is sparsely populated. Small municipalities make up most of the population centers in the region. Pitt County is the only semi-developed county in the region and varies demonstratively from the other four counties.

The region is punctuated by flat, meandering rivers – the Tar-Pamlico, Pungo, Chowan, and Cashie, and the more turbulent waters of the Roanoke. The vast acreage on both sides of these rivers and their many tributary creeks are devoted to undevelopable floodplains. The entire system of sounds, rivers, tributaries and wetlands constitutes the second largest estuary ecosystem on the East Coast and in the lower 48 United States.

The land is dominated by wetland peat, and primarily sand and loam based prime agricultural soils. A large percentage of the land in the region has severe constraints for development, due

primarily to a seasonal high water table and year-round wetness tendencies. These soils are also located in areas susceptible to flooding as specified by FEMA. The vegetation consists of that found in wet and floodplain areas with Carolina pines tending to dominate the landscape. Farm crops which are an important part of the natural resource based economy are cotton, grain, corn, peanuts, tobacco, soybeans, and sweet potatoes. The region has a mild four-season climate with frequent humid conditions typical of the Southeastern United States.

Planning Process

The Mid-East Region Digital Inclusion Plan was graciously funded through Building a New Economy in NC (BAND-NC), which is part of the Institute for Emerging Issues at NC State University. The mission of BAND-NC is to address the digital divide in North Carolina. Accessing and using broadband effectively and safely is essential for work, education, health, worship and more. Everyone in our state deserves access to affordable broadband, digital devices that meet their needs and digital skill-building. These digital opportunities support a more vibrant economy and future for North Carolina.

The Mid-East Region Digital Inclusion Steering Committee was developed to guide the planning process. The committee included a diverse range of participants including local government representatives from across the region, broadband focused support organizations such as BAND-NC and NC Rural Center's Broadband Collaborative, organizations serving vulnerable populations such as minorities, seniors, and the reentry population, Institutes of Higher Education, economic development organizations, workforce development organizations, healthcare organizations, internet service providers, Cooperative Extension, Social Services, Chambers of Commerce, private businesses, faith-based organizations, and community institutions such as libraries and senior centers, amongst others. In total there were 99 Steering Committee members. The membership roster is included as Appendix A.

The Steering Committee met seven times between August 2024 – May 2025. Meetings were hybrid, in person at the NC Telecenter in Williamston with a virtual option available. Meetings were generally 2 – 2.5 hours in duration. Information was disseminated by email between meetings.

The NC Dept. of Information Technology's Digital Equity Survey was used as the public survey for the planning process. Steering Committee members played a strong role in gathering responses from community members. A total of 389 residents responded to the survey. The survey results for the Mid-East Region are included as Appendix B.

There were three Public Open Houses and two Focus Groups held to obtain additional public input around digital inclusion priorities and needs in local communities. The Public Open Houses were widely advertised and open to all. Public Open House events were held at Beaufort County Community College, Martin Community College, and the Pitt County Agricultural Center. The Focus Groups were smaller, directly invited groups of participants. Focus Groups were facilitated deep dive conversations between participants and hosts from the Friday Institute at NC State. The Focus Groups were graciously funded by the Camber Foundation. Focus Groups were held at Mt. Olive Missionary Baptist Church in Windsor and Kingdom Building Healing and Deliverance for All People in Ahoskie. Public event summaries are included as Appendix C. Public input was a strong driving factor in the development of goals, objectives, implementation strategies, and priority projects.

Digital Inclusion Planning Overview

The digital divide is the issue. Digital equity is the goal. Digital inclusion is the work. The digital divide is the gap between those who have affordable access, skills, and support to effectively engage online and those who do not. The digital divide disproportionately affects people of color, Indigenous peoples, households with low incomes, people with disabilities, people in rural areas, and older adults. Digital equity is where all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy, and economy. Digital inclusion is the work and includes activities necessary to ensure all individuals and communities have the following:

- Access to affordable high speed internet
- Access to a device that meets the needs of the user
- Access to digital skills training
- Quality technical support
- Apps and online content designed for self-sufficiency

A Digital Inclusion Plan is a community strategic plan that addresses the components of digital inclusion and works to close the digital divide (National Digital Inclusion Alliance definitions).

Vision Statement

A digitally inclusive Mid-East Region where every individual has equitable access to affordable and reliable internet, digital skills training, essential devices, and support services - fostering economic growth, education and quality of life for all communities.

Mission Statement

North Carolina's Mid-East Region is dedicated to bridging the digital divide by ensuring that every resident, regardless of background, demographics, geography, or socio-economic status, has equitable access to essential technology and skills needed to thrive in the digital age. By leveraging local partnerships and resources, we will provide broadband infrastructure, affordable, high-quality internet access, digital skills programs, essential devices, and support services that empower our community members to overcome barriers, enhance educational and economic opportunities, and improve their quality of life. Together, we strive to build connected and inclusive communities, where every individual has the tools and opportunities to fully participate in the digital economy and society.

State and National Digital Inclusion Data

Computer and Internet Use

The following data was sourced from the US Census Computer and Internet Use in the United States report (2021).

- Most U.S. households had at least one type of computer (95%) and had a broadband internet subscription (90%) in 2021, an increase from 2018 (92% and 85%, respectively).
- Smartphones were the most common computing device in U.S. households (90%), followed by desktop or laptop computers (81%) and tablets (64%) in 2021.
- Urban households (96%) were more likely than rural ones (93%) to own computers; they were also more likely to have a broadband internet subscription (91 % vs. 87%, respectively).
- Only 66 counties had low rates (below 60%) of broadband subscription in 2017-2021, compared to 291 in 2014-2018.
- "Smartphone-only" households (which accessed the internet only through mobile broadband) were more likely to make $25,000 or less annually, be headed by someone 65 years and over or to have a Black or Hispanic householder.
- Compared to the 90% national average, 84% of households in tribal areas had broadband internet.

Internet Connectivity and Farms in NC

The following data was sourced from the NC Dept. of Information Technology Internet Connectivity and Farms in NC report (2020).

- Although agriculture has an estimated $87 billion impact on NC's economy, many farmers struggle to get affordable, high-speed internet service.
- Survey had responses from 1,250 farms across NC (94% farm owners, 6% farm employees).
- 90% of respondents said that reliable high-speed internet is "extremely important" or "very important" to conduct business at the farm, while just 1% said "not important."
- For respondents participating in the speed test, the primary connection type was DSL (copper infrastructure), with a median download speed of 5.4 Mbps, and upload of 0.5 Mbps.
- 57% of respondents reported some form of wireline service.
    - 50% were "somewhat dissatisfied" or "extremely dissatisfied" with the service.
- 63% of respondents reported having some type of cellular data service.
    - 52% were "somewhat dissatisfied" or "extremely dissatisfied" with the service.
- 28% of respondents reported having fixed wireless or satellite service.
    - Fixed wireless: 35% were "somewhat dissatisfied" or "extremely dissatisfied" with the service.
    - Satellite: 66% were "somewhat dissatisfied" or "extremely dissatisfied" with the service.

Homework Gap in NC

The following data was sourced form the NC Dept. of Information Technology and Friday Institute Homework Gap in NC report (2019).

- The 'Homework Gap' occurs when students are assigned homework requiring access to the internet, but don't have home access.
- If we are not able to bridge this Homework Gap, our state's children, our future workforce, will not be adequately prepared for the jobs of the 21st century. In addition, expanding broadband access, especially in our rural communities, will help to expand economic opportunities for families across North Carolina.
- 9,490 survey participants across NC with school-aged children.
- 10% of survey respondents had no internet access at home.
- 67% of those without internet cite cost as the primary reason.
- 23% of those without internet cite availability as the primary reason.

Economic Development

The following data was provided by BAND-NC.

- Rural households subscribing to internet realized a 1% increase in employment rate, >1% increase in income for avg. household benefits of $2,222 or 4x cost of the service.
- Rural areas obtaining 100 Mbps service see increase of business births at least 5 years;250 Mbps even greater increase, but results with 1G service less clear.
- E-Commerce – 18% compound annual growth 2000-2019, and accelerating since pandemic.

Workforce and Employment

The following data was provided by BAND-NC.

- 80% jobs openings posted online, 84% employers use social media to recruit with additional 9% planning to start.
- Only 14% of folks with limited digital skills think the internet is important for job searches.
- Jobs requiring 1 digital skill earn 20% more (avg $8,000).
- Jobs requiring 3 digital skills earn 45% more, generating $1,363-$2,879 in additional tax revenues.

Telehealth

The following data was provided by BAND-NC.

- Telehealth can result in 67% fewer ER and urgent care visits.
    - Telehealth consult $41-$49
    - Urgent Care $98-$163
    - ER Visit $368-$1,596
- Five rural Indiana hospitals implementing telehealth generated > $3.5 M in direct cost savings and benefits captured by communities.
- Chronic disease incidence in rural communities is inversely correlated with broadband availability and even more strongly related with broadband adoption.

The following data was sourced from the NC Healthcare Association legislative brief (2024).

- Given the severe provider shortages throughout North Carolina — in both rural and urban areas — increased telehealth services have a unique capacity to increase access to healthcare for millions of new patients in even the most remote areas of North Carolina.

- Telehealth has been shown to reduce the cost of healthcare and increase efficiency through better management of chronic diseases, shared health professional staffing, and fewer or shorter hospital stays. It also encourages better utilization of healthcare services.

County and Regional Demographic Data

Table 1 shows population growth for counties in the Mid-East region. It shows the total population for each county from 2000, 2010, and 2022 as well as the population and percentage growth during that timeframe.

The data shows that Pitt County is much more populated than the other four counties. Pitt County was the only county to grow in population (1.8%) from 2010 to 2022. The other four counties saw a population decline from 2010 to 2022. The Mid-East Region as a whole had a population loss of -3.1% from 2010 to 2022.

Table 1.
Mid-East Commission Region Population Growth, 2000-2022

County	Census 2000	Census 2010	ACS 2022	Growth 2010-2022	% Growth 2010-2022
Beaufort	44,958	47,759	44,711	(-3,048)	(-6.4%)
Bertie	19,773	21,282	17,818	(-3,464)	(-16.3%)
Hertford	22,601	24,669	21,633	(-3,036)	(-12.3%)
Martin	25,593	24,505	21,992	(-2,513)	(-10.3%)
Pitt	133,798	168,148	171,196	3,048	1.8%
Region Total	**246,723**	**286,363**	**277,350**	**(-9,013)**	**(-3.1%)**

Source: US Census Bureau (2000 Decennial Census, 2010 Decennial Census, 2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates)

Table 2 shows the Mid-East Region population by race and ethnicity. Race is broken down by Caucasian or White, African American or Black, and Other (includes American Indian and Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander, some other race, and two or more races), while ethnicity is split into Hispanic or Latino and Non- Hispanic or Latino.

Beaufort (70.5%), Martin (52.3%) and Pitt (54.7%) Counties have a larger White population while Bertie (61.7%) and Hertford (58.3%) Counties have a higher percentage of African Americans. Overall, the Mid-East Region has a 54.1%% White population and a 37.2% African

American population. Pitt County has the largest Other race population at 10.2% followed by Hertford (7.7%), Beaufort (6.4%), Martin (6.0%), and Bertie (3.6%) Counties. The Mid-East Region's Other race population is 8.6%.

The ethnicity part of the table shows Hispanic or Latino populations of each county. Beaufort County had the largest percentage with 8.4%, followed by Pitt at 6.7%, Hertford at 4.6%, Martin at 4.4%, while Bertie County had the smallest Hispanic or Latino population at 1.4%. The Mid-East Region had a population of 6.3% Hispanic or Latino and 93.7% Non-Hispanic or Latino.

Table 2.
Mid-East Commission Region Population by Race and Ethnic Group, 2022

	Population By Race						Population by Ethnicity			
County	White	% White	African American	% African American	Other	% Other	Hispanic or Latino	% Hispanic or Latino	Non Hispanic or Latino	% Non Hispanic or Latino
Beaufort	31,510	70.5%	10,344	23.1%	2,857	6.4%	3,734	8.4%	40,977	91.6%
Bertie	6,188	34.7%	10,987	61.7%	643	3.6%	258	1.4%	17,560	98.6%
Hertford	7,343	33.9%	12,622	58.3%	1,668	7.7%	1,004	4.6%	20,629	95.4%
Martin	11,503	52.3%	9,171	41.7%	1,318	6.0%	959	4.4%	21,033	95.6%
Pitt	93,580	54.7%	60,117	35.1%	17,499	10.2%	11,540	6.7%	159,656	93.3%
Region Total	**150,124**	**54.1%**	**103,241**	**37.2%**	**23,985**	**8.6%**	**17,495**	**6.3%**	**259,855**	**93.7%**

Source: US Census Bureau (2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates)

Table 3 shows the region's population breakdown by age group and the median age for each county. Each county's percentage of people 18 or younger ranges from 17.1% (Bertie) to 21.2% (Pitt). Pitt County (25.4%) has the highest and Hertford County (12.1%) has the second highest percentage of people in the 18-24 year age group, with the other three counties ranging from 6.9% to 7.6% in this age group. This is at least partially due to East Carolina University's location in Pitt County and Chowan University's location in Hertford County.

Each county's percentage of people in the 25-44 year age group ranges from 20.7% (Beaufort) to 25.4% (Pitt). Each county's percentage of people in the 45-64 year age group ranges from 22.0% (Pitt) to 28.0% (Martin).

Pitt County has the lowest percentage of people in the 65 years and over age group at 14.1%. The other four counties ranged from 20.4% (Hertford) to 24.4% (Beaufort) in the 65 years and over age group.

The Mid-East Region average is 20.4% under 18 years, 13.8% 18-24 years, 24.1% 25-44 years, 24.1% 45-64 years, and 17.7% 65 years and over.

Pitt County has the youngest median age at 33.2 years, followed by Hertford County at 41.7 years. The other three counties range from 45.9 – 46.9 years median age. The Mid-East Region average is 42.9 years median age.

Table 3.
Mid-East Commission Region Population by Age Group, 2022

County	% Under 18 years	% 18-24 years	% 25-44 years	% 45-64 years	% Over 65 years	Median Age
Beaufort	19.6%	7.3%	20.7%	28.0%	24.4%	46.9
Bertie	17.1%	7.6%	24.2%	27.3%	23.9%	45.9
Hertford	17.9%	12.1%	23.2%	26.4%	20.4%	41.7
Martin	20.3%	6.9%	21.4%	27.1%	24.3%	46.7
Pitt	21.2%	17.2%	25.4%	22.0%	14.1%	33.2
Region Total	**20.4%**	**13.8%**	**24.1%**	**24.1%**	**17.7%**	42.9

Source: US Census Bureau (2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates)

Table 4 shows poverty rates and food insecurity rates. It shows the percentage of all people in poverty as well as just those persons under the age of 18. The table also shows the food insecurity rate for each county as well as the region's average.

The poverty rate for the Mid-East Region ranged from 17.1% in Beaufort County to 21.4% in Bertie County. The region's average poverty rate was 19.9%. The percentage of persons under the age of 18 living in poverty was higher, ranging from 22.8% in Pitt County to 32.3% in Martin County. The average poverty rate of persons under the age of 18 was 28.1% for the Mid-East Region. (It is worth noting that Pitt County's poverty rate is impacted by a large student population from East Carolina University that work part-time for relatively low wages.)

The food insecurity rate for the region was very similar in all counties, ranging from 13.1% - 14.1%. The average food insecurity rate for the Mid-East Region was 13.5%. All five counties were greater than the State of North Carolina's average food insecurity rate of 11.8%.

Table 4. Mid-East Commission Region Poverty Rates 2022 & Food Insecurity Rates 2021			
County	**All Persons Poverty Rate (%)**	**Under 18 Poverty Rate (%)**	**Food Insecurity Rate**
Beaufort	17.1%	28.8%	13.2%
Bertie	21.4%	27.3%	14.1%
Hertford	20.3%	29.5%	13.2%
Martin	20.5%	32.3%	13.9%
Pitt	20.0%	22.8%	13.1%
Region Average	**19.9%**	**28.1%**	**13.5%**

Source: Source: US Census Bureau (2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates), Feeding America 501(c) (3) non-profit (2021 Map the Meal Gap study)

Table 5 shows the percentage of high school graduates aged 25 and older, the percentage of people with a Bachelor's Degree aged 25 and older, and the percentage of people with a Graduate or Professional Degree aged 25 and older. The North Carolina High School graduation rate was 89.4% while the Mid-East Region's average High School graduation rate was 84.7%. Pitt County was the only county higher than the state at 90.2%. The other counties had High School graduation rates below the state average with Beaufort County at 86.8%, Hertford County at 83.9%, Martin County at 82.0%, and Bertie County at 80.5%.

The North Carolina percentage of persons 25 years and older with a Bachelor's Degree or higher was 33.9%, while the Mid-East Region's average Bachelor Degree rate was 20.1%. All counties were lower than the state for the population 25 years and older with Bachelor's Degrees or higher with Pitt County at 33.1%, Beaufort County at 19.5%, Bertie County at 16.6%, Hertford County at 16.0%, and Martin County at 15.5%.

The North Carolina percentage of persons 25 years and older with a Graduate or Professional Degree was 12.5%, while the Mid-East Region's average rate was 7.4%. Pitt County (13.2%) was higher than the state, while Beaufort County (7.2%), Hertford County (6.6%), Bertie County (5.7%) and Martin County (4.3%) were lower than the state for the population with Graduate or Professional Degrees.

Table 5. Mid-East Commission Region Educational Attainment of Population 25 years and over, 2022			
County	**High School Graduate or higher**	**Bachelor's Degree or higher**	**Graduate or Professional Degree**
Beaufort	86.8%	19.5%	7.2%
Bertie	80.5%	16.6%	5.7%
Hertford	83.9%	16.0%	6.6%
Martin	82.0%	15.5%	4.3%
Pitt	90.2%	33.1%	13.2%
Region Average	**84.7%**	**20.1%**	**7.4%**
North Carolina	**89.4%**	**33.9%**	**12.5%**

Source: US Census Bureau (2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates)

County and Regional Digital Inclusion Data

Data on where broadband is and isn't available is notoriously under-reported and does not fully depict the reality on the ground for many people in North Carolina.

The North Carolina Broadband Indices are two unique measures designed to create a more accurate picture of the state's broadband access, adoption and the resulting digital divide. Because broadband access and adoption are both important but distinct from each other, two indices, which can be applied at the county and census tract levels, have been designed by the NC Dept. of Information Technology.

The indices can inform the design of programs, policies and tools to align with the specific needs of each community by:

- Helping demonstrate need
- Identifying the most beneficial types of investments
- Determining where resources should be deployed

The indices can help state and local leaders, private providers and advocates:

- Understand the current state of broadband access and adoption and the digital divide in communities across the state

- Visualize the specific challenges, opportunities and key factors contributing to the digital divide in the areas they serve
- Assist in the design of specific solutions that meet the specific needs of communities

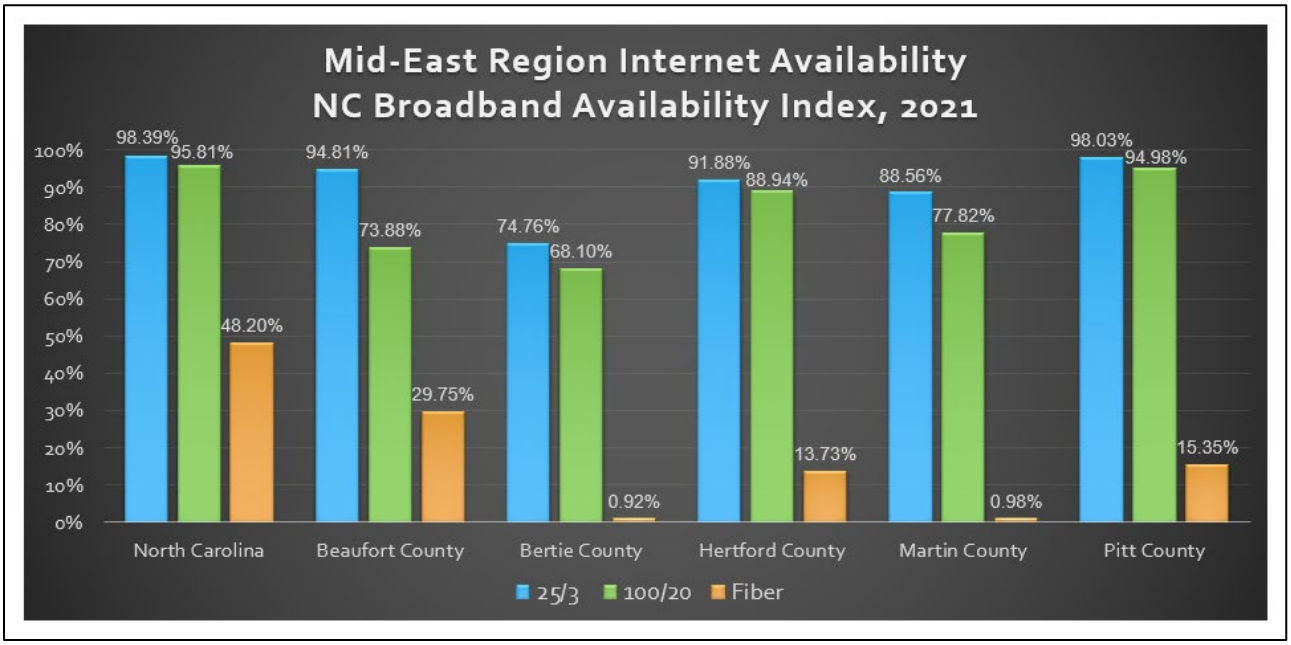
Together, 19 variables – eight in broadband availability and 11 in broadband adoption – make up the indices, which can be applied at both the county and the census-tract levels.

In the availability category, some indicators utilized include access to types of technology, number of providers and access to specific speed thresholds. In addition, the data sheds light on the quality of service such as slower speeds and large differences between download and upload speeds (known as asymmetrical service). Lastly, barriers to infrastructure deployment such as the age and density of housing units are also included.

Regarding adoption, one variable is the share of homes subscribing to DSL, cable or fiber or not subscribing at all (no internet access). However, research points to other variables that affect technology adoption including but not limited to age, income, the presence of children and educational attainment. These variables must also be included to measure adoption potential in addition to absolute adoption. It is important to keep in mind that one key variable that affects adoption is missing from these indices: cost of service. This variable is not included because it is not available from secondary data sources.

Table 6 shows the Broadband Availability Index results for Mid-East Region counties and for the state.

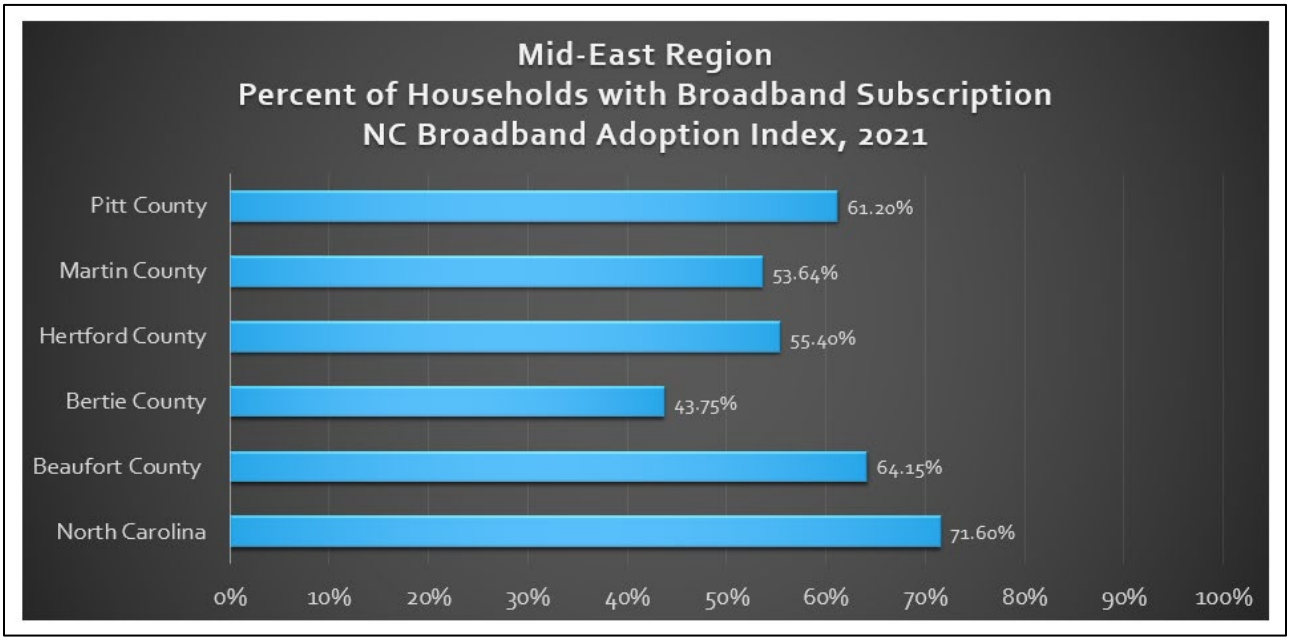
Table 6



Source: NC Dept. of Information Technology

Table 7 shows the "Percent of Households with Broadband Subscription" Broadband Adoption Index results for Mid-East Region counties and for the state.

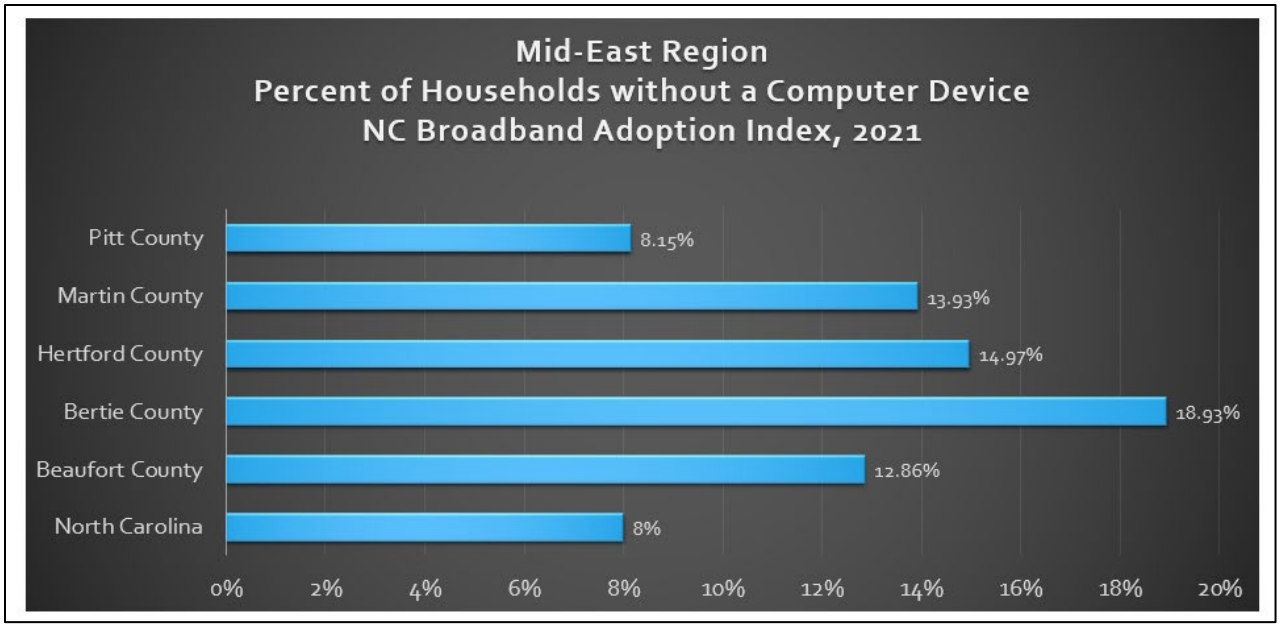
Table 7



Source: NC Dept. of Information Technology

Table 8 shows the "Percent of Households without a Computer Device" Broadband Adoption Index results for Mid-East Region counties and for the state.

Table 8



Source: NC Dept. of Information Technology

Overview of Broadband Infrastructure in the Region

High-speed broadband internet has become a necessary utility. Broadband connection is no longer optional but vital for the region to compete economically and for citizens to not be left behind. Students can no longer fully participate in the education system without broadband access. Most jobs require an online application process. Access to healthcare and government benefits is rapidly transitioning to online formats. The region needs high-speed internet infrastructure to the last mile in rural areas.

While there have been many recent projects in the region to extend fiber broadband infrastructure, there are still many rural areas in the region that have no options for high speed internet service. Satellite based services available in these areas are generally not adequate (reliability and speed) and expensive. It is imperative that every household, business, and organization in the region is served with reliable internet service capable of 200 mbps download/20 mbps upload speeds. Once all addresses are served, areas that are currently served by cable infrastructure should be upgraded to fiber.

Federal and state grants have been a helpful source of funding for local governments to implement broadband infrastructure projects in partnership with internet service providers. This includes federal grants such as the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF) through the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), and state grants such as the Growing Rural Economies with Access to Technology (GREAT) grant and Completing Access to Broadband (CAB) grant through the NC Division of Broadband and Digital Opportunity. These grants provide funding for companies to go into rural areas that would otherwise be unprofitable because of the upfront infrastructure costs and the low population densities. This has helped bring broadband projects to rural areas in the region. Some counties were able to use American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to assist with the match requirements of these grants.

While we still have long way to go in some areas, there have been many recent projects to bring broadband to unserved places. The next round of CAB funding awards was announced shortly prior to this writing, with awards for additional counties expected to be announced in the near future. The expectation is that all counties in the region will have projects awarded. This will put us closer to closing the broadband service gap in the region.

The state will soon be administering funds through the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) grant. This will be a state managed grant. Internet service providers have already applied to be pre-qualified to participate. It is essential that local input is a driving factor in how these funds are allocated, including local input on selection of the internet service provider for each particular area. The BEAD allocation process is expected to begin in 2025.

Table 9 shows past North Carolina GREAT and CAB broadband infrastructure grant awards in the region and their current status (as of December 2024). Information on the status of RDOF grants was not readily available.

Table 9: Mid-East Region CAB and GREAT Grant Awards

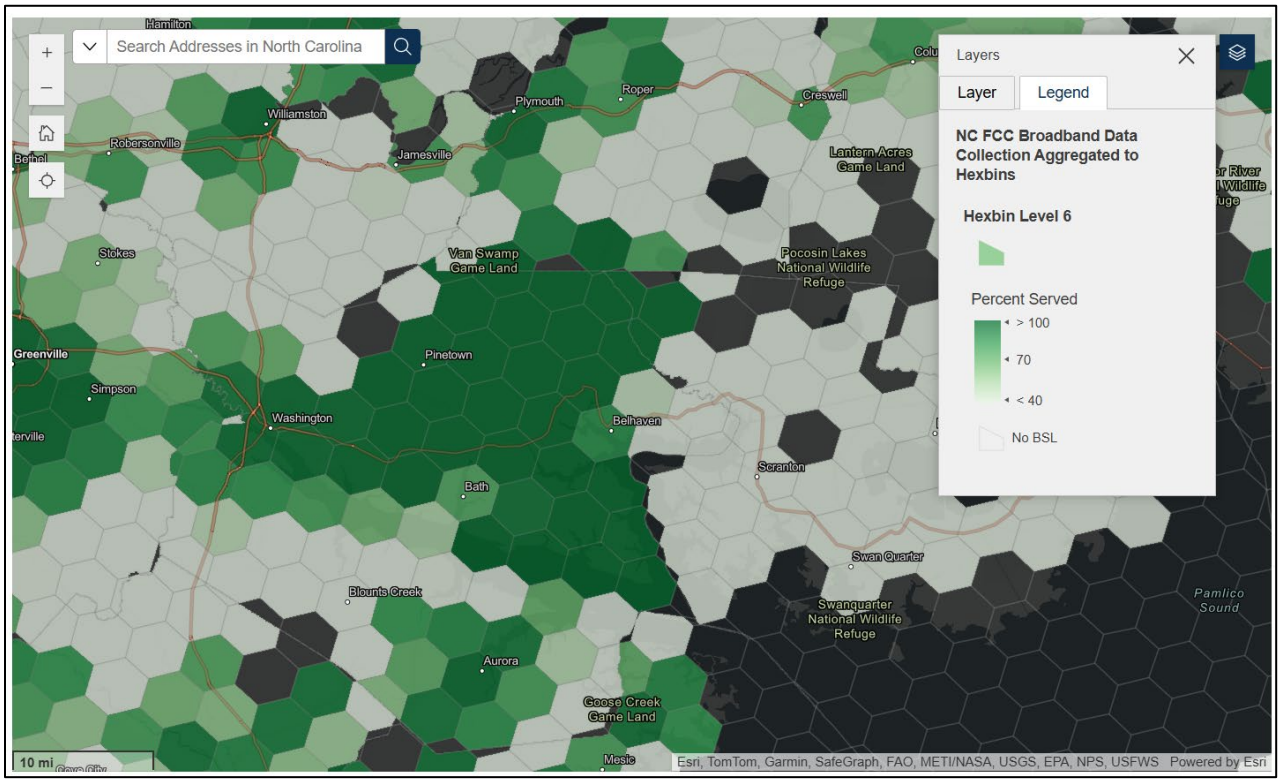
County	Program	Internet Service Provider	Grant Amount	Match Amount	Project Status
Beaufort	CAB	Brightspeed	$2,762,123	$2,367,534	Contracted
Beaufort	GREAT	Brightspeed	$4,000,000	$1,290,509	Construction Phase
Beaufort	GREAT	Spectrum	$1,679,248	$296,338	Contracted
Bertie	GREAT	FYBE	$2,441,845	$430,913	Construction Phase
Bertie	GREAT	Spectrum	$1,813,102	$777,044	Construction Phase

Hertford	CAB	FYBE	$999,797	$88,217	Design Phase
Hertford	GREAT	Brightspeed	$1,356,586	$581,394	Construction Phase
Martin	CAB	Brightspeed	$5,222,662	$1,044,532	Contracted
Martin	GREAT	FYBE	$4,000,000	$2,316,740	Contracted
Pitt	CAB	Brightspeed	$3,547,248	$3,040,498	Contracted
Pitt	GREAT	Brightspeed	$4,000,000	$5,213,922	Construction Phase
Pitt	GREAT	Spectrum	$1,060,186	$187,091	Construction Phase

Source: NC Dept. of Information Technology Awards by County Dashboard

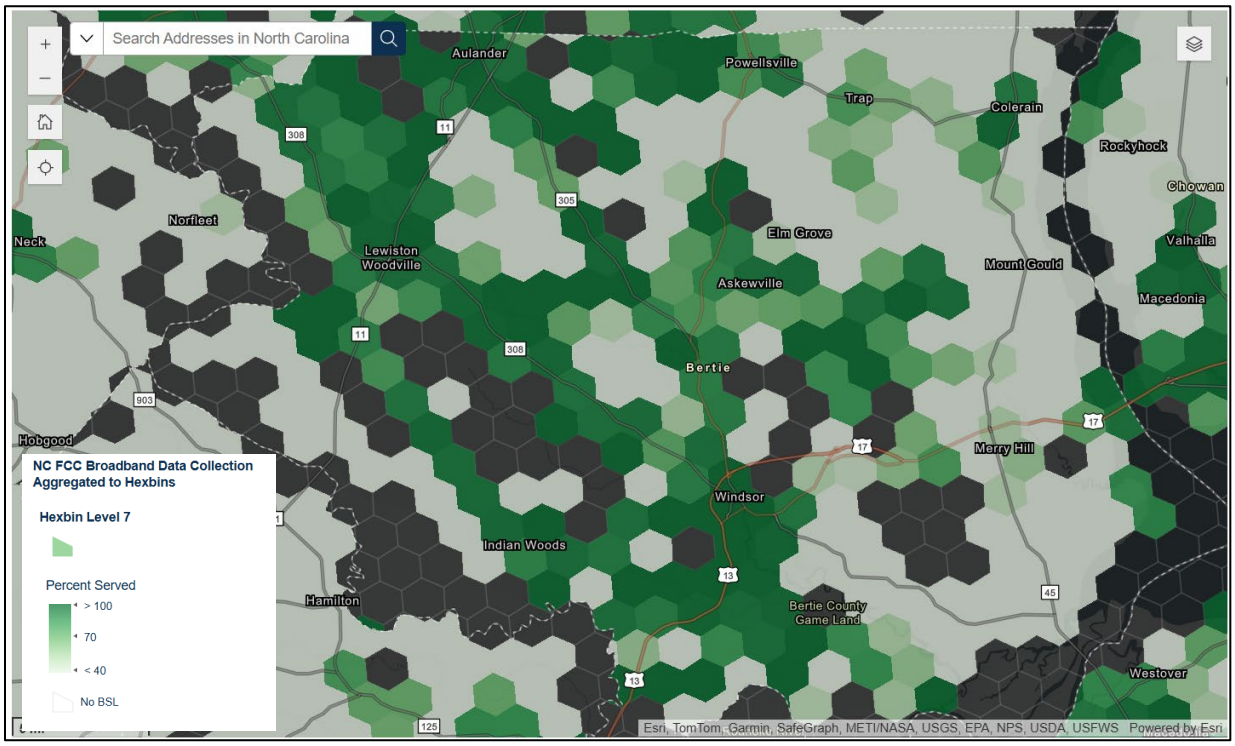
The following maps show the percentage of properties that are served with high speed broadband internet aggregated into hexagonal areas for each county.

Map 1: Beaufort County FCC Broadband Data Collection Map, June 2024



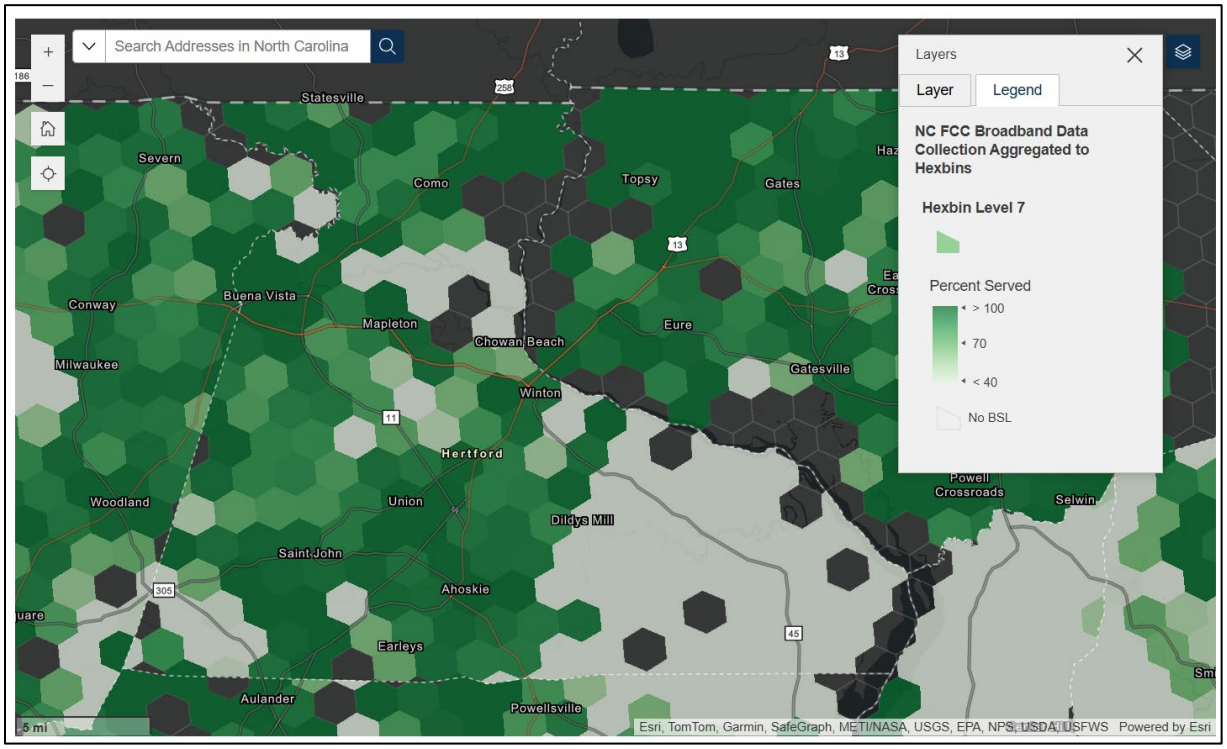
Source: NC Dept. of Information Technology

Map 2: Bertie County FCC Broadband Data Collection Map, June 2024



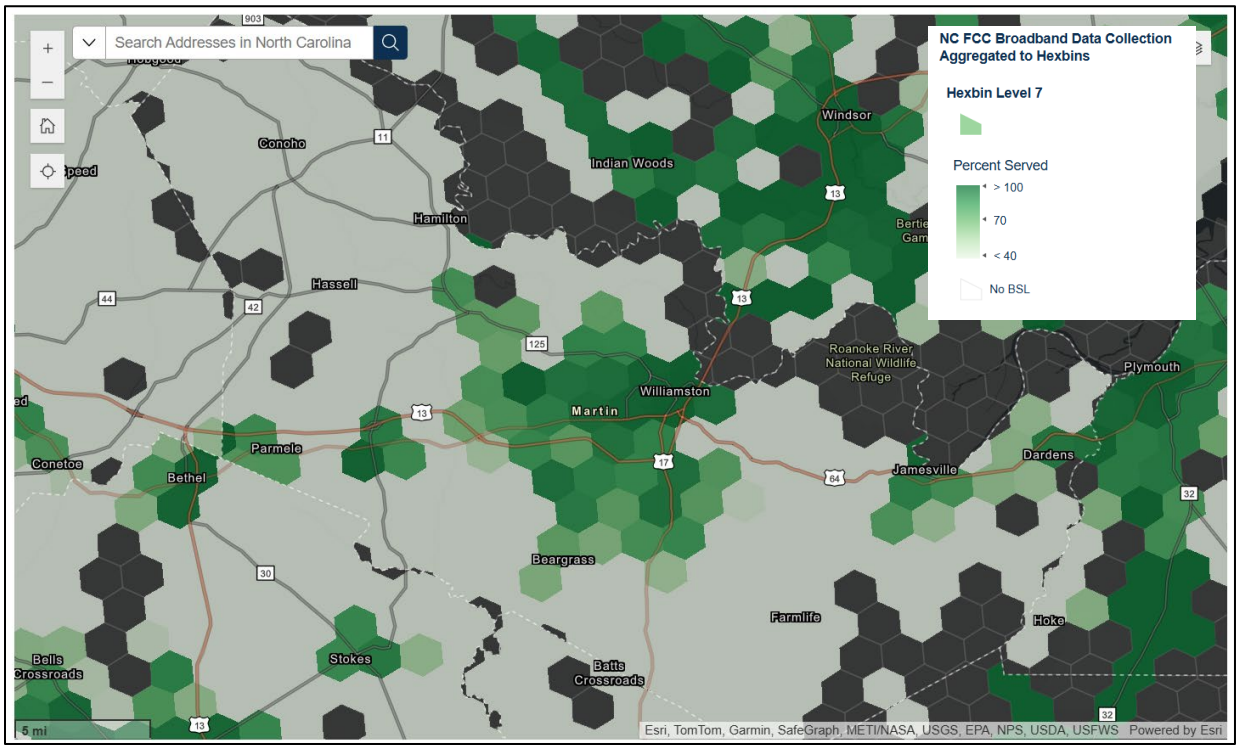
Source: NC Dept. of Information Technology

Map 3: Hertford County FCC Broadband Collection Map, June 2024



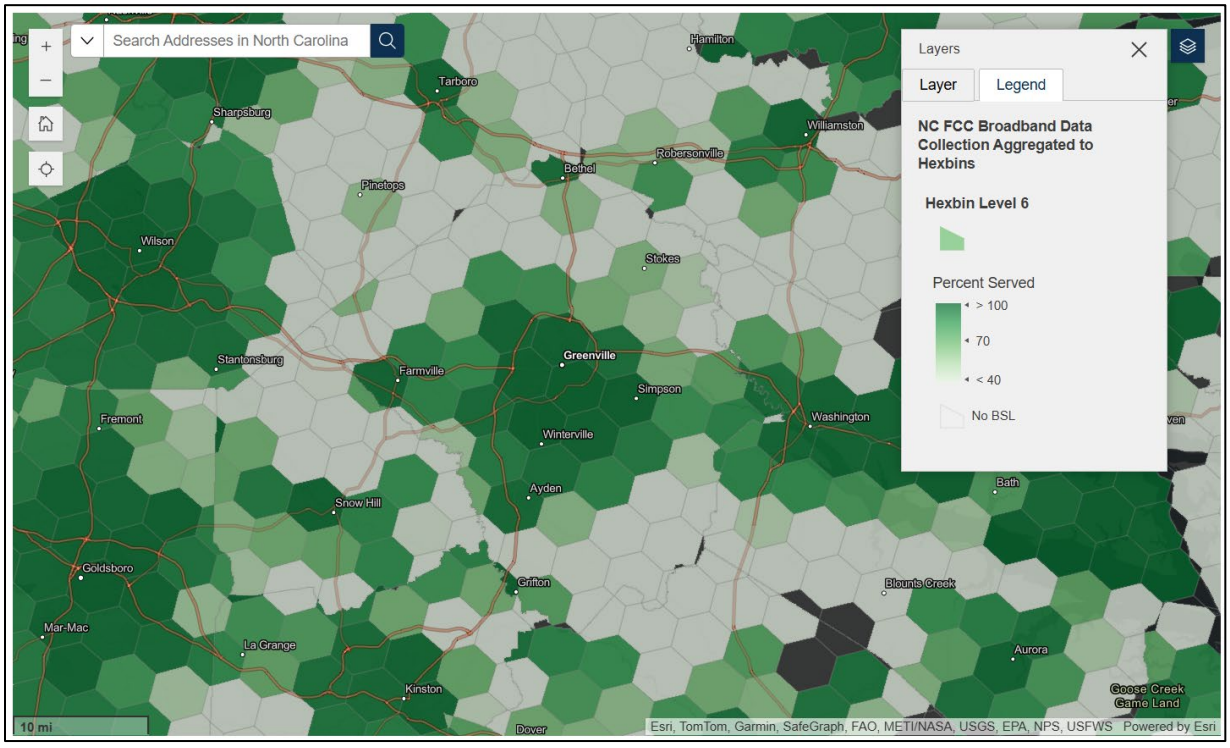
Source: NC Dept. of Information Technology

Map 4: Martin County FCC Broadband Collection Map, June 2024



Source: NC Dept. of Information Technology

Map 5: Pitt County FCC Broadband Collection Map, June 2024



Source: NC Dept. of Information Technology

Overview of Cellular Tower Infrastructure in the Region

There are still many rural areas in the region that have a lack of reliable cellular phone service. The recent switch to 5G technology exacerbated this problem in rural areas, as cell towers need to be closer together than they did with 4G technology in order to have enough signal. Many people are unable to get service at their homes or have to walk around their properties in an attempt to get signal. Cellular or hot spot based access is the only way that many residents can afford to access the internet. It is imperative that every household, business, and organization in the region is served with adequate cellular signal.

As is the case with broadband infrastructure, it is difficult for providers to make the case to build cellular towers in rural areas due to the smaller customer base. Past grants have focused on broadband infrastructure, but cell tower infrastructure in rural areas has not been addressed.

The FCC announced the 5G Fund for Rural America and published initial rules for the grant in August 2024. This fund will allocate $9 Billion to mobile wireless carriers to bring 5G mobile wireless coverage to areas of the United States being served by 4G LTE or earlier wireless technologies.

The FCC is currently updating its mapping database to identify eligible unserved and underserved areas. This process is being supported by a speed test that is available to the public. There will be an opportunity for state and local organizations and private citizens to submit challenges to the map before eligible areas are finalized. It is important that local and regional governments take advantage of this opportunity when the challenge process opens.

The 5G Fund for Rural America will operate on a “reverse auction” basis, where companies will bid to provide 5G services in areas determined to by the FCC in the funding maps, with funding going to the lowest bidder. This is similar to how the FCC rolled out the RDOF grant for broadband infrastructure. Details are not posted as of this writing, but it is expected that there will be a pre-qualification process for providers. This process is expected to begin in 2025.

Local governments and regional partners should stay involved to ensure that local input is a driving factor in the 5G Fund for Rural America award process. Development of partnerships with cellular service providers and FCC staff will be essential and should start now. Lessons learned from the earliest broadband infrastructure grants indicate that local involvement from the beginning of the process is best case scenario to ensure community needs are met.

Overview of Digital Equity in the Region

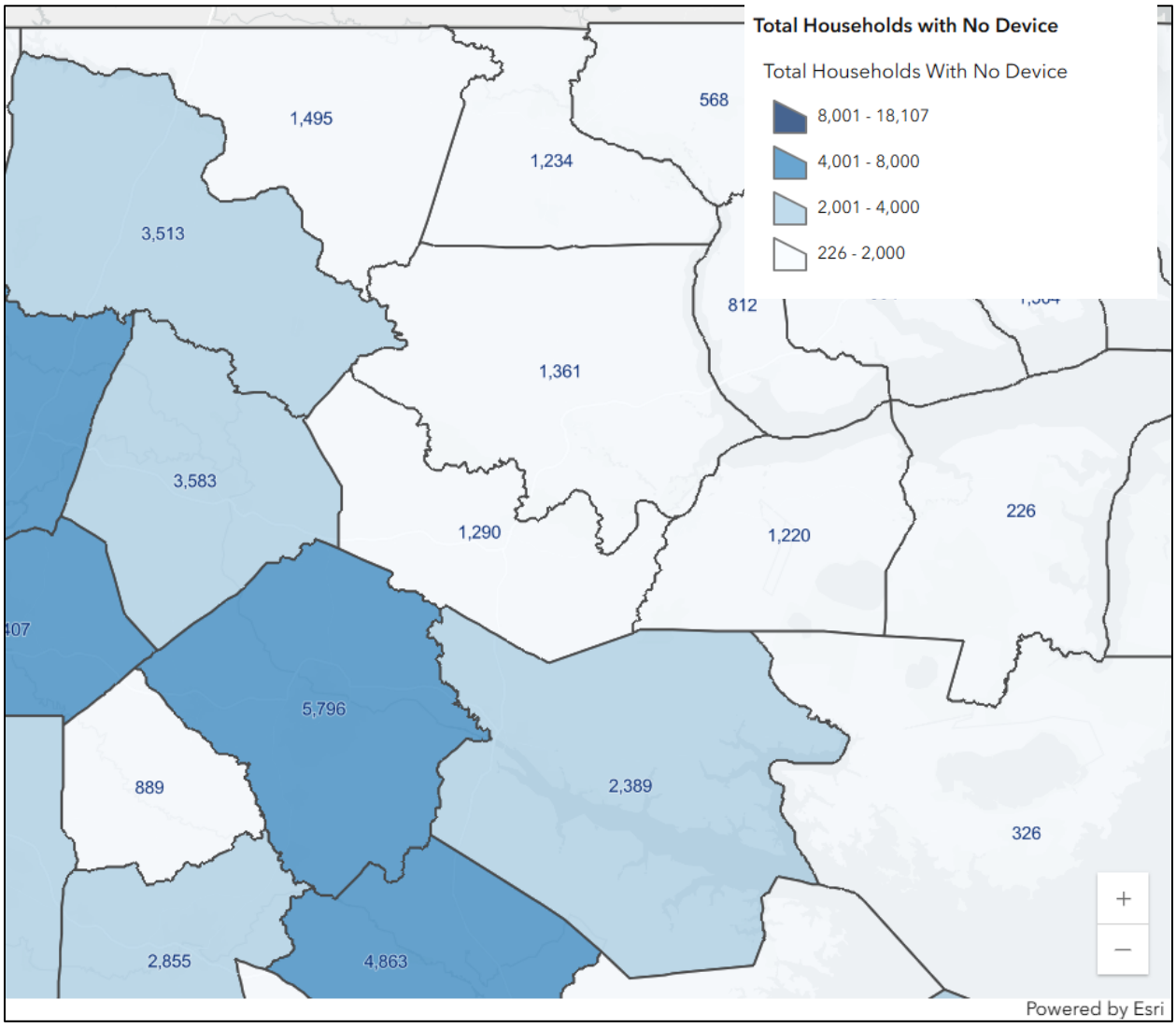
Part of digital equity is ensuring that all homes, businesses and organizations have access to infrastructure. If everyone had access to broadband and cellular infrastructure, would that solve the digital divide? The answer is no. Residents also need to be able to afford the service, they need devices to access the service, and they need the skills to use the devices.

Even in areas where there is adequate broadband infrastructure, many residents cannot afford to connect to the service. The cancellation of the federal Affordable Connectivity Program in 2024 exacerbated this affordability issue. Over 900,000 people in North Carolina relied on the program, which provided a $30 discount on the participants' monthly internet bill.

The only current internet subsidy program available to residents in the region is the FCC's Lifeline program, which provides a $9.25 monthly discount on an internet or phone bill. This program is under marketed and there are likely many residents who would qualify that are not enrolled. Some internet service providers offer affordable plans to qualifying residents (usually at reduced speeds), but there are many single provider areas where this is not an option.

Along the same lines, many residents are unable to afford the devices that they need to access the internet. Some community institutions offer device lending programs. In many areas, demand exceeds available devices. K-12 students usually have a device that they can utilize throughout the school year. It is imperative that this funding for student device access is maintained in all districts. There are currently no active device gifting programs in the region. Map 6 shows the estimated total households with no device for each county in the region.

Map 6: Households with No Device



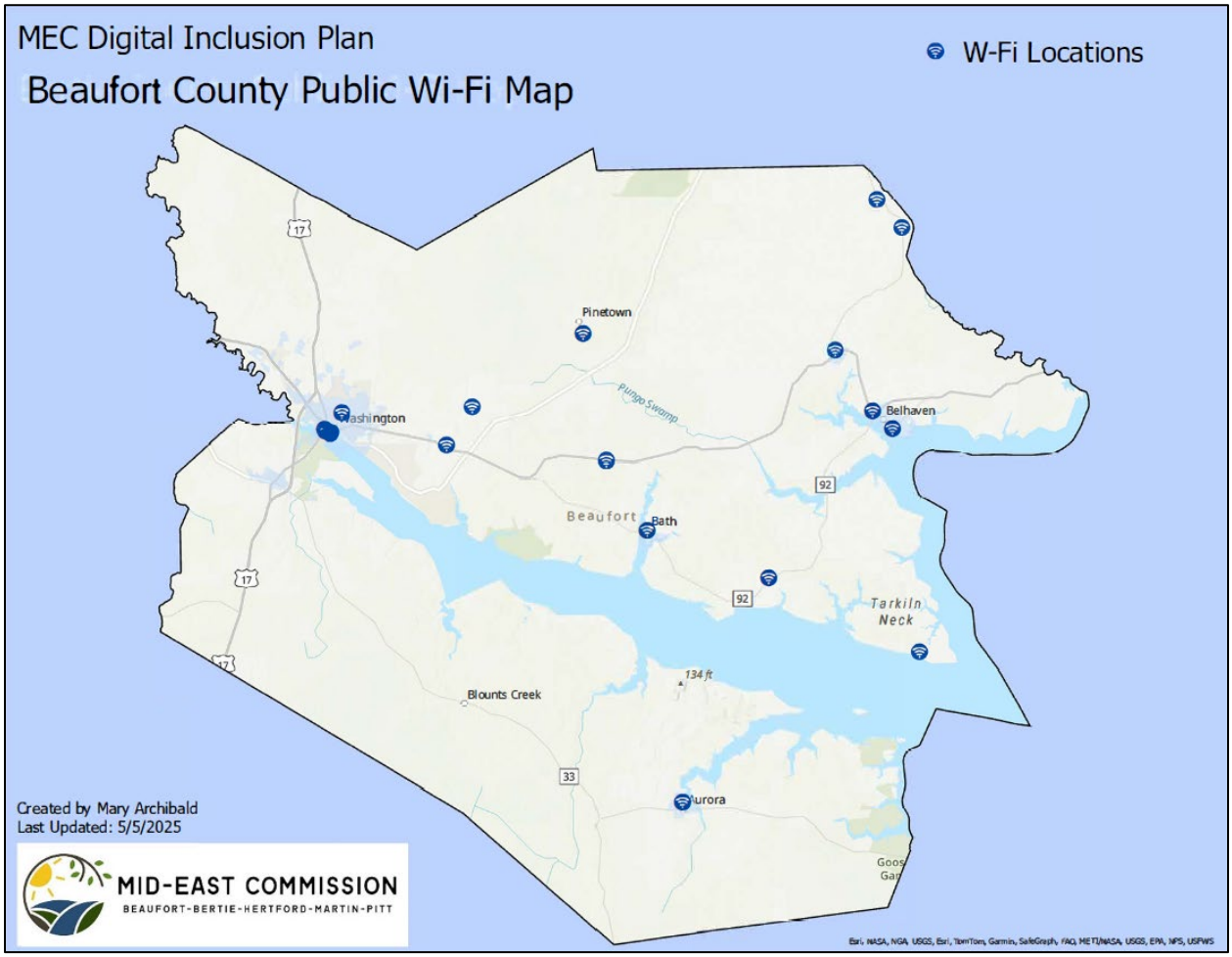
Source: NC Dept. of Information Technology

While not a replacement for at home access, public wi-fi locations are an important part of the strategy to close the digital divide. This can include drive up locations, as well as locations that have computers available and staff on hand to assist patrons. Community anchor institutions can also be outfitted with back-up satellite connections to serve the community in the event of infrastructure damage resulting from a natural disaster.

Many small towns and rural areas in the region lack access to a free public wi-fi network. There is a need to expand the number of public wi-fi networks in the region. Some existing public wi-fi networks are also in need of improvement. Security issues need to be addressed to ensure the sustainability of public networks.

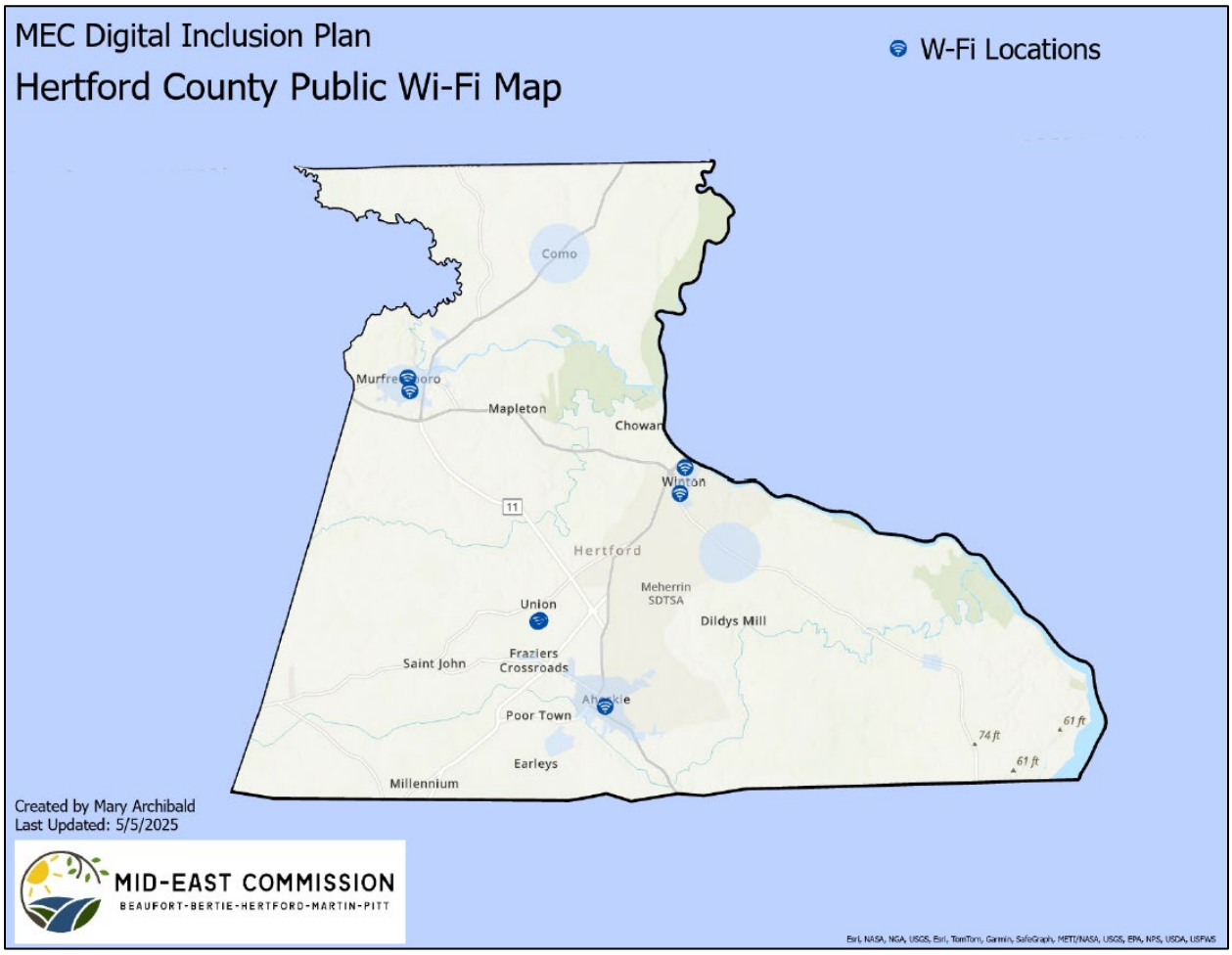
The following maps show the availability of public wi-fi networks in the Mid-East Region. The final map is a distance spot map which highlights areas that are the furthest from a public wi-fi network.

Map 7: Beaufort County Public Wi-Fi Networks

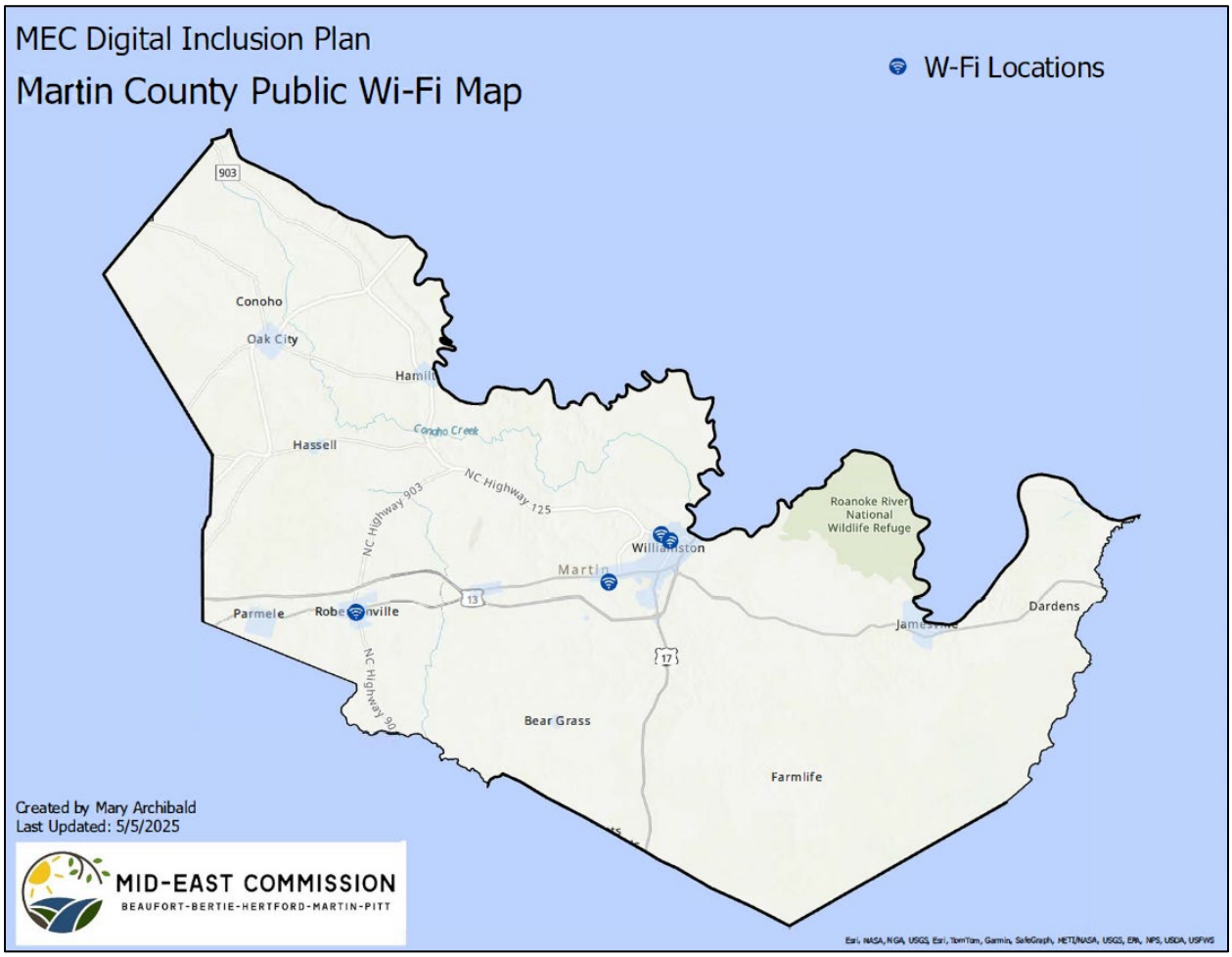


Map 8: Bertie County Public Wi-Fi Networks

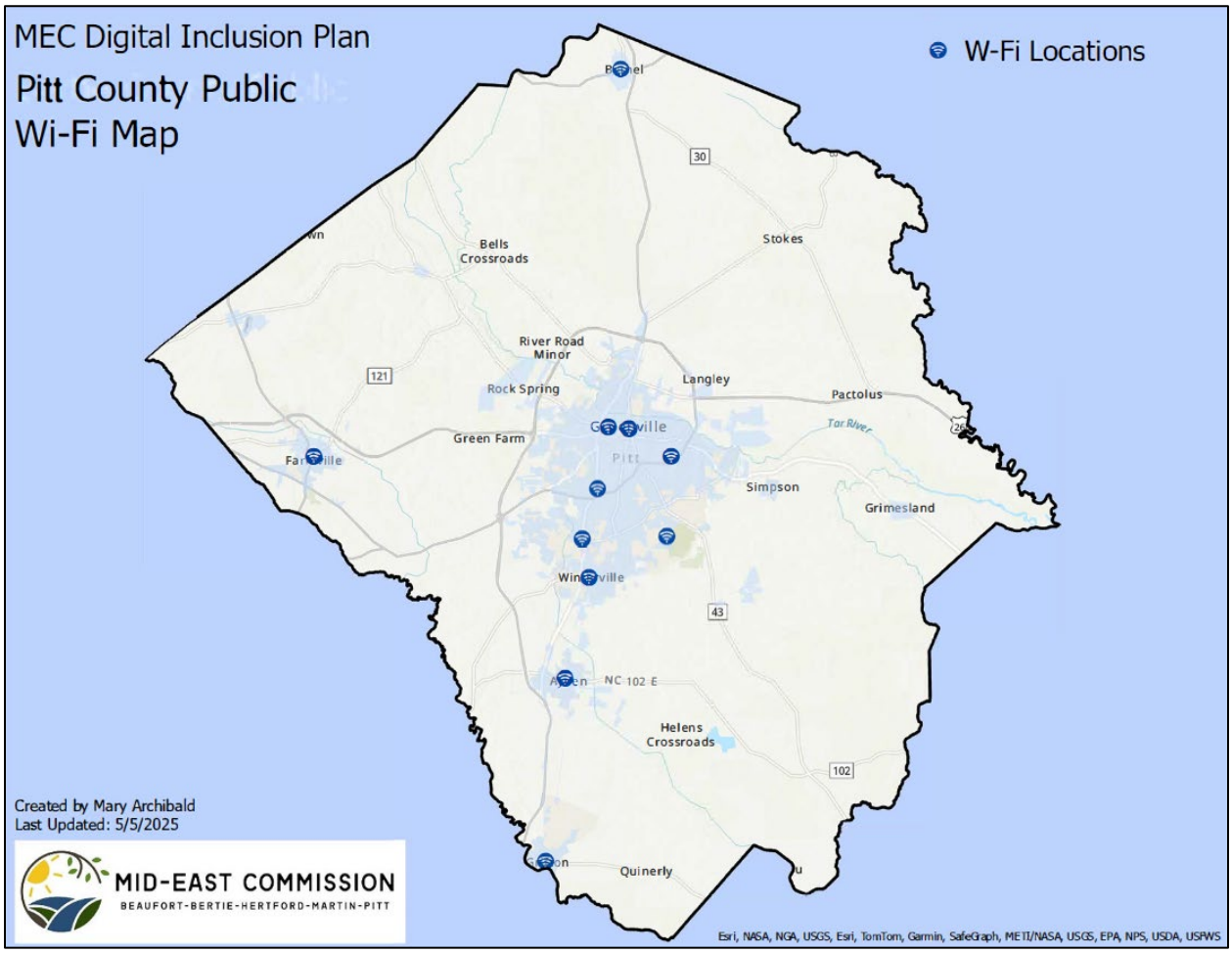
Map 9: Hertford County Public Wi-Fi Networks



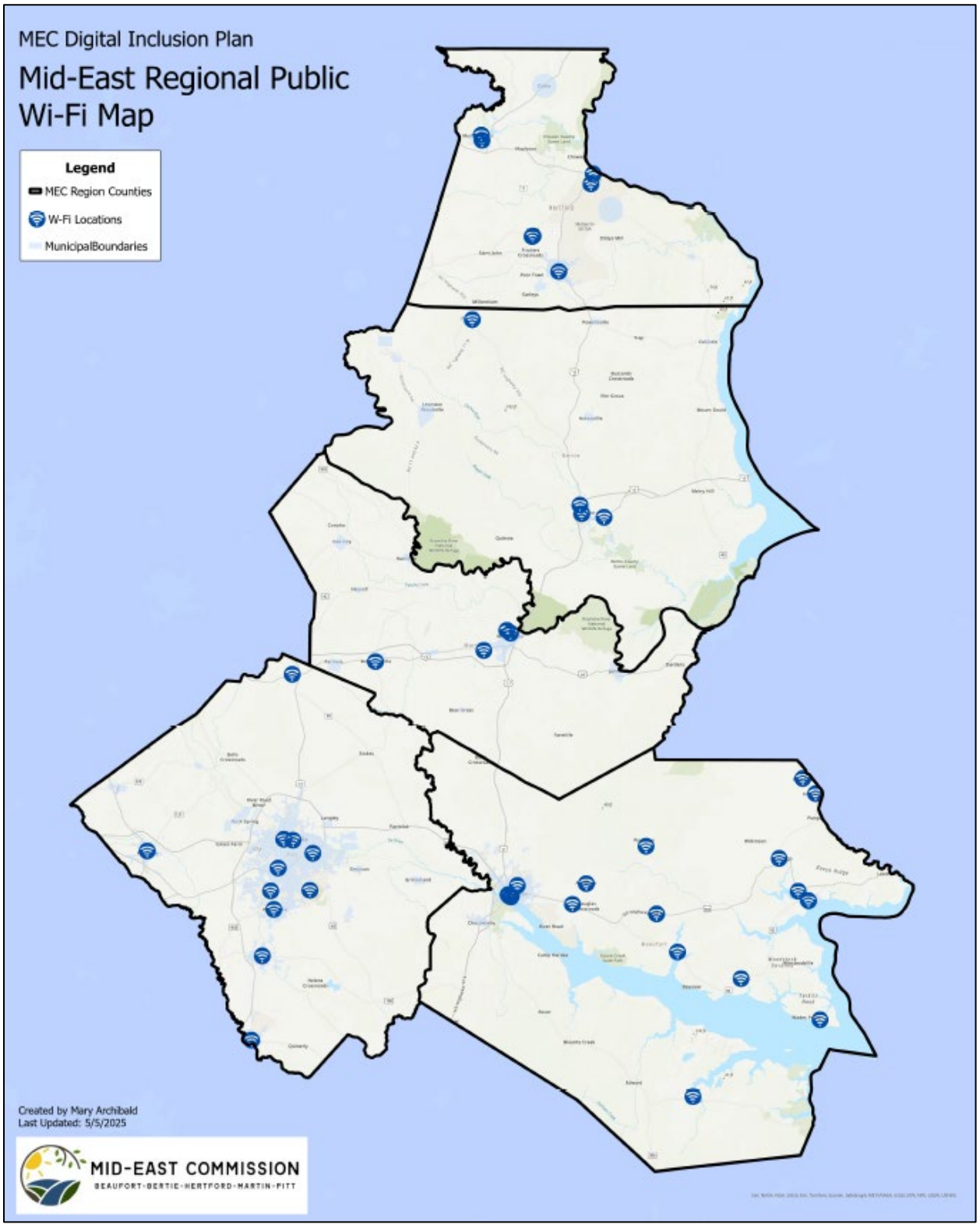
Map 10: Martin County Public Wi-Fi Networks



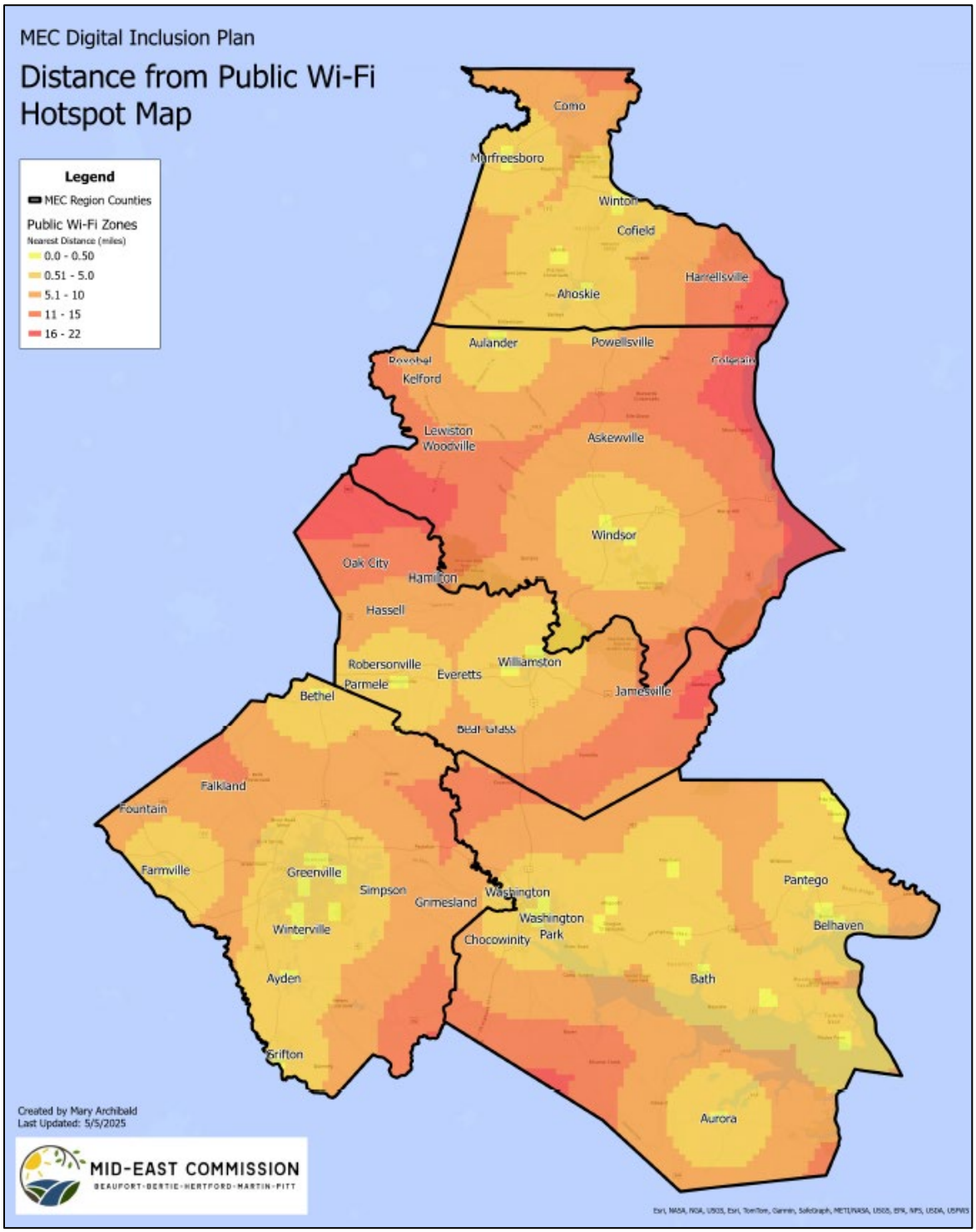
Map 11: Pitt County Public Wi-Fi Networks



Map 12: Mid-East Region Public Wi-Fi Networks



Map 13: Mid-East Region Public Wi-Fi Network Distance Spot Analysis



*Note: A limitation of this analysis is that it does not include consideration of public wi-fi sites in surrounding counties.

Many residents in the region are being left behind because they do not have the digital skills that they need to thrive in the modern world. As job applications, government benefits, healthcare access, and other essential functions transition to online formats, many residents still do not know how to use a computer for even the most basic tasks. This represents a dire gap in public education. Some groups are at a higher risk of having of digital skills gaps, including low-income workers, reentry populations, seniors, and veterans.

While there are some opportunities for digital skills education in the region, the needs far outweigh the availability of digital skills educators. Community targeted digital skills education should occur (ideally free or low cost) at all Community Colleges in the region. This type of program currently exists at Beaufort County Community College and Martin Community College, but not at Roanoke-Chowan Community College or Pitt Community College. There is also the need for mobile solutions and for the expansion of educators who go out to community institutions such as churches, libraries, and senior centers to provide programming.

Digital skills education programs currently active in the region are summarized in the Asset Mapping section of this plan. It is important that these programs are sustained and expanded to meet the vast digital education needs of the region.

Asset Mapping

Categories of Support

These categories are available for participants in NC Dept. of Information Technology's Asset Inventory Survey and were also used for this community asset mapping excercise. They are National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) definitions.

- Device Access - Organizations or programs that help people access affordable digital devices. This could include organizations and programs along the entire device supply chain, including device donation sources, refurbishers, retailers, and distribution locations.
- Digital Skills & Technical Support – Organizations or programs that offer digital skills resources (classes and training) and technical support services (break/fix and troubleshooting of devices, equipment, and network). These may include in-person services as well as tools and resources available digitally.
- Public Devices & Internet – Organizations or programs that provide publicly available digital devices and broadband access. In contrast to the prior 'Device Access' section, which focuses on person service or devices, this section focuses on shared resources.

This could include computers and internet access available in central locations (e.g., library or senior center) or devices like laptops and hotspots that are loaned for home use.

- Digital Inclusion Funding – Organizations or programs that fund digital inclusion work in any or all of the other categories.
- Other (please explain)

Regional and State Organizations

- AARP NC Fraud Watch Network
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Statewide
    - Details: AARP offers fraud watch classes to support seniors in staying safe online. They are willing to travel to host classes locally.
- Agricultural Workers Digital Equity Initiative (East Carolina University, NC Office of Rural Health's Farmworker Health Team, NC State University)
    - Categories: Device Access, Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Statewide
    - Details: The five-year, nearly $6 million award strives to advance health equity by promoting digital inclusion for agricultural workers and their families in NC. The goal of the Agricultural Workers Digital Equity Initiative is to increase agricultural workers' access to digital health services and emergency communication by improving access to affordable, reliable high-speed internet. The Agricultural Workers' Digital Equity Initiative will enhance partnerships aimed at equipping NC's farming community with digital resources and skills, bolstering the safety toolkit for both agricultural workers and farmers. This opportunity enables access to critical healthcare resources through telehealth, propelling us toward a safer and healthier future for NC agriculture.
- Albemarle Regional Library (branches listed individually)
    - Categories: Device Access, Public Devices & Internet, Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Bertie, Hertford, Gates and Northamption Counties
    - Details: Operate a device lending program. Provide public computers and public internet access. Although staff is not specifically trained in digital skills education and they don't teach formal courses, they do provide patrons with one-on-one assistance as requested. Bertie County Cooperative Extension offers structured classes at the Albemarle Regional Library branches.

- BHM Regional Library (branches listed individually)
    - Categories: Public Devices & Internet, Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Beaufort, Martin, and Hyde Counties
    - Details: Provide public computers and public internet access. Although staff is not specifically trained in digital skills education and they don't teach formal courses, they do provide patrons with one-on-one assistance as requested. Beaufort County Community College Digital Bridge program staff offer scheduled digital skills programming at the library, including structured courses and opportunities for one-on-one support.
- Churches Outreach Network
    - Categories: Device Access
    - Service Area: Beaufort and Pitt Counties
    - Details: Device access program for low-income families.
- County K-12 School Districts
    - Categories: Device Access
    - Service Area: Statewide
    - Details: Public schools provide device access for K-12 students in need. These devices are loaned and can usually stay with the student throughout the school year.
- E2D
    - Categories: Device Access
    - Service Area: Statewide (currently most active in Charlotte and surrounding areas)
    - Details: E2D collects donated laptops from corporations and individuals, refurbishes them in student-led technology labs, and distributes them to student families who don't have a computer at home.
- East Carolina University, College of Health and Human Performance, Digital Bridges Program
    - Categories: Device Access, Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: 29 counties in Eastern NC
    - Details: Program to train community health workers to provide digital literacy and skills training sessions. Program to partner with libraries to deploy computing devices, hot spots, and rugged internet hubs.
- ECU Health
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support, Public Devices and Internet
    - Service Area: 29 counties in Eastern NC
    - Details: The "Community Health Hub" program locates these hubs in underserved areas. The hubs serve provide access to virtual care as well as

offer a gateway to community resources. Health Hubs are located at local churches, businesses and organizations, and a designated Health Hub ambassador serves as the community's point of contact. The hubs are equipped with necessary devices, including a computer with a webcam and microphone, and vital sign monitors like blood pressure cuffs, pulse oximeters and thermometers. Health Hubs are open to everyone in the community. There are currently 21 hubs and ECU Health is looking to expand to additional locations.

- FCC's Lifeline Program
    - Categories: Digital Inclusion Funding
    - Service Area: Nationwide
    - Details: Provides a $9.25 discount on internet, phone, or bundled services for eligible consumers.
- HarvestBeam
    - Categories: Other
    - Service Area: Beaufort, Pitt, Lenoir, Craven, Greene, Washington and Jones Counties
    - Details: HarvestBeam received a USDA Rural Utility Service Broadband Technical Assistance award to promote the expansion of high-speed internet in 13 communities across Beaufort, Pitt, Lenoir, Craven, Greene, Washington and Jones counties in North Carolina. HarvestBeam will hire students from community colleges and East Carolina University to develop and conduct broadband surveys, host community focus groups and accomplish field research in coordination with local, area and state USDA Rural Development Officials. The award also supports financial modeling, network engineering and broadband mapping needed for future broadband deployment grant programs.
- Hertford, Gates, Chowan and Bertie Reentry Council
    - Categories: Device Access, Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Bertie, Hertford, Chowan and Gates Counties
    - Description: The Reentry Council plans to work with Roanoke Chowan Community College, Martin Community College, and The College of the Albermarle for key digital skills education programming. Virtual reality training is currently being piloted in Rocky Mount and the Reentry Council hopes to make this programming available in Bertie and Hertford Counties.
- Kramden Institute
    - Categories: Device Access, Digital Skills & Technical Support

    - Service Area: Statewide
    - Details: Kramden Institute collects donated desktop and laptop computers from corporations and individuals, refurbishes the computers, and sells them at a low cost to people in need ($30 desktops, $70 laptops). They work with regional distribution partners (such as Councils of Governments and non-profit organizations) across the state. Kramden Institute also offers in-person beginner classes in English and Spanish, online training and certifications, and a computer club for adults. For kids, Kramden Institute offers summer camps, Coders Club, and afterschool programs (in person programs currently only available in Durham).
- Mid-East Commission Area Agency on Aging
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Mid-East Region
    - Details: Full time Digital Navigator position funded to serve senior population.
- NC Cooperative Extension's "NC Digital Futures Program"
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Statewide
    - Details: The NC Digital Futures Program aims to close the digital divide by helping people use technology to improve their lives. The program offers digital skills educational training both in class/group format and on a one-on-one basis with residents. NC State Extension has seven full-time digital skills agents, and six who incorporate digital skills education within other programming. An additional three are members of the N.C. Plant Sciences Initiative (PSI) Extension Agent Network and are creating farms of the future by helping producers adopt digital agriculture tech in areas new to broadband connectivity or in places where connectivity is still lacking. One of the full-time digital skills agents is located in Bertie County's Extension Office and has also started providing services in surrounding counties. There are plans to expand the program. Remote work professional certification is now available in an online setting through NC State Extension.
- NC Office of Rural Health's "Healthier Lives in School and Beyond Telemedicine Program"
    - Categories: Device Access, Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Statewide
    - Details: Provides telehealth access and health screening services at local schools and at community locations with a mobile telehealth van.

- Our Journey 2Gether
    - Categories: Device Access, Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Statewide
    - Details: Provide "first aid reentry kits" and cell phone/technology training to men returning from incarceration from five N.C. Department of Adult Corrections facilities.
- Rivers East Workforce Development Board/NC Works Career Centers
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support, Public Devices & Internet
    - Service Area: Mid-East Region
    - Details: Provide digital skills training and technical assistance through workforce development programs. Provide digital skills training, technical assistance and public device access at NC Works Career Centers in each county. Free drive up public wi-fi access is available at NC Works Career Centers in each county.
- Roanoke Cooperative Digital Health Navigation Initiative
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Bertie, Hertford, Gates, Halifax, and Northampton Counties
    - Details: Full time Digital Health Navigator to teach participants—including elderly individuals, veterans, income-qualified households, and others facing digital literacy challenges—how to confidently use digital tools for telehealth and other health resources. By collaborating with local organizations, creating educational workshops, developing an asset map to enhance health equity, and exploring telehealth access spaces in community settings, this initiative aims to bridge the digital divide and improve the quality of life for all.
- Washington, Hyde, Beaufort, Tyrrell and Martin Reentry Council
    - Categories: Device Access, Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Beaufort, Martin, Washington, Hyde, and Tyrrell Counties
    - Description: Once individuals are enrolled, the Reentry Council can offer the following support:
        - Cell phone and timecard assistance
        - Purchase of a computer or tablet for educational purposes
        - Digital literacy classes including provided transportation in partnership with Beaufort County Community College and Martin Community College.
        - Digital literacy and soft skills training, which includes practical applications such as using AI tools, helpful apps, and navigating online resources.

        - Financial literacy training, through a new partnership with PNC Bank which includes identify theft prevention education.

Beaufort County Organizations

- Alligood Church of God
    - Categories: Public Devices & Internet
    - Service Area: Washington and surrounding areas
    - Details: Free drive up public wi-fi access is available.
- Bath Community Library (a branch of BHM Regional Library)
    - Categories: Public Devices & Internet, Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Bath
    - Details: Provide public computers and public internet access. Although staff is not specifically trained in digital skills education and they don't teach formal courses, they do provide patrons with one-on-one assistance as requested. Beaufort County Community College Digital Bridge program staff offer scheduled digital skills programming at the library, including structured courses and opportunities for one-on-one support.
- Beaufort County Behavioral Health Task Force
    - Categories: Other
    - Service Area: Beaufort County
    - Details: The Behavioral Health Task Force's mission is to address identified behavioral health issues and inform behavioral health system changes for the benefit of children, pregnant women, individuals, and families living in Beaufort County. The program assists local citizens and families with a wide range of issues which includes digital skills and internet access related referrals.
- Beaufort County Community College
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support, Device Access, Public devices and internet
    - Service Area: Beaufort, Hyde, Tyrrell, and Washington Counties
    - Details: Two key initiatives to address challenges in its rural service area: the BCCC Mobile and the Beaufort Digital Bridge program. BCCC Mobile deploys a highly visible van staffed by a full-time Digital Navigator to provide on the ground support, digital literacy instruction, and access to digital devices and internet connectivity. The Beaufort Digital Bridge is a free on-campus program designed to support individuals in navigating the digital world, particularly those in underserved or marginalized communities who may lack access, skills, or confidence with technology. The Digital Bridge Program

offers public devices and internet access at the college and thorough the mobile van. Program leaders also teach at some other locations around the county, such as senior centers. A device lending program is also available through the Digital Bridge Program.

- Beaufort County Health and Wellness Outreach Network (HealthWon)
    - Categories: Other
    - Service Area: Beaufort County
    - Details: HealthWon is a clinical-community collaboration of community health workers, community outreach advocates, health coaches, and health and human service organization members who have come together to push awareness, community education, resource sharing, and advocacy to the public to improve health outcomes. Digital inclusion is one of the groups' focus areas.
- Beaufort County NC Works Career Center
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support, Public Devices & Internet
    - Service Area: Beaufort County
    - Details: Provide digital skills training, technical assistance and public device access related to seeking employment. Free drive up public wi-fi access is available.
- Belhaven Community Library (a branch of BHM Regional Library)
    - Categories: Public Devices & Internet, Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Belhaven
    - Details: Provide public computers and public internet access. Although staff is not specifically trained in digital skills education and they don't teach formal courses, they do provide patrons with one-on-one assistance as requested. Beaufort County Community College Digital Bridge program staff offer scheduled digital skills programming at the library, including structured courses and opportunities for one-on-one support.
- Brown Library
    - Categories: Public Devices & Internet, Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Washington
    - Details: Provide public computers and public internet access. Although staff is not specifically trained in digital skills education and they don't teach formal courses, they do provide patrons with one-on-one assistance as requested. The library offers a regular "Tech Thursday" event where patrons can receive one-on-one tech assistance. This service is available bilingually.
- Downtown Washington
    - Categories: Public Devices & Internet

    - Service Area: Washington
    - Details: The City of Washington provides a free public wi-fi network in the downtown area.
- Everett's Church of Christ
    - Categories: Public Devices & Internet
    - Service Area: Pinetown and surrounding areas
    - Details: Free drive up public wi-fi access is available.
- Grace Martin Harwell Senior Center
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support, Public Devices & Internet
    - Service Area: Washington
    - Details: Provide digital skills training and technical support to the senior population. Provide public computers and public internet access. Beaufort County Community College has programming through the Digital Bridge program available at the Grace Martin Harwell Senior Center in Washington. Cell phone and tablet help is available on a one-on-one basis, and structured classes are also offered at the Senior Center.
- Hazel W. Guilford Memorial Library (a branch of BHM Regional Library)
    - Categories: Public Devices & Internet, Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Aurora
    - Details: Provide public computers and public internet access. Although staff is not specifically trained in digital skills education and they don't teach formal courses, they do provide patrons with one-on-one assistance as requested. Beaufort County Community College Digital Bridge program staff offer scheduled digital skills programming at the library, including structured courses and opportunities for one-on-one support.
- Lifegate Freewill Baptist Church
    - Categories: Public Devices & Internet
    - Service Area: Belhaven and surrounding areas
    - Details: Free drive up public wi-fi access is available.
- Pantego Fire Department
    - Categories: Public Devices & Internet
    - Service Area: Pantego and surrounding areas
    - Details: Free drive up public wi-fi access is available.
- Pinetown Fire Department
    - Categories: Public Devices & Internet
    - Service Area: Pinetown and surrounding areas
    - Details: Free drive up public wi-fi access is available.

- Peletah Ministries
    - Categories: Device Access, Digital Skills & Technical Support, Public Devices & Internet
    - Service Area: Beaufort and Craven Counties
    - Details: Provide digital literacy programs, Digital Navigators, tele-support spaces (Craven County only), and a device loan distribution program.
- Pungo River Fire Department
    - Categories: Public Devices & Internet
    - Service Area: Pantego and surrounding areas
    - Details: Free drive up public wi-fi access is available.
- Purpose of God Annex Outreach Center
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Washington
    - Details: The church assists members with a wide range of issues which includes digital skills and internet access related referrals. The church offers summer programs for children which include computer skills programs.
- St. Clair's Church of Christ
    - Categories: Public Devices & Internet
    - Service Area: Bath and surrounding areas
    - Details: Free drive up public wi-fi access is available.
- Union Grove Church of Christ
    - Categories: Public Devices & Internet
    - Service Area: Pantego and surrounding areas
    - Details: Free drive up public wi-fi access is available.

Bertie County Organizations

- All God's Children Church
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Bertie County and surrounding areas (located in Aulander)
    - Details: Provide digital skills training and technical support courses.
- Bertie Correctional Institution
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: North Carolina (State Prison)
    - Details: Provide digital skills training and technical support to inmates.
- Bertie County Cooperative Extension
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Bertie and Hertford Counties

    - Details: Full time Digital Skills Agent provides both one-on-one digital skills training and technical support as well as group classes in partnership with community organizations. Service has recently been expanded to Hertford County and Halifax County and may be expanding to other surrounding counties. Martin County is currently being targeted for expansion.
- Bertie County Council on Aging/Senior Center
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support, Public Devices & Internet
    - Service Area: Bertie County
    - Details: Provide digital skills training and technical support to the senior population. Provide public computers and public internet access.
- Bertie County NC Works Career Center
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support, Public Devices & Internet
    - Service Area: Bertie County
    - Details: Provide digital skills training, technical assistance and public device access related to seeking employment. Free drive up public wi-fi access is available.
- Bertie County Public Library (a branch of Albemarle Regional Library)
    - Categories: Public Devices & Internet, Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Bertie County (located in Windsor)
    - Details: Provide public computers and public internet access. Although staff is not specifically trained in digital skills education and they don't teach formal courses, they do provide patrons with one-on-one assistance as requested. Bertie County Cooperative Extension offers structured classes at the library.
- Indian Woods Missionary Baptist Church
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Bertie County and surrounding areas (located in Windsor)
    - Details: Provide digital skills training and technical support courses.
- Martin Community College
    - Categories: Device Access, Public Devices & Internet
    - Service Area: Bertie and Martin Counties
    - Details: Provide public computers and public internet access at the satellite Bertie County Campus.
- Mt. Olive Missionary Baptist Church
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Bertie County and surrounding areas (located in Windsor)
    - Details: Provide digital skills training and technical support courses.

- Sallie Harrell Jenkins Memorial Library (a branch of Albemarle Regional Library)
    - Categories: Public Devices & Internet, Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Aulander
    - Details: Provide public computers and public internet access. Although sta is not specifically trained in digital skills education and they don't teach formal courses, they do provide patrons with one-on-one assistance as requested. Bertie County Cooperative Extension offrs structured classes at the library.
- The Hive Educational Vitality Center
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Bertie County
    - Details: Provide digital skills training and technical support both one-on-one and through group classes.
- Windsor-Bertie Chamber of Commerce
    - Categories: Public Devices & Internet
    - Service Area: Bertie County
    - Details: provide public computers and public internet access.

Hertford County Organizations

- Ahoskie Nutrition Site
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Hertford County (located in Ahoskie)
    - Details: Provide digital skills training and technical support courses.
- Ahoskie Public Library (a branch of Albemarle Regional Library)
    - Categories: Public Devices & Internet, Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Ahoskie
    - Details: Provide public computers and public internet access. Although staff is not specifically trained in digital skills education and they don't teach formal courses, they do provide patrons with one-on-one assistance as requested. Bertie County Cooperative Extension offers structured classes at the library.
- Chowan University
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support, Public Devices & Internet
    - Service Area: Murfreesboro
    - Details: Provide public computers and public internet access.
- Elizabeth S. Parker Memorial Library (a branch of Albemarle Regional Library)
    - Categories: Public Devices & Internet, Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Murfreesboro
    - Details: Provide public computers and public internet access. Although staff is not specifically trained in digital skills education and they don't teach formal courses, they do provide patrons with one-on-one assistance as

requested. Bertie County Cooperative Extension offers structured classes at the library.

- Hertford County Council on Aging Office / Winton Senior Center
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support, Public Devices & Internet
    - Service Area: Hertford County
    - Details: Provide digital skills training and technical support to the senior population both in person and in a virtual setting. Provide public computers and public internet access.
- Hertford County NC Works Career Center
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support, Public Devices & Internet
    - Service Area: Hertford County
    - Details: Provide digital skills training, technical assistance and public device access related to seeking employment. Free drive up public wi-fi access is available.
- Hertford County Public Library/Albemarle Regional Library Headquarters
    - Categories: Public Devices & Internet, Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Bertie, Hertford, Gates and Northampton Counties (located in Winton)
    - Details: Provide public computers and public internet access. Although staff is not specifically trained in digital skills education and they don't teach formal courses, they do provide patrons with one-on-one assistance as requested. Bertie County Cooperative Extension offers structured classes at the library.
- Murfreesboro Nutrition Site
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Hertford County (located in Murfreesboro)
    - Details: Provide digital skills training and technical support courses.
- Roanoke Chowan Community College
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support , Public Devices & Internet
    - Service Area: Bertie, Hertford, and Northampton Counties
    - Details: Provide digital skills and technical support classes. Provide public computers and public internet access.

Martin County Organizations

- Martin Community College
    - Categories: Device Access, Digital Skills & Technical Support, Public Devices & Internet
    - Service Area: Bertie and Martin Counties

    - Details: Operate a device access program. Provide digital skills and technical support classes as well as one-on-one support. Provide public computers and public internet access both at the main Martin County campus and the satellite Bertie County Campus.
- Martin County Adult & Aging Services/Williamston Senior Center
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support, Public Devices & Internet
    - Service Area: Martin County
    - Details: Provide digital skills training and technical support to the senior population. Provide public computers and public internet access.
- Martin County NC Works Career Center
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support, Public Devices & Internet
    - Service Area: Martin County
    - Details: Provide digital skills training, technical assistance and public device access related to seeking employment. Free drive up public wi-fi access is available.
- Martin Memorial Library (a branch of BHM Regional Library)
    - Categories: Public Devices & Internet, Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Williamston
    - Details: Provide public computers and public internet access. Although staff is not specifically trained in digital skills education and they don't teach formal courses, they do provide patrons with one-on-one assistance as requested.
- Robersonville Public Library (a branch of BHM Regional Library)
    - Categories: Public Devices & Internet, Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Robersonville
    - Details: Provide public computers and public internet access. Although staff is not specifically trained in digital skills education and they don't teach formal courses, they do provide patrons with one-on-one assistance as requested.
- Martin County Digital Ambassadors Program
    - Categories: Digital Skills Training
    - Service Area: Martin County
    - Details: Partnership between Martin County Schools and Cornerstone Community Based Programs. Students volunteer to go out into the community to teach digital skills.

Pitt County Organizations

- Ayden Library
    - Categories: Public Devices & Internet, Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Ayden
    - Details: Provide public computers and public internet access. Although staff is not specifically trained in digital skills education and they don't teach formal courses, they do provide patrons with one-on-one assistance as requested. The library also offers free online self-paced courses for adults.

Examples of these courses include computer literacy, digital photography, Google Docs, HTML basics, and Microsoft Office, just to name a few.

- Blount Branch Library (a branch of Sheppard Memorial Library)
    - Categories: Device Access, Public Devices & Internet. Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Bethel
    - Details: Provide public computers and public internet access. Operate a community device lending program. Although staff is not specifically trained in digital skills education and they don't teach formal courses, they do provide patrons with one-on-one assistance as requested.
- Carver Branch Library (a branch of Sheppard Memorial Library)
    - Categories: Device Access, Public Devices & Internet, Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Greenville
    - Details: Provide public computers and public internet access. Operate a community device lending program. Although staff is not specifically trained in digital skills education and they don't teach formal courses, they do provide patrons with one-on-one assistance as requested.
- East Branch Library (a branch of Sheppard Memorial Library)
    - Categories: Device Access, Public Devices & Internet, Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Greenville
    - Details: Provide public computers and public internet access. Operate a community device lending program. Although staff is not specifically trained in digital skills education and they don't teach formal courses, they do provide patrons with one-on-one assistance as requested.
- Farmville Public Library
    - Categories: Public Devices & Internet, Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Farmville
    - Details: Provide public computers and public internet access. Although staff is not specifically trained in digital skills education and they don't teach formal courses, they do provide patrons with one-on-one assistance as requested.
- Grifton Public Library
    - Categories: Public Devices & Internet, Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Grifton
    - Details: Provide public computers and public internet access. Although staff is not specifically trained in digital skills education and they don't teach

formal courses, they do provide patrons with one-on-one assistance as requested.

- Pitt Community College
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support, Public Devices & Internet
    - Service Area: Pitt County
    - Details: Provide digital skills and technical support classes as well as one-on-one support. Provide public computers and public internet access.
- Pitt County Council on Aging/Senior Center
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support, Public Devices & Internet
    - Service Area: Pitt County
    - Details: Provide digital skills training and technical support to the senior population. Provide public computers and public internet access.
- Pitt County Health Department
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support, Public Devices & Internet
    - Service Area: Pitt County
    - Details: Establishing satellite clinics equipped with public devices and internet access, telehealth services, and educational resources.
- Pitt County NC Works Career Center
    - Categories: Digital Skills & Technical Support, Public Devices & Internet
    - Service Area: Pitt County
    - Details: Provide digital skills training, technical assistance and public device access related to seeking employment. Free drive up public wi-fi access is available.
- Pitt Reentry Council
    - Categories: Device Access, Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Pitt County
    - Description: Partner with other organizations to refer people to device access programs and digital skills training programs. Examples include partnerships with OurJourney 2Gether, NC Works, and Community Colleges.
- Sheppard Memorial Library Headquarters (Main Library/Children's Library)
    - Categories: Device Access, Public Devices & Internet, Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Pitt County
    - Details: Provide public computers and public internet access. Operate a community device lending program. Although staff is not specifically trained in digital skills education and they don't teach formal courses, they do provide patrons with one-on-one assistance as requested.

- Winterville Public Library (a branch of Sheppard Memorial Library)
    - Categories: Device Access, Public Devices & Internet, Digital Skills & Technical Support
    - Service Area: Winterville
    - Details: Provide public computers and public internet access. Operate a community device lending program. Although staff is not specifically trained in digital skills education and they don't teach formal courses, they do provide patrons with one-on-one assistance as requested.

Goals, Objectives and Implementation Actions

Access to Devices

Access to Devices Goal

- Increase the number of residents in the Mid-East Region who have access to an affordable device that meets their needs and allows them to fully participate in the digital landscape.

Access to Devices Objectives

- Promote and/or develop existing opportunities to remove barriers to device ownership.
- Create and promote a device donation, repair and refurbishment program.
- Increase the number of locations offering public access to usable devices, particularly in low-adoption and low-access areas.
- Provide technical support for device set-up, maintenance, and troubleshooting.
- Increase awareness about existing subsidy/refurbishment programs that would provide low or no-cost devices to people who need them.
- Work with, including but not limited to, educational institutions and community based organizations to support a device lending or gifting program.
- Create and implement a strategic marketing campaign to make the community aware of device access programs.
- Work with correctional facilities (Bertie Correctional Institution in Windsor) and county detention centers to ensure device access to returning citizens.
- Ensure that device access programs start by identifying the needs, goals, and device education level of each person, as device needs will vary.
- Explore the feasibility of partnering with internet service providers on device distribution programs.
- Increase local access to telehealth kiosks.

Access to Devices Implementation Actions

- Tap into existing resources for information on grants (i.e. BAND-NC, Connecting Counties, NCDIT, NC Office of Rural Health, NC Rural Center, etc.)
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of resources being tracked.
        - Use of resources for grant tracking/database.
- Apply for grants to implement device access programs. The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) – Digital Equity Competitive Grant Program grant is a funding opportunity (two more rounds anticipated in 2025 and 2026).
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of grant applications.
        - Number of awarded grants.
        - Dollar value of awarded grants.
- Include staff capacity funds in all grant applications to ensure that programs are implemented and grants are properly administered.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Inclusion in all grant applications.
- Explore the feasibility of a regional device access program which distributes devices through local community level providers.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Research and program design documentation.
        - Implementation of a regional device access program.
- Identify educational and community-based partners who are able to assist with device distribution at the local level. Develop a vetting process to approve organizations to participate.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of community-based partners contacted.
        - Development of vetting application/process.
        - Number of community-based partners assisting with device access program.
- Contact Internet Service Providers to see which are able to assist with device distribution programs.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of Internet Service Providers contacted.
        - Number of Internet Service Providers assisting with device access program.
- Partner with Bertie Correctional Institution and County Detention Centers to distribute devices to returning citizens that meet their needs, such as smartphones.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Partnership formed with Bertie Correctional Institution.
        - Partnership formed with County Detention Centers.

        - Number of returning citizens provided with smartphones.
- Decide what qualifications for participation in the device access program are.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Inclusion in research and program design documentation.
- Consider how the application process will work and develop an application for vetting participants.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Inclusion in research and program design documentation.
- Design and implement the device access program.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Research and program design documentation.
        - Implementation of regional device access program.
- Research and implement best practices for device tracking to manage situations such as lost or stolen devices in device lending and gifting programs.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Inclusion in research and program design documentation.
        - Implemented as part of the regional device access program.
- Integrate resilience back-ups in device access programs, such as battery back-ups for equipment, and multiple carriers serving hotspots, including satellite carriers such as Starlink that can work outside of the normal network as back-up service.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Inclusion in research and program design documentation.
        - Implemented as part of the regional device access program.
- Explore the feasibility of sourcing retiring computers from businesses, schools and governments in the region, refurbishing them, and then donating them through the device access program.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Inclusion in research and program design documentation.
        - Implemented as part of the regional device access program.
- Partner with reputable agencies with security protocols in place, or take internal measures to ensure that security issues are addressed when utilizing device refurbishment to source devices.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Security protocol in place (internally and/or through partner organization).
- Plan for software availability when accepting refurbished devices.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Inclusion in research and program design documentation.
        - Basic functional software always included.
        - Number of unique software programs offered to meet different categories of needs.

- Identify all user groups and different needs of each (students 16+ who are not enrolled in the K-12 school system, workforce, seniors, disabled, etc.)
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Inclusion in research and program design documentation.
        - Implemented as part of the regional device access program.
- Determine how many of each device type to start the device access program with (desktop computers, laptop computers, tablets, hotspots, smartphones). Align with anticipated needs and grant funding availability.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Inclusion in research and program design documentation.
        - Used as a basis for grant application budgets.
- Explore the feasibility of combining a device access program with an affordability program, so that both needs can be met in one place.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Inclusion in research and program design documentation.
        - Implemented as part of the regional device access program.
- Develop questions that can be used to determine a person's needs and device education level once they are accepted into the program.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Inclusion in research and program design documentation.
        - Implemented as part of the regional device access program.
- Consider the possibility of acceptance on a household level and ask about the needs of all people within the household.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Inclusion in research and program design documentation.
        - Implemented as part of the regional device access program.
- Match individuals to a specific device that meets all categories of their needs and goals.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Inclusion in research and program design documentation.
        - Implemented as part of the regional device access program.
- Catalog existing locations providing public device access and identify gaps.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Catalog and map of existing locations.
        - Gap analysis and recommendations.
- Identify community organizations and government facilities that can potentially provide public device access in underserved areas.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Gap analysis and recommendations.
        - Number of organizations contacted.
        - Number of new public device access locations.
- Partner with organizations to secure funding for public device access.

    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of organizations contacted.
        - Number of organizations assisted with grant applications.
        - Number of funded grant applications.
        - Dollar amount of funded grant applications.
- Survey organizations providing public device access for needs.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of organizations contacted.
        - Documentation of organizations' needs.
        - Identification of resources to meet organizations' needs.
        - Number of organizations provided with grant writing assistance, technical assistance, capacity building, etc.
- Assist with funding applications to upgrade devices or expand the number of public devices offered by existing programs.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of organizations contacted.
        - Number of organizations assisted with grant applications.
        - Number of funded grant applications.
        - Dollar amount of funded grant applications.
- Continue operation of existing public device access programs by working with operating organizations to proactively identify and resolve issues.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of organizations contacted.
        - Documentation of organizations' needs.
        - Identification of resources to meet organizations' needs.
        - Number of organizations provided with grant writing assistance, technical assistance, capacity building, etc.
- Work with libraries and other community partners to establish device lending programs.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of organizations contacted.
        - Number of device lending programs expanded.
        - Number of new device lending programs established.
- Include "contingency" funding to replace lost or broken laptops in lending programs.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Inclusion in research and program design documentation.
        - Implementation as part of lending programs.
- Partner with ECU Community Health and community-based organizations to increase the number of local telehealth kiosks. Implement telehealth kiosks at, including but not limited to; Albemarle Regional Library, Martin Community College, local pharmacies, and other places that can be used for community access.
    - Measurable Metrics:

        - Number of new telehealth kiosks established.
        - Continuation of existing telehealth kiosks.
- Identify software needs of community members.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Inclusion in research and program design documentation.
        - Basic functional software always included.
        - Number of unique software programs offered to meet different categories of needs.
- Work with organizations providing public access to devices to increase the number and variety of software programs available.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of software programs added.
- Explore the feasibility of partnering with NC-based computer refurbishers, E2D – Eliminate the Digital Divide, and the Kramden Institute. Both have received Digital Champions grants to expand their reach and impact in Eastern and Western NC.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Development of a partnership with E2D.
        - Development of a partnership with the Kramden Institute.
        - Number of refurbished computers distributed.
        - Number of residents receiving subsidized device repair services.
- Develop or support a regional program where people can get their devices repaired at a low cost; or provide a subsidy for people to access this service via the private sector.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of residents receiving subsidized device repair services.
- Include a marketing budget in funding applications.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of grant applications with marketing budget included.
        - Percent of grant applications with marketing budget included.
- Utilize partnerships to advertise device access programs via websites and social media, as well as with printed materials such as brochures available at public locations.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of advertising partners.
        - Number of website and social media posts.
        - Number of paid social media ads.
        - Number of public places with brochures, flyers, etc.
        - Number of advertisements in local newspapers, magazines, etc.
- Utilize Digital Navigators, Digital Skills Agents, and similar positions to help refer people to device access programs.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of referrals.
- Educate residents on device access programs during community events.

    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of community events held/attended.
- Work with Internet Service Providers to advertise device access programs.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of Internet Service Providers helping with advertisement and/or enrollment.
        - Number of new households enrolled in device access programs.
- Work with local community partners such as Churches, Libraries, Schools, Senior Centers, and Social Service agencies to refer people to device access programs.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of partner organizations making referrals.
        - Number of referrals.
- Implement cost effective paid advertisements (paid social media ads, newspaper inserts, direct mail campaigns, local magazine ads, etc.).
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of paid social media ads.
        - Number of direct mail campaigns/pieces.
        - Number of newspaper ads.
        - Number of magazine ads.
- Ensure that children in public K-12 schools still have access to devices through a lending program. Advocate for the continuation of funding for these programs. Should funding cease in any district, alternative sources of device access for students need to be implemented.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Device lending program active at all public K-12 schools.

Affordability

Affordability Goal

Increase access to low cost or no-cost broadband across the Mid-East Region through stipend or subsidy programs and services.

Affordability Objectives

- Enroll more residents in affordability programs.
- Work with broadband providers within the Mid-East Region to increase awareness amongst the population about diverse broadband subscription options.
- Increase awareness and enrollment in established programs (i.e. Lifeline, provider plans) that give broadband stipends or subsidies.
- Utilize public, private and non-profit partnerships to develop new broadband subsidy programs.
- Advocate for state and federal funding to address broadband affordability.

- Ensure that affordability programs start by identifying the internet access needs and options for each household.
- Create and implement a strategic marketing campaign to make the community aware of affordability programs.
- Advocate for state level policy changes to facilitate broadband affordability.

Affordability Implementation Actions

- Advocate for broadband to be considered an essential utility at the federal and state level.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Joining an existing organized group or developing a regional group for federal and state advocacy.
        - Number of emails, letters, and phone calls to decision makers.
        - Number of in person visits/discussions with decision makers.
- Advocate for additional recurring funding to be allocated to the Affordable Connectivity Program or a similar federal program.
    - Measurable Metrics same as above.
- Advocate for increased funding under the FCC's Lifeline program (Currently $9.25 monthly discount on internet and $5.25 monthly discount on phone.)
    - Measurable Metrics same as above.
- Advocate for a state level broadband affordability program.
    - Measurable Metrics same as above.
- Identify and apply for grants to start a regional broadband affordability program for qualified residents. NC DIT's Digital Champions Grant is a potential funding resource.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of grant applications.
        - Number of awarded grants.
        - Dollar value of awarded grants.
        - Development of a regional broadband affordability program.
        - Number of new households enrolled in a broadband affordability program.
- Address the sustainability of any affordability program that is developed. Ensure that any program that is started can be continued into the foreseeable future. (With the Affordable Connectivity Program, a lot of effort went into signing people up, then it was not funded.)
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Sustainability plan is a part of the design of a regional broadband affordability program.
        - Number of new grant applications to continue program after initially funded.
        - Number of fundraising efforts to continue program after initially funded.
        - Dollars brought in to continue the program.
- Identify a non-profit or create a new non-profit that can fundraise to help support a regional broadband affordability program.
    - Measurable Metrics:

        - Non-profit organization fundraising partnership.
        - Number of fundraising events/efforts.
        - Number of fundraising dollars brought in to continue the program.
- Work with Internet Service Providers and local businesses to contribute to a regional broadband affordability program as a tax-deductible donation.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of contacts made.
        - Number of donations.
        - Dollar value of donations.
- Create specific pools of money within appropriate community organizations to go towards paying internet subscriptions for qualified residents.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of participating community organizations.
        - Number of new households enrolled in broadband affordability programs.
- Catalog all existing broadband affordability programs and discount programs. Utilize existing resources such as the National Digital Inclusion Alliance's honor roll of low cost broadband programs.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Catalog for Mid-East Region developed.
        - Catalog kept updated on a quarterly basis.
- Part of the affordability program process should be helping people to enroll in the lowest cost provider plan that meets their needs; then helping them enroll in affordability programs.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Provider programs are ingrained into the affordability program vetting process.
        - Number of new households enrolled in provider discount programs.
- Utilize partnerships to advertise existing broadband affordability programs via websites and social media, as well as with printed materials such as brochures available at public locations.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of advertising partners.
        - Number of website and social media posts.
        - Number of paid social media ads.
        - Number of public places with brochures, flyers, etc.
        - Number of advertisements in local newspapers, magazines, etc.
- Utilize Digital Skills Educators, Digital Navigators, and similar positions to help enroll people in broadband affordability programs.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of providers offering this service in the region.
        - Number of new households enrolled in affordability programs.

- Educate residents on existing broadband affordability programs during community events.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of events where outreach occurs. This could be an announcement at a Town Council meeting, a booth at a local festival, announcements at civic group gatherings, through local churches, etc.
- Work with Internet Service Providers to advertise broadband affordability programs.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of Internet Service Providers helping with advertisement and/or enrollment.
        - Number of new households enrolled in broadband affordability programs.
- Work with local community partners such as Churches, Libraries, Senior Centers, and Social Service agencies to help enroll people in broadband affordability programs.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of community partnerships to help enroll residents.
        - Number of new households enrolled in broadband affordability programs.
- Increase the number of qualifying households enrolled in the Lifeline program by implementing a strategic marketing campaign to inform the community about the program and how to sign up. Partner organizations can directly assist their clients with signing up for the program.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Development of marketing materials.
        - Number of advertising partners.
        - Number of website and social media posts.
        - Number of paid social media ads.
        - Number of public places with brochures, flyers, etc.
        - Number of advertisements in local newspapers, magazines, etc.
        - Number of events where outreach occurs. This could be an announcement at a Town Council meeting, a booth at a local festival, announcements at civic group gatherings, through local churches, etc.
        - Number of new households enrolled in Lifeline.
- Include Lifeline enrollment in any regional or local affordability program.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Lifeline enrollment included in regional affordability program enrollment process.
        - Number of new households enrolled in Lifeline.
- Partner with community based organizations to implement new affordability programs and to increase enrollment in any local affordability programs that can be used for broadband (an example is the Salvation Army's utility assistance program).
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of community partnerships to help enroll residents.
        - Number of new households enrolled in broadband affordability programs.

        - Number of new households enrolled in local assistance programs.
- Develop and implement a strategic marketing campaign to make the community aware of affordability programs. Utilize diverse marketing strategies in both online and offline formats. Some examples include website postings, paid social media ads, utility bill mailings, and circulations in local newspapers.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Development of marketing materials.
        - Number of advertising partners.
        - Number of website and social media posts.
        - Number of paid social media ads.
        - Number of public places with brochures, flyers, etc.
        - Number of advertisements in local newspapers, magazines, etc.
        - Number of utility bill mailings.
        - Number of ads/circulations in local newspapers.
        - Number of events where outreach occurs. This could be an announcement at a Town Council meeting, a booth at a local festival, announcements at civic group gatherings, through local churches, etc.
- Strive to combine affordability programs with device access programs, so that residents are able to access both from one source.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Affordability programs and device access programs being designed to work together and included together in grant applications.
        - Implementation of a combined regional affordability program and device access program.
- Advocate for state level policy changes to facilitate broadband affordability. New York passed a statewide policy that if the ISP is serving over 20,000 homes, they need to offer a high-speed option that is $15 or less per month. It looks like a great framework to build on.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of emails and letters to state House and Senate representatives.
        - Number of phone calls to state House and Senate representatives.
        - Number of meetings with state House and Senate representatives.
- Explore opportunities for affordable broadband for rural health clinics.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - List of potential solutions for rural health clinics/study documentation.
        - Number of partnerships developed to resolve issue.
        - Affordability solution is implemented.

Availability

Availability Goal

Improve and increase broadband connectivity throughout the Mid-East Region to provide residents and businesses access to reliable, high-speed broadband service.

Availability Objectives

- Pursue future funding opportunities that address broadband availability.
- Pursue grants to make last-mile broadband infrastructure connections and strive to serve every resident and business in the Mid-East Region.
- Advocate for the continued dedication of State and Federal funds to expand broadband availability.
- Pursue future funding opportunities to improve cellular network (5G) availability in the Mid-East Region.
- Address gaps in unlimited bandwidth hotspot funding as well as connectivity for students residing in areas where hotspots are ineffective.
- Increase the number of satellite and fixed wireless options for the most rural areas of the region.
- Identify, promote, and increase free public Wi-Fi across the Mid-East Region to improve accessibility, engaging with local community groups and other partners to utilize potential sites.
- Support the maintenance of existing public Wi-Fi networks and strengthen existing Wi-Fi networks where needed.
- Develop a public Wi-Fi wayfinding program that highlights public Wi-Fi locations.
- Utilize satellite Wi-Fi networks as resilience back-ups. These networks should still be accessible should hard line infrastructure be destroyed.
- Address broadband availability policy during emergency events such as natural disasters.
- Improve partnerships with Internet Service Providers.
- Partner with Internet Service Providers to address the reliability and speed of existing broadband service in areas where this is an issue.

Availability Implementation Actions

- Complete speed tests available through NCDIT in underserved areas (i.e., areas with slow speeds or unreliable service).
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Number of speed tests.
        - No gaps in areas of the region where speed tests have occurred.
        - Number of partner organizations assisting residents with speed tests.
- Educate residents on the need to complete the speed test and how this helps allocate grant funding for broadband infrastructure. Link from local websites to the NCDIT speed test.

    - Measurable Metrics
        - Development of marketing materials.
        - Number of advertising partners.
        - Number of website and social media posts.
        - Number of paid social media ads.
        - Number of public places with brochures, flyers, etc.
        - Number of advertisements in local newspapers, magazines, etc.
        - Number of utility bill mailings.
        - Number of ads/circulations in local newspapers.
        - Number of events where outreach occurs. This could be an announcement at a Town Council meeting, a booth at a local festival, announcements at civic group gatherings, through local churches, etc.
- Review broadband coverage maps and challenge incorrect areas as opportunities arise.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Number of challenges.
        - Number of partner organizations that reviewed maps.
- Keep the database of broadband infrastructure grant programs up to date.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Database updated at least quarterly.
- Share broadband infrastructure grant due dates and requirements with local governments and other eligible entities. Tap into existing resources for information on grants (i.e. BAND-NC, Connecting Counties, NCDIT, NC Rural Center).
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Number of Mid-East Commission Constant Contact newsletter posts.
        - Number of emails with related information to the Steering Committee.
        - Development of an informational portal where this information can be shared in an easy to access format.
- Work with Internet Service Providers to upgrade existing broadband infrastructure to improve reliability and speeds in underserved areas.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Inventory of areas that are deemed served but have reliability and/or speed issues.
        - Number of contacts (email, phone, or in person) with Internet Service Providers.
        - Number of areas with upgraded infrastructure.
- Use maps and data layers developed by Broadband Catalysts to plan broadband infrastructure expansion locations for future grant applications.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Inventory of areas that still need broadband infrastructure completed.
        - Plan to strategically combine unserved areas for grant applications.
- Facilitate regional and cross jurisdictional grant applications where appropriate.

    - Measurable Metrics
        - Number of regional and cross jurisdictional grant applications.
- Continue inviting Internet Service Providers to broadband planning sessions.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Number of participating Internet Service Providers.
        - All Internet Service Providers in the region are invited.
- Invite Internet Service Providers to sponsor and/or participate in local events.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Number of local events with Internet Service Provider sponsorship and/or participation.
- Develop partnerships with Internet Service Providers ahead of grant application cycles and plan for appropriate infrastructure expansion projects together.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Number of Internet Service Providers worked with on future infrastructure plans.
        - All unserved areas have been planned for in partnership with Internet Service Providers.
- Complete due diligence research to ensure that Internet Service Providers that are awarded infrastructure expansion grants are capable of delivering, and that the resulting service will be reliable and high-speed.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Research completed and local recommendations made for every grant application.
- Bolster local and regional grant writing and administration capacity.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Number of new positions.
        - Number of grant applications.
        - Number of grants administered.
- Advocate for state and federal grant programs funding broadband infrastructure to continue until every resident and business in the region is served with 100/25 service.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Joining an existing organized group or developing a regional group for federal and state advocacy.
        - Number of emails, letters, and phone calls to decision makers.
        - Number of in person visits/discussions with decision makers.
- Educate unserved residents in grant build out areas on “stop gap” funding and catalog addresses in these areas that still lack service.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Development of marketing materials.
        - Number of advertising partners.
        - Number of website and social media posts.

        - Number of paid social media ads.
        - Number of public places with brochures, flyers, etc.
        - Number of advertisements in local newspapers, magazines, etc.
        - Number of utility bill mailings.
        - Number of ads/circulations in local newspapers.
        - Number of events where outreach occurs. This could be an announcement at a Town Council meeting, a booth at a local festival, announcements at civic group gatherings, through local churches, etc.
        - Inventory of addresses that still lack service in grant build out areas.
        - Number of households and businesses served through stop gap funds.
- All counties participate in the Stop Gap funding through CAB process with NCDIT.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - All counties are participating.
- Create or change laws to allow use of existing dark fiber and government fiber infrastructure construction to expand in unserved areas.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Joining an existing organized group or developing a regional group for federal and state advocacy.
        - Number of emails, letters, and phone calls to decision makers.
        - Number of in person visits/discussions with decision makers.
- Complete cell phone connectivity/speed tests using the approved app for the FCC's 5G Fund for Rural America (first round of funding expected 2025).
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Number of speed tests.
        - No gaps in areas of the region where speed tests have occurred.
        - Number of partner organizations assisting residents with speed tests.
- Educate residents on the need to complete the connectivity/speed tests and how this helps allocate grant funding for cell phone tower infrastructure. Link from local websites to resources for downloading the app and completing testing.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Development of marketing materials.
        - Number of advertising partners.
        - Number of website and social media posts.
        - Number of paid social media ads.
        - Number of public places with brochures, flyers, etc.
        - Number of advertisements in local newspapers, magazines, etc.
        - Number of utility bill mailings.
        - Number of ads/circulations in local newspapers.
        - Number of events where outreach occurs. This could be an announcement at a Town Council meeting, a booth at a local festival, announcements at civic group gatherings, through local churches, etc.

- Review 5G coverage maps and challenge incorrect areas as opportunities arise.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Number of challenges.
        - Number of partner organizations that reviewed maps.
- Follow the FCC 5G Fund for Rural America funding process and inform local governments and other partner organization when Notice of Funding Opportunity is released.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Number of Mid-East Commission Constant Contact newsletter posts.
        - Number of emails with related information to the Steering Committee.
        - Development of an informational portal where this information can be shared in an easy to access format.
- Eligible entities apply for the FCC 5G Fund for Rural America grant.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Number of grant applications.
        - Number of awarded grants.
        - Dollar value of awarded grants.
- Monitor federal and state agency announcements for additional grant programs to address 5G coverage and share opportunities with local governments and other partner organizations.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Number of Mid-East Commission Constant Contact newsletter posts.
        - Number of emails with related information to the Steering Committee.
        - Development of an informational portal where this information can be shared in an easy to access format.
- Catalog existing public Wi-Fi locations and identify gaps.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Database and map of existing public Wi-Fi locations.
- Identify community organizations and government facilities that can potentially provide public Wi-Fi networks in unserved areas.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Identification of gap areas and potential locations for public Wi-Fi in those areas.
        - Number of organizations contacted (email, phone, or in person) regarding feasibility of offering public Wi-Fi.
- Partner with organizations to secure funding for development of new public Wi-Fi networks.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Number of grant applications.
        - Number of awarded grants.
        - Number of new public Wi-Fi networks.
- Offer public Wi-Fi in all downtown areas in partnership with local governments or downtown organizations.

    - Measurable Metrics
        - Inventory of all downtown areas in the region and which already have public Wi-Fi available.
        - Number of local governments and downtown organizations contacted (email, phone, or in person).
        - Number of grant applications.
        - Number of awarded grants.
        - Number of new downtown public Wi-Fi networks.
- Enable Wi-Fi access in all publicly accessible government buildings.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Inventory of all publicly accessible government buildings in the region and which already have public Wi-Fi available.
        - Number of government organizations contacted (email, phone, or in person).
        - Number of grant applications.
        - Number of awarded grants.
        - Number of new government building public Wi-Fi projects.
- Enable Wi-Fi access in all community and neighborhood parks by installing weather protected routers at park facilities that would expand access to parking lots and picnic areas.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Inventory of all public parks in the region and which already have public Wi-Fi available.
        - Number of local governments contacted (email, phone, or in person).
        - Number of grant applications.
        - Number of awarded grants.
        - Number of new public park Wi-Fi projects.
- Enable Wi-Fi access development in churches, income-based housing, and community-based organization buildings.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Number of churches, income-based housing, and community-based organizations contacted (email, phone, or in person).
        - Number of grant applications.
        - Number of awarded grants.
        - Number of new public Wi-Fi projects in churches, income-based housing developments, and community-based organizations.
- Survey organizations operating existing public Wi-Fi networks for quality issues.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Survey all organizations operating public Wi-Fi networks to ask about their needs and identify any quality issues.

- Partner with organizations to secure funding to improve existing public Wi-Fi networks as needed.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Number of grant applications.
        - Number of awarded grants.
        - Number of existing public Wi-Fi networks that are improved.
- Continue operation of existing public Wi-Fi networks by working with operating organizations to proactively identify and resolve any issues.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Number of operating organizations provided with assistance.
- Seek funding for mobile public Wi-Fi solutions.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Number of grant applications.
        - Number of awarded grants.
        - Number of new mobile public Wi-Fi projects.
- Deploy mobile public Wi-Fi solutions (i.e. Wi-Fi vans) directly to neighborhoods with the greatest need, such as rural areas with high rates of households with no vehicle access.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Number of new mobile public Wi-Fi projects.
- Create an interactive online map of public Wi-Fi access points and update the map on a regular basis. The map should be both website and app based.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Database of all existing public Wi-Fi sites.
        - Creation of map.
        - Map made available through website(s).
        - Map made available through an app.
        - Map is updated at least quarterly.
- Share the map widely through partner organization websites.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Number of website and social media postings.
- Create a printed resource with the map of public Wi-Fi access points along with locations in geographic list format.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Printed resource created.
- Distribute the printed resource through Churches, Civic Groups, Libraries, Schools, Senior Centers, Social Service Agencies, etc.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Number of organizations where printed resource is available or who have distributed the printed resource to their members.
        - Number of printed resources distributed.
- Install visible signage at locations to identify public Wi-Fi access sites.

    - Measurable Metrics
        - Number of signs installed.
- Encourage Internet Service Providers to adopt policies that allow service line extensions of up to 1,500 feet at no additional installation cost.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of Internet Service Providers in the region who adopt the policy.
- Advocate for broadband to be considered an essential utility at the federal and state level.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Joining an existing organized group or developing a regional group for federal and state advocacy.
        - Number of emails, letters, and phone calls to decision makers.
        - Number of in person visits/discussions with decision makers.
- Follow the BEAD funding implementation process and ensure local input is a driving factor in project selection and Internet Service Provider selection.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - All counties provide input into the Internet Service Provider selection process through established methods with NCDIT.
        - Number of projects to be funded through BEAD that are reviewed by the Mid-East Commission, local governments, and partner organizations.
        - Number of comments on projects submitted to NCDIT.
- Develop satellite based Wi-Fi networks to ensure redundancies in the broadband network in the event of natural disasters. Ensure that these networks are property engineered to provide the best service possible.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Catalog all existing satellite based Wi-Fi networks.
        - Include engineering costs in all grant applications.
        - Number of grant applications.
        - Number of funded grant applications.
        - Number of new satellite based Wi-Fi networks.
- Advocate for policies that would open all broadband networks for free public use during and immediately following declared emergency events.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Number of emails, letters, and phone calls to decision makers.
        - Number of in person visits/discussions with decision makers.
        - Number of emails, letters, and phone calls with Internet Service Providers.
        - Number of in person visits/discussions with Internet Service Providers.
        - Policy adopted at the state level.
        - Policy adopted individually by Internet Service Providers.
- Explore the feasibility of partnering with Internet Service Providers to use existing towers to help provide Wi-Fi.
    - Measurable Metrics

        - Number of Internet Service Provider contacts (email, phone, or in person).
        - Number of new public Wi-Fi networks that are set up using existing towers.
- Educate public wi-fi network operators on network security protocols. Proper protocols can help prevent public wi-fi misuse. Passwords can be assigned so users are held accountable, similar to the system that hotels use. Proper protocols can also protect users. For example, information should be clearly visible directing patrons not to sign into online banking or other sensitive data systems on the public wi-fi network.
    - Measurable Metrics
        - Educational materials developed and shared.
        - Number of courses offered.
        - Number of public wi-fi providers worked with.
        - Number of public wi-fi providers implementing security protocols.

Digital Skills

Digital Skills Goal

Develop technology support and educational programming that meets a variety of needs and accommodates all skill levels; empowering community members to gain the necessary skills to fully participate in the digital world.

Digital Skills Objectives

- Provide training that targets specific community needs (basic computer use, basic smart phone use, communication, education, health care access, economic participation, democratic participation, and beyond).
- Partner with trusted organizations to provide space for digital training centers and/or support training events.
- Fund additional Digital Navigator, Digital Skills Agent, and Technical Support Provider positions across the Mid-East Region.
- Provide training resources for Digital Navigators, Digital Skills Agents, and Technical Support Providers.
- Support the expansion of organizations that offer digital skills training.
- Develop opportunities for Digital Navigators, Digital Skills Agents, Technical Support Providers, and similar positions to coordinate and work together.
- Create and implement a strategic marketing campaign to increase awareness of digital skills educational opportunities.
- Extend digital skills training to additional populations and areas throughout the Mid-East Region.
- Leverage partnerships with local community-based organizations within the Mid-East Region to support local and regional efforts.

- Partner with County School Districts, Community Colleges, Small Business Centers, and Universities to provide space and fund instructors to teach digital skills classes that are open to all.
- Explore the feasibility of providing certificates to recognize people for completing digital skills training courses. Refer participants interested in official accreditation to CTE courses (currently available at all Community Colleges in the region).
- Partner with businesses to provide digital skills training that meets workforce development needs.

Digital Skills Implementation Actions

- Catalog all existing digital skills education programs in the region.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Catalog of programs.
- Catalog all existing Digital Navigator, Digital Skills Agent, and Technical Support Provider positions in the region.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Catalog of positions.
- Use survey results and local input to determine community needs.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Inclusion in research and program design documentation.
- Contact businesses to determine digital skills related workforce development training needs.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of businesses contacted.
        - Number of related workforce development training courses.
        - Number of employees trained.
- Explore the feasibility of working digital skills training into existing Business and Industry training funding. Workforce development staff already travel to businesses to provide training through this program.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of related workforce development training courses.
        - Number of employees trained.
- Start a “Train the Trainer” program under workforce development for local businesses. The business would appoint a person that would be trained to be the digital skills “trainer” for that business.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Program research and design documentation.
        - Number of businesses contacted.
        - Number of employees trained to be “trainers”.
- Identify gaps in programs and staffing.
    - Measurable Metrics:

        - Catalog of digital skills programs and catalog of Digital Skills related employee positions.
        - Gap analysis.
        - Recommendations to fill identified gaps.
- Apply for grants to expand the number of Digital Navigator, Digital Skills Agent, Technical Support Providers, and similar positions in the region. The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) – Digital Equity Competitive Grant Program grant is a funding opportunity (two more rounds anticipated in 2025 and 2026).
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of grant applications.
        - Number of positions retained.
        - Number of new positions.
- Implement training programs that meet diverse needs and varying digital education levels (basic computer use, basic smart phone use, communication, education, health care access, economic participation, democratic participation, workforce development, and beyond).
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Training programs available in all counties.
        - Number of unique training program types.
- Educate users on privacy and security matters, including safety on public Wi-Fi networks, avoiding scams, etc.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of educational handouts distributed.
        - Number of website and social media postings.
        - Number of direct mailing campaigns/pieces.
        - Number of training courses that address privacy and security matters.
        - Number of participants in training courses.
- Partner with School Districts, Community Colleges, Small Business Centers, and Universities to provide space and fund instructors to teach digital skills classes that are open to all.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of organizations providing free digital skills classes.
        - Number of classes provided.
        - Number of participants in classes.
- Explore the feasibility of implementing student led training programs.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Inclusion in research and program design documentation.
        - Implementation of student led training program(s).
        - Number of participating schools.
        - Number of students participating in program.

- Partner with Bertie County Correctional Facility and County Detention Centers to provide smart phone training to returning citizens.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Partnership with Bertie County Correctional Facility.
        - Partnership with County Detention Centers.
        - Partnership with reentry organizations.
        - Number of training courses offered.
        - Number of participants in training courses.
- Utilize community partnerships (Libraries, Churches, Senior Centers, Small Business Centers, etc.) to recruit participants and host programs to be taught by Digital Navigators, Digital Skills Agents, Technical Support Providers, and similar providers in the region.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of organizations partnering to host training sessions.
        - Number of training sessions held at each location.
        - Number of participants at training sessions.
- Explore the feasibility of providing certificates to recognize people for completing digital skills training courses. Refer participants interested in official accreditation to CTE courses (currently available at all Community Colleges in the region).
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Inclusion in program research and design documentation.
        - Development of certificates for training programs or training series.
        - Number of referrals for CTE accreditation.
- Research existing “train the trainer” type resources.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Catalog of training resources.
- Develop new targeted “train the trainer” resources if needed.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - All “train the trainer” resources needed are in place.
- Train Digital Navigators, Digital Skills Agents, Technical Support Providers, and similar positions on basic device troubleshooting.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of positions provided with troubleshooting training.
        - Number of devices that are successfully troubleshooted for residents.
- Provide quick access guides by topic that staff can hand out to program participants.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Gathering or development of handouts.
        - Number of handouts distributed.
- Share resources with partner organizations offering digital skills training.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of partner organizations receiving information.

- Research and implement software programs to assist with digital skills training programs. For example, the NorthStar Digital Literacy Platform is used by multiple Community Colleges and automatically adjusts to the student's skill level.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Inclusion in program research and design documentation.
        - Number of software programs implemented.
        - Staff member survey of usefulness of software programs in the field.
- Ensure that Digital Navigators, Digital Skills Agents, and Technical Support Providers have access to the resources and training that they need to provide high-quality services.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - "Knowledge Bank" that providers can all use and contribute to.
        - Number of participating digital skills training providers.
- Partner with AARP NC to host "fraud watch" classes in the region.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - AARP NC partnership established.
        - Number of "fraud watch" classes held.
- Include self-service learning opportunities into digital skills training programs, such as E-Learning that is self-led. Options can be included from basic to technically advanced topics.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Inclusion in program research and design documentation.
        - Subscription to existing self-led educational program or development of new program(s).
        - Self-led educational programs are implemented.
        - Number of topics covered by self-led educational programs.
- Include a marketing budget in funding applications.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of applications that include a marketing budget.
        - Percentage of applications that include a marketing budget.
- Utilize partnerships to advertise digital skills education programs via websites and social media, as well as with printed materials such as brochures available at public locations.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of advertising partners.
        - Number of website and social media posts.
        - Number of paid social media ads.
        - Number of public places with brochures, flyers, etc.
        - Number of advertisements in local newspapers, magazines, etc.
- Utilize community-based organizations to help refer people to digital skills education programs and to host classes.
    - Measurable Metrics:

        - Number of partner organizations making referrals.
        - Number of referrals to digital skills training programs.
        - Number of partner organizations hosting courses.
        - Number of courses at each location.
        - Number of participants in courses.
- Educate residents on digital skills education programs during community events.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of events hosted or attended.
- Work with Internet Service Providers to advertise digital skills education programs.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of Internet Service Providers helping with advertisement and/or enrollment.
        - Number of new households enrolled in device access programs.
- Work with County Schools Systems and Community Colleges to refer people to digital skills education programs.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of schools making referrals.
        - Number of referrals to digital skills education programs.
- The Beaufort County Community College Digital Bridge Program is open to all people 16 and older at no charge. In addition to classes, there are two full time Digital Navigators that get out into the community. This program can be used as a case study for other Community Colleges in the region.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of free digital training programs operating at Community Colleges in the region.
- Work with local businesses to refer employees to digital skills education programs.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of businesses contacted.
        - Number of employees referred to participate in digital skills education programs.
- Implement cost effective paid advertisements (paid social media ads, newspaper inserts, direct mail campaigns, local magazine ads, etc.).
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of paid social media ads.
        - Number of direct mail campaigns/pieces.
        - Number of newspaper ads.
        - Number of magazine ads.
- Offer a robust range of digital skills training courses. Examples include but are not limited to:
    - Basic skills (turning on a device, installing apps, navigating to websites, setting up email, sending email)

- Device maintenance and protection (Anti-Virus, cleaning temporary files/browser history, file management, system updates, etc.)
- Basic Microsoft Office software – Word, Excel, PowerPoint
- Using video applications (Zoom, FaceTime, etc.)
- Using social media
- Entertainment (streaming movies/videos, music, online games, etc.)
- Information about government services (voter registration, DVM, property/tax information, etc.)
- Recreational or tourism information
- Health services / telehealth services
- Applying for and managing government benefits (SNAP, Medicaid/Medicare, Work First, Social Security, internet subsidy programs, etc.)
- Job searches and online applications
- Enrolling in higher education/navigating web based educational portals
- Online banking
- Security/privacy
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of unique courses being offered in the region.
        - A variety of courses offered in all counties.
        - Number of people attending courses.

Implementation Resources

Implementation Resources Goal

- Build structure and organization to support long-term Digital Inclusion success and to empower partners to create their own digital inclusion programs and partnerships.

Implementation Resources Objectives

- Create an informational portal in dual functioning web and app based formats to direct local governments and other partner organizations to resources to assist with implementation of the Mid-East Region Digital Inclusion Plan.
- Create an informational portal in dual functioning web and app based formats to direct citizens to digital inclusion resources.
- Create and implement a strategic marketing campaign to make the community aware of the informational portal and app.
- Seek funding to increase staff capacity to implement the Mid-East Region Digital Inclusion Plan.
- Help guide local governments and community-based organizations in the Mid-East Region when applying to funding opportunities addressing digital inclusion.
- Utilize existing partnerships and develop additional community-based partnerships to support implementation of the Mid-East Region Digital Inclusion Plan.

- Address the sustainability of programs to ensure that resident and business needs can continue being met into the future.
- Track implementation progress through the established Measurable Metrics for each Implementation Action on a minimum quarterly basis.
- Complete a major update of the Mid-East Region Digital Inclusion Plan on a minimum five-year schedule.

Implementation Resources Actions

- Provide support to local governments and other partner organizations who are working on Digital Inclusion related grant applications.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of organizations provided with grant writing assistance, technical assistance, etc.
- Provide resources for local governments and other partner organizations through an easy to access web based and app based informational portal.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Development of informational portal.
- Use existing resources to pull information for the portal (BAND-NC, Connecting Counties, NC Rural Center, NC Office of Rural Health, NCDIT, etc.).
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Up-to-date resources are included on the informational portal.
- Gather all resources to be included in the "implementation organization" information portal and app; i.e. asset mapping, implementation tracking, information on grants, training resources, etc.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Up-to-date resources are included on the informational portal.
- Develop a "knowledge bank" that all Digital Navigators, Digital Skills Agents and similar positions can contribute to and utilize.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Development of the "knowledge bank".
        - Number of digital skills staff members contributing to and utilizing the resource.
- Hire a website/app developer to develop the "implementation organization" informational portal and app using provided resources. Platforms should be provided that allow staff to easily make updates to both the website and app.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Dual functioning website and app are developed (internal for implementation organizations).
        - Staff is able to update the website and app without outside assistance.

- Gather all resources to be included in the public information portal and app; i.e. affordability programs, device access programs, digital skills education opportunities, the public Wi-Fi access map, etc.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Up-to-date resources included on the public portal.
- Hire a website/app developer to develop the dual functioning public informational website and app using provided resources. Platforms should be provided that allow staff to easily make updates.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Dual functioning website and app are developed for public outreach.
- Include a marketing budget in funding applications.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of grant applications that include a marketing budget.
        - Percentage of grant applications that include a marketing budget.
- Utilize partnerships to advertise the informational web portal and app via websites and social media, as well as with printed materials such as brochures available at public locations.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of advertising partners.
        - Number of website and social media posts.
        - Number of paid social media ads.
        - Number of public places with brochures, flyers, etc.
        - Number of advertisements in local newspapers, magazines, etc.
- Utilize community-based organizations to help refer people to the informational web portal and app.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of organizations making referrals.
        - Number of referrals.
        - Traffic counts on website and app.
- Educate residents on the informational web portal and app during community events.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of events hosted or attended with the information.
- Work with County Schools Systems, Community Colleges, and Universities to refer people to the informational web portal and app.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of schools making referrals.
        - Number of referrals.
        - Traffic counts on website and app.
- Implement cost effective paid advertisements (paid social media ads, newspaper inserts, direct mail campaigns, local magazine ads, etc.).
    - Measurable Metrics:

        - Number of paid social media ads.
        - Number of direct mail campaigns/pieces.
        - Number of newspaper ads.
        - Number of magazine ads.
- Include funding to support Mid-East Commission staff and partner organization staff in all grant applications.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Inclusion in all grant applications.
- Utilize existing partnerships to the greatest extent possible, including partnerships on grant applications, providing a local source to serve residents in various programs, advertising available programs, etc.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Percentage of grant applications with partner organizations.
        - Number of partner organizations assisting with advertising available programs.
        - Number of partner organizations referring people to programs.
        - Number of potential new partner organizations contacted.
- Catalog all community-based organizations in the region.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Catalog/database of all organizations.
- Reach out to community-based organizations to develop new digital inclusion partnerships.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Number of potential new partner organizations contacted.
        - Number of new partnerships.
- Plan for continued grant applications or other forms of funding allocation to ensure that programs can continue to serve residents and businesses into the future.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Sustainability plan.
        - Continued funding of programs (no programs ending due to lack of funding).
- On a minimum of a quarterly basis, track Implementation Actions using identified Measurable Metrics.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Implementation actions tracked quarterly.
- Explore the use of software programs such as Customer Relation Management Tools (CRM) to assist with implementation tracking.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Research documentation.
        - Implementation of software program.
- Continue the Digital Inclusion Plan Steering Committee. Meet quarterly to discuss implementation progress and work together to achieve goals.
    - Measurable Metrics:

        - Number of meetings post-planning.
- Ask each County Board of Commissioners to adopt the Mid-East Region Digital Inclusion Plan to ensure local buy in and implementation commitment (in addition to adoption by the Mid-East Commission Board of Directors).
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - All counties adopt plan.
- Complete a major update of the Mid-East Region Digital Inclusion Plan on a minimum five-year schedule.
    - Measurable Metrics:
        - Major update completed by 2030.

Priority Project Profiles

The assembled project portfolio details fifteen (15) priority projects, with solution types including access to devices, affordability, availability, digital skills, and implementation resources. Each project profile includes a brief description, project scope, type of solution, partner agencies, estimated cost, potential implementation funding, priority rating, and performance measures.

Project goals, objectives and implementation strategies were developed in partnership with the Steering Committee with public survey results utilized to help guide the process. Priority projects were distilled from these overall strategies. Residents who attended Public Open House events and Steering Committee members voted on priority projects. Each participant was able to vote for their top 3 projects using a 1-3 scoring system with 1 being their top preferred project.

Since the lowest number was the favorite project, a weighted average was calculated based on score. The highest scores represent the most popular projects. This method corrects for opposite scoring (1 being highest weight) and for a no score of a project. Essentially, the method is to tally up the number of votes per score, multiply by its weight and sum the total. Results of the weighted scoring and more details on the methodology are included in Appendix D. The weighted scoring was used to rate priority projects as either high, medium, or low priority.

Priority projects are summarized by goal topic below. The project profiles are then included in priority order from highest to lowest score.

Access to Devices

- Device Access Program
- Device Repair and Technical Support Program

Affordability

- Internet Subsidy Program

Availability

- Cell Tower Infrastructure Expansion
- Improve the Quality of Broadband Networks
- Resiliency Back-Up Networks
- Broadband Infrastructure Expansion
- Public Access Locations

Digital Skills Training

- Digital Skills Training
- Workforce Development Program Integration

Implementation Resources

- Advocacy Coalition*
- Coalition of Churches*
- Digital Skilling Coalition*
- Implementation Resources Portal*
- Public Informational Portal

*Not included in voting/scoring due to being an internal implementation resource.

Project Summary	
Project Description	Extend high speed broadband internet infrastructure to rural areas until all households, businesses, and organizations in the region are served.
Project Scope	While there have been many recent projects in the region to extend fiber broadband infrastructure, there are still many rural areas in the region that have no options for high speed internet service. Satellite based services available in these areas are generally not adequate (reliability and speed) and expensive. It is imperative that every household, business, and organization in the region is served with reliable internet service capable of 200 mbps download/20 mbps upload speeds. We should continue to work to get service to areas that currently have no options beyond satellite. Once this is complete, we should go back to areas that are currently served by cable and upgrade these areas to fiber infrastructure. Local governments and internet service providers should continue to apply for grants to extend broadband infrastructure to unserved rural areas. Address level broadband service maps can be used to support the planning process. Unserved addresses can easily be identified and you can see which providers are nearest to those addresses. The state will soon be administering funds through the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) grant. This will be a state managed grant. Internet service providers have already applied to be pre-qualified to participate. It is essential that local input is a driving factor in how these funds are allocated, including local input on selection of the internet service provider for each particular area. The BEAD allocation process is expected to begin in 2025. Additionally, local input should continue to be a driving factor in Closing Access to Broadband (CAB) grant awards. These grants are currently in progress with new CAB projects recently being awarded to counties.
Type of Solution	List Strategy Area (Availability, Affordability, Access to Devices, Digital Skills Training, Implementation Resources) ▪ Availability

Partner Agencies	▪ Local Governments ▪ Internet Service Providers ▪ NC Dept. of Information Technology's Division of Broadband and Digital Opportunity ▪ Mid-East Commission ▪ NC Rural Center Broadband Collaborative (technical assistance)
Project Estimated Cost	▪ Staffing for local input meetings: $10,000 (assuming 10% FTE) ▪ Infrastructure ○ Varies depending on project, internet service providers to provide costs (rough estimate of $60,000 - $100,000 per mile for fiber)

Potential Implementation Funding Sources	Potential Sources for Project/Action Implementation
	▪ Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF) Grant
	  ○ Projects from this grant are still currently being implemented, but there is not another round of funding for this grant planned.
	▪ NC Dept. of Information Technology (NCDIT) Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Grant
	▪ NCDIT Completing Access to Broadband (CAB) Grant
	  ○ Projects from this grant are still currently being implemented and 2024 round projects have recently been awarded to counties (providers to be selected). There is not another round of this grant planned.
	▪ NCDIT Stop Gap Solutions Grant
	  ○ Will be implemented following CAB for addresses still unserved in areas that have already received a grant (farms or houses far from the road are potential examples).
	▪ United States Dept. of Agriculture (USDA) Community Connect Grant
	▪ USDA Re-Connect Loan and Grant Program
	▪ USDA Broadband Technical Assistance Grant (for staffing)
	▪ BAND-NC Implementation Funds (for staffing)

Project Estimated Timeline	▪ Local input meetings for CAB grants expected to occur in 2025 ▪ Local input meetings for state administered BEAD grant expected to occur in late 2025 or 2026. ▪ Infrastructure projects timeline varies depending on project and internet service provider timeline
Priority Rating	High

Broadband Infrastructure Expansion

Performance Measures	▪ Number of grant applications ▪ Number of new addresses served ▪ Number of new miles of fiber infrastructure ▪ Number of communications regarding NC BEAD and CAB grant spending ▪ Number of meetings regarding NC BEAD and CAB grant spending

Broadband Infrastructure Expansion

MID-EAST REGION DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN

Cell Tower Infrastructure Expansion

Project Summary	
Project Description	Extend cell towers with 5G infrastructure to rural areas until all households, businesses, and organizations in the region are adequately served.
Project Scope	There are still many rural areas in the region that have a lack of reliable cellular phone service. The recent switch to 5G technology exacerbated this problem in rural areas, as cell towers need to be closer together than they did with 4G technology in order to have enough signal. Many people are unable to get service at their homes or have to walk around their properties in an attempt to get signal. Cellular or hot spot based access is the only way that many residents can afford to access the internet. It is imperative that every household, business, and organization in the region is served with adequate cellular signal. As is the case with broadband infrastructure, it is difficult for providers to make the case to build cellular towers in rural areas due to the smaller customer base. Past grants have focused on broadband infrastructure, but cell tower infrastructure in rural areas has not been addressed. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) announced the 5G Fund for Rural America and published initial rules for the grant in August 2024. This fund will allocate $9 Billion to mobile wireless carriers to bring 5G mobile wireless coverage to areas of the United States being served by 4G LTE or earlier wireless technologies. Eligible areas for the 5G Fund for Rural America grant will be based on the FCC's Broadband Data Collection Maps. The FCC uses speed test results to verify the accuracy and reliability of the mobile broadband coverage data. A mobile app is available for download at the following: https://www.fcc.gov/BroadbandData/speed-test-app Wireless customers have the ability to challenge speeds at locations indoors, outdoors, or remotely. These challenges will influence the final funding maps for the 5G Fund. A “low hanging fruit” of this project is for partner organizations working directly with clients to train them to complete the speed test on their phones, so that the resident can then repeat that speed test at home and in other areas they frequent. This is a time sensitive action. Partner agencies who travel across the region and state should complete these tests in rural areas with signal issues that they travel through or visit. A flyer should also be developed and distributed for advertisement to the public. The 5G Fund for Rural America will operate on a “reverse auction” basis, where companies will bid to provide 5G services in areas determined to by the FCC in the funding maps, with funding going to the lowest bidder. Details are not

	posted at this point, but it is expected that there will be a pre-qualification process for providers. This process is expected to begin in 2025. Local governments and regional partners should stay involved to ensure that local input is a driving factor in the 5G Fund for Rural America award process. Development of partnerships with cellular service providers and FCC staff will be essential and should start now. Lessons learned from the earliest broadband infrastructure grants indicate that local involvement from the beginning of the process is best case scenario to ensure community needs are met. Partnerships with organizations that own utility poles is best facilitated at the local or regional level. These partnerships will ensure that funds can be stretched as far as possible by fully utilizing existing available infrastructure. Electric Membership Cooperatives, other electric providers, phone companies, and Fire Departments are examples of organizations that own poles. Regarding signal capacity, education will be needed to ensure local emergency responders that technology is available to prioritize their equipment first.
Type of Solution	List Strategy Area (Availability, Affordability, Access to Devices, Digital Skills Training, Implementation Resources) ▪ Availability
Partner Agencies	▪ Local Governments (lead agency) ▪ Cellular Service Providers (lead agency) ▪ Federal Communications Commission (FCC) (lead agency) ▪ Mid-East Commission (lead agency) ▪ Electric Membership Cooperatives and other electric providers (pole owner) ▪ Fire Departments (pole owner) ▪ Phone Companies (pole owner) ▪ Other organizations that own utility poles ▪ All partner agencies can conduct speed tests as they travel across the region and state ▪ Churches (speed test promotion) ▪ Libraries (speed test promotion) ▪ Senior Centers (speed test promotion) ▪ Other community based organizations working directly with residents (speed test promotion) ▪ NC Rural Center Broadband Collaborative (technical assistance)
Project Estimated Cost	▪ Promotion of FCC's speed tests: $7,500 ○ Partner agency training and material printing ▪ Infrastructure varies depending on project, cellular service providers to provide costs (rough estimate of $100,000 - $1,000,000 per tower)

Cell Tower Infrastructure Expansion

Potential Implementation Funding Sources	Potential Sources for Project/Action Implementation ▪ Federal Communications Commission (FCC) 5G Fund for Rural America ▪ BAND-NC Implementation Funds (promotion of speed tests)

Project Estimated Timeline	▪ Promotion of FCC's speed tests
	  ○ Partner agency training and material printing: 2 months
	  ○ Resident outreach: 1 year
	▪ Infrastructure: Varies depending on project and cellular service provider timeline

Priority Rating	High
Performance Measures	▪ Number of new addresses served ▪ Number of new cellular towers ▪ Number of communications regarding FCC 5G Fund for Rural America grant spending ▪ Number of meetings regarding FCC 5G Fund for Rural America grant spending ▪ Number of new partnerships developed with FCC staff and cellular service providers ▪ Number of new partnerships developed with pole owners ▪ Partner agency training and material distribution for FCC's speed test ▪ Number of advertisements for FCC's speed test ▪ Number of residents assisted with FCC's speed test ▪ Partner agencies are completing FCC's speed test as they travel ▪ Number of FCC speed tests completed in region

Cell Tower Infrastructure Expansion

MID-EAST REGION DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN

Digital Skills Training

Project Summary	
Project Description	Provide digital skills training that targets specific community needs. Expand current programs and develop additional programs until all communities in the region are adequately served.
Project Scope	Provide digital skills training that targets specific community needs (basic computer use, basic smartphone use, communication, education, healthcare access, economic participation, democratic participation, security/avoiding scams, and beyond). Expand current programs and develop additional programs until all communities in the region are adequately served. A primary need is the retention of current digital skills agents and similar positions across the region (many of which are grant funded on a temporary basis). Additionally, more positions need to be added to adequately serve area residents. Specific needs: • Retain the Mid-East Area Agency on Aging's Digital Navigator position. This position serves the senior population in the region through one-on-one support and through regular office hours at local senior centers. • Hire a digital skills agent or similar position for the Rivers East Workforce Development Board. • Partner with Reentry Councils and non-profit organizations such as Our Journey 2Gether to provide digital skills programming to the reentry population. • Retain the Bertie County Cooperative Extension's Digital Futures Agent. This position serves all populations in Bertie County (and some services provided in surrounding counties on a case-by-case basis). One-on-one support and structured classes are both offered. There is space available to host classes at the Cooperative Extension Office, and the Digital Futures Agent will also travel to local churches, libraries, and other community organizations to teach classes. • Expand NC Cooperative Extension's Digital Futures Agent program to have a full time person in all counties in the region. • Retain programs offered at Beaufort County Community College (Digital Bridge program) and Martin Community College through the NC Digital Champions grant. These programs provide free digital skills training at the college and out in the community. • Develop similar programs at Roanoke-Chowan Community College and Pitt Community College.

	• Retain Roanoke Electric Membership Cooperative's Digital Health Navigator position. This position provides one-on-one support and teaches classes around telehealth and other digital health related topics. The Digital Health Navigator will travel to local churches, libraries, and other community organizations to teach classes. • Hire a bi-lingual Digital Skills Agent or similar position to serve the Latino community in the region. This position could possibly operate under a community organization such as the Association of Mexicans in NC (AMEXCAN). • Expand digital skills courses offered on-site at churches, libraries, senior centers, and other community based organizations. • Expand the number of digital skills agents and similar positions in the region providing one-on-one support and teaching classes to residents. • Ensure a wide variety of program offerings to meet the needs of beginner, intermediate and advanced users. • Digital skills agents (and similar positions) can refer residents to other programs, such as device access programs and affordability programs. • Develop student based support programs where students volunteer to get out into the community to teach digital skills. The Martin County Digital Ambassadors Program (a partnership between Martin County Schools and Cornerstone Community Based Programs) is a recent successful example.
Type of Solution	List Strategy Area (Availability, Affordability, Access to Devices, Digital Skills Training, Implementation Resources) ▪ Digital Skills Training

Digital Skills Training

Partner Agencies	▪ Mid-East Area Agency on Aging ▪ Rivers East Workforce Development Board ▪ NC Works Offices ▪ American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) ▪ Association of Mexicans in NC (AMEXCAN) ▪ BAND-NC/Institute for Emerging Issues ▪ County Cooperative Extension Offices ▪ Community Colleges ▪ ECU College of Health and Human Performance ▪ ECU Health ▪ NC Office of Rural Health ▪ Our Journey 2Gether ▪ Reentry Councils ▪ Roanoke Electric Membership Cooperative ▪ Churches ▪ Community Centers ▪ Libraries ▪ Senior Centers ▪ Other Community-Based Organizations
Project Estimated Cost	$120,000 - $140,000 per staff position (including indirect costs and expenses such as equipment, materials, and traveling)
Potential Implementation Funding Sources	Potential Sources for Project/Action Implementation ▪ BAND-NC Implementation Funds (for temporary staff retention) ▪ NC Dept. of Information Technology (NCDIT) Digital Opportunity Grant ▪ National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) Digital Equity Competitive Grant
Project Estimated Timeline	Continuous project
Priority Rating	High
Performance Measures	▪ Number of positions retained ▪ Number of programs retained ▪ Number of new positions ▪ Number of residents assisted ▪ Number of courses offered

Digital Skills Training

MID-EAST REGION DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN

Device Access Program

Project Summary	
Project Description	Develop a regional device access program with local distribution of devices through community based organizations.
Project Scope	Many residents in the region are struggling to make ends meet and are unable to afford technology devices. This project would develop a regional device access program with distribution of devices through community based organizations. A variety of devices should be included to meet user needs (desktop computers, hot spots, laptop computers, tablets, and smartphones). A simple application would be developed to determine if the resident qualifies (based on enrollment in government programs, income, etc.). Once accepted into the program, there would be further evaluation to determine the participants' needs. (At this time the participant can be referred to other relevant programs, such as affordability programs or digital skills training programs.) The program would ideally be managed at the regional level through the Mid-East Commission or a regional non-profit organization. Community based organizations can help refer residents to the program and help with device distribution so that participants are able to pick up devices in their own communities. The regional organization would serve to manage the grant, seek donated devices, and be the hub for receiving devices and distributing them to the local community organizations for distribution to program participants. The Kramden Institute would be a key partner on the initiative to assist with sourcing affordable devices. In addition to the organizations skill in refurbishing devices, the experience of the organization has led to policies which minimize or eliminate issues (such as lifespan of devices, security concerns, software compatibility, etc.). Businesses, local governments, schools, and other organizations in the region can donate technology devices that are being upgraded. The Kramden Institute will refurbish the devices and make sure that they are distributed back to the regional device access program in the area from which they were donated. Internet service providers could potentially donate devices to the program and "sponsor" a certain number of participants with new devices. There is also the potential that device access programs can be developed locally through community based organizations.
Type of Solution	List Strategy Area (Availability, Affordability, Access to Devices, Digital Skills Training, Implementation Resources)

	▪ Access to Devices
Partner Agencies	▪ Mid-East Commission/Mid-East Area Agency on Aging (program lead) ▪ Kramden Institute (computer refurbishment partner) ▪ Rivers East Workforce Development Board (program promotion) ▪ NC Works Offices (program promotion) ▪ Local Governments (program promotion) ▪ Chambers of Commerce (program promotion) ▪ Digital Skills Agents and similar positions (program promotion) ▪ Internet Service Providers (device donation) ▪ Businesses (device donation) ▪ Governmental organizations (device donation) ▪ Community Colleges and Universities (device donation) ▪ K-12 Schools (device donation) ▪ Churches (program promotion and device distribution) ▪ Libraries (program promotion and device distribution) ▪ Senior Centers (program promotion and device distribution) ▪ Other community based organizations (program promotion and device distribution) ▪ BAND-NC / Institute for Emerging Issues (technical assistance)
Project Estimated Cost	$400,000 - $500,000 per year
Potential Implementation Funding Sources	Potential Sources for Project/Action Implementation ▪ National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) Digital Equity Competitive Grant ▪ NC Dept. of Information Technology (NDIT) Digital Opportunity Grant ▪ Private Donations
Project Estimated Timeline	Continuous program
Priority Rating	High
Performance Measures	▪ Establishment of a regional device access program with local distribution partners ▪ Establishment of local device access program(s) ▪ Number of program participants ▪ Number of devices donated ▪ Number of devices distributed

Device Access Program

MID-EAST REGION DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN

Internet Subsidy Programs

Project Summary	
Project Description	Develop a regional internet subsidy program to assist residents with internet bills and promote existing subsidy and discount programs.
Project Scope	Even in areas where there is adequate broadband infrastructure, many residents cannot afford to connect to the service. The cancellation of the federal Affordable Connectivity Program in 2024 exacerbated this affordability issue. Over 900,000 people in North Carolina relied on the program, which provided a $30 discount on the participants' monthly internet bill. The "low hanging fruit" of this project is for partner agencies to assist their clients with enrollment in existing subsidy programs. Information on these programs can also be made available at public locations such as Community Resource Hubs, Churches, Libraries, and Senior Centers. Current affordability programs include the federal Lifeline program (provides a $9.25 monthly discount on phone or internet bill) and discount programs offered through several Internet Service Providers for qualifying customers. As of the date of this writing, we have not identified any agencies in the region who are assisting residents with enrollment in these programs, representing a gap in our service offerings. There are likely many people in the region who could benefit from these existing programs. The other part of this project is the development of a regional internet subsidy program. A simple application would be developed to determine if the resident qualifies (based on enrollment in government programs, income, etc.). The program would work by providing the discount directly through the Internet Service Provider (similar to how the Affordable Connectivity Program worked). There is the potential for this program to be managed in partnership with County Social Services Departments. Program payments could be distributed to internet service providers on behalf of program participants in a similar manner as the Low Income Energy Assistance Program's (LIEAP) management. Private donations could also potentially contribute to the regional internet subsidy program and offset the cost to operate the program. This could be done at the internet service provider level, in a similar manner to the "Neighbor to Neighbor" program operated by Greenville Utilities, where customers can make a donation to help in need people in their community with their utility bills. Internet service providers could potentially match private donations as feasible for each provider. A primary challenge and concern with the development of a regional internet subsidy program is initial funding and continued funding to maintain the program (sustainability).

Type of Solution	List Strategy Area (Availability, Affordability, Access to Devices, Digital Skills Training, Implementation Resources) ▪ Affordability
Partner Agencies	▪ Mid-East Commission ▪ County Social Services Departments ▪ Internet Service Providers ▪ Digital Skills Agents and similar positions ▪ ECU Health's Community Resource Hubs ▪ Rivers East Workforce Development Board ▪ NC Works Offices ▪ Local Governments ▪ Digital Skills Agents and similar positions ▪ Churches ▪ Libraries ▪ Senior Centers ▪ Other community based organizations ▪ BAND-NC / Institute for Emerging Issues (technical assistance)
Project Estimated Cost	▪ Promotion of existing subsidy programs: $15,000 ○ Internet service provider coordination, partner agency training, and material printing ▪ Regional internet subsidy program: $1,980,000 per year ○ $180,000 staffing, $1,800,000 subsidy funds ($30 per month discount for 5,000 program participants)
Potential Implementation Funding Sources	Potential Sources for Project/Action Implementation ▪ Promotion of existing subsidy programs: ○ BAND-NC Implementation Funds ○ ECU Health ○ NC Dept. of Information Technology (NDIT) Digital Opportunity Grant ○ NC Community Foundation ▪ Regional internet subsidy program: ○ National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) Digital Equity Competitive Grant ○ Southeast Crescent Regional Commission ○ Internet Service Provider donation driven programs (see Greenville Utilities Neighbor to Neighbor program as an example)
Project Estimated Timeline	▪ 6 months to implement once funded ▪ Continuous project
Priority Rating	Medium

Internet Subsidy Programs

Performance Measures	▪ Information on existing internet subsidy programs is available in at least five public locations in each county. ▪ All digital skills agents and related positions in the region are assisting clients with enrollment in existing internet subsidy programs. ▪ Number of other organizations in the region assisting clients with enrollment in existing internet subsidy programs. ▪ A regional internet subsidy program is started and maintained. ▪ 5,000 region residents are participating in the regional internet subsidy program.

Internet Subsidy Programs

MID-EAST REGION DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN

Improve the Quality of Broadband Networks

Project Summary	
Project Description	Identify problem areas and improve the reliability and speed of existing broadband networks.
Project Scope	This project is intended for areas already considered "served" with high speed broadband internet, but where reliability and/or speed of the service is a major concern. Residents report that some areas of the region marked as served on the broadband maps have issues with the service going out frequently, or the speeds being received are substantially lower than the advertised speeds. A "low hanging fruit" of this project is for partner organizations working directly with clients to train them to complete the speed test, so that the resident can then repeat that speed test from their home computer. Partner agencies who travel across the region and state should complete these tests in rural areas with signal issues that they visit. A flyer should also be developed and distributed for advertisement to the public. The speed test and short survey regarding the participants' broadband connectivity are available through the NC Division of Broadband and Digital Opportunity at: https://www.ncbroadband.gov/surveys/broadband. There are also text and phone options for participants with no internet connection. If a substantial number of residents in a certain area are complaining about service from a provider, the first step would be for the local or regional government to reach out to the internet service provider to try to negotiate a solution to the issue. The likely solution is improved infrastructure. It is possible that the provider could be assisted with grant applications to help fund resolution of the issue if channels of communication are opened. In extreme cases where a resolution is not able to be made, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has a process where a report can be made regarding unreliable service or service with actual speeds lower than advertised speeds. Customers of the service can directly make reports to the FCC through their website for further investigation. Single provider areas with unresolved issues should also be targeted for service by a secondary provider. This project is intended for areas that are already classified as "served" with high speed broadband internet, but have major issues with network reliability and/or speed. Areas that are classified as "underserved" or "unserved" should be focused on for expansion of broadband infrastructure.
Type of Solution	List Strategy Area (Availability, Affordability, Access to Devices, Digital Skills Training, Implementation Resources)

	▪ Availability
Partner Agencies	▪ Local Governments (lead agency) ▪ Internet Service Providers (lead agency) ▪ NC Dept. of Information Technology, Division of Broadband and Digital Opportunity (lead agency) ▪ All partner agencies can conduct speed tests as they travel across the region and state ▪ Churches (speed test promotion) ▪ Libraries (speed test promotion) ▪ Senior Centers (speed test promotion) ▪ Other community based organizations working directly with residents (speed test promotion) ▪ NC Rural Center Broadband Collaborative (technical assistance)
Project Estimated Cost	▪ Promotion of NC Division of Broadband and Digital Opportunity Division's speed tests: $7,500 ○ Partner agency training and material printing ▪ Infrastructure varies depending on project, cellular service providers to provide costs (rough estimate of $60,000 - $100,000 per mile of fiber)
Potential Implementation Funding Sources	Potential Sources for Project/Action Implementation ▪ Internet Service Providers ▪ NC Dept. of Information Technology (NCDIT) Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Grant ▪ United States Dept. of Agriculture (USDA) Community Connect Grant ▪ USDA Re-Connect Loan and Grant Program ▪ USDA Broadband Technical Assistance Grant (to fund staff) ▪ BAND-NC Implementation Funds (promotion of speed test)
Project Estimated Timeline	Continuous project
Priority Rating	Medium
Performance Measures	▪ Number of communications with internet service providers ▪ Number of meetings with internet service providers ▪ Number of improvement projects completed ▪ Partner agency training and material distribution for the NC Division of Broadband and Digital Opportunity's speed test ▪ Number of advertisements for the speed test ▪ Number of residents assisted with the speed test ▪ Partner agencies are completing the speed test as they travel ▪ Number of speed tests completed in region

Improve the Quality of Broadband Networks

MID-EAST REGION DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN

Workforce Development Program Integration

Project Summary	
Project Description	Incorporate digital skills training into workforce development programs.
Project Scope	This project will incorporate digital skills training into workforce development programs. This will include: ▪ "Train the trainer" program for churches, digital skills agents, librarians, senior center employees, and others working directly with the public to teach digital skills. ▪ "Train the trainer" program for businesses who can appoint a person to be the digital skills trainer for that business. ▪ Incorporation of basic, intermediate and advanced level digital skills classes into existing programs, such as the Next-Gen Program, the Incumbent Worker Training Program, and the Customized Training Program. ▪ Incorporate digital skills courses into Small Business Center programs. ▪ Full-time Digital Skills Agents (or similar positions) with Rivers East Workforce Development Board to implement initiative. ▪ Set up "access" points in our communities and train staff at those locations to assist individuals with online job searches and accessing training opportunities to upskill. ▪ Mobile van solution to provide digital skills education with an employment/workforce focus and assist individuals with online job searches.
Type of Solution	List Strategy Area (Availability, Affordability, Access to Devices, Digital Skills Training, Implementation Resources) ▪ Digital Skills Training
Partner Agencies	▪ Rivers East Workforce Development Board ▪ NC Works Offices ▪ County Economic Development Departments ▪ Community Colleges ▪ Economic Development Partnership of NC ▪ NC Dept. of Commerce Rural Economic Development Division ▪ Greenville-ENC Alliance ▪ NENC Career Pathways ▪ Small Business Centers at Community Colleges ▪ Local businesses and organizations in need of employee training

Project Estimated Cost	▪ $120,000 - $140,000 per staff position (including indirect costs and expenses such as equipment, materials, and traveling)
	▪ Access points
	  ○ Varying cost depending on needs at each building
	  ○ Desktop computers: $500 - $1,000 each
	▪ Mobile Digital Skills Center Initial Purchase: $140,000
	  ○ Van: $95,000
	  ○ Conversion to Mobile Learning Lab: $45,000
	▪ Mobile Digital Skills Center annual operating costs: $13,100
	  ○ Subscription cost: $2,100 (500 GB)
	  ○ Equipment maintenance/depreciation: $4,000 (assuming 5-year service life)
	  ○ Vehicle maintenance: $3,000
	  ○ Vehicle fuel: $4,000

Potential Implementation Funding Sources	Potential Sources for Project/Action Implementation ▪ Community Colleges (tapping into existing programs such as Customized Training and Digital Champion Grant funded programs) ▪ Golden Leaf Foundation (most applicable with direct link to jobs created or retained) ▪ US Economic Development Administration (EDA) (most applicable with direct link to jobs created or retained) ▪ NC Dept. of Commerce ▪ NC Dept. of Information Technology (NCDIT) Digital Opportunity Grant ▪ National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) Digital Equity Competitive Grant
Project Estimated Timeline	Continuous program
Priority Rating	Medium
Performance Measures	▪ “Train the trainer” programs developed. ▪ Number of trainers certified. ▪ Number of new courses developed. ▪ Enrollment in courses. ▪ Number of businesses provided with training. ▪ Number of access points developed. ▪ Number of residents provided with training.

Workforce Development Program Integration

MID-EAST REGION DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN

Device Repair and Technical Support Program

Project Summary	
Project Description	Develop a regional program to assist citizens with repairs for their devices and/or technical support for device maintenance.
Project Scope	Many residents in the region are struggling to make ends meet and are unable to afford repairs to their technology devices. Additionally, many residents do not have the needed skills to complete basic device maintenance. This project would develop a regional device repair and technical support program which would operate alongside existing programs. Digital skills agents and similar positions can offer basic device maintenance support and training when working one-on-one with clients, such as help setting up devices, clearing temporary files, installing anti-virus software, installing system updates, etc. Clients with devices that need repairs can be referred to the device repair and technical support program by digital skills agents and other training providers, and by community based organizations working with clients. This program could operate alongside the device access program and utilize the same application process. Kramden Institute would be a key partner for device repairs/refurbishment. If the device is unable to be repaired or refurbished, the client could be served through the device access program. Hosting IT support events across the region is another way to provide residents with this service. These events could have IT support staff present to help residents with computer maintenance, repairs, and/or diagnostics.
Type of Solution	List Strategy Area (Availability, Affordability, Access to Devices, Digital Skills Training, Implementation Resources) ▪ Access to Devices
Partner Agencies	▪ Mid-East Commission/Mid-East Area Agency on Aging (program lead) ▪ Kramden Institute (computer refurbishment partner) ▪ Rivers East Workforce Development Board (program promotion) ▪ NC Works Offices (program promotion) ▪ Local Governments (program promotion) ▪ Digital Skills Agents and similar positions (maintenance training, program promotion) ▪ Churches (program promotion and device distribution) ▪ Libraries (program promotion and device distribution) ▪ Senior Centers (program promotion and device distribution)

	▪ Other community based organizations (program promotion and device distribution) ▪ BAND-NC / Institute for Emerging Issues (technical assistance)
Project Estimated Cost	▪ Included as part of the regional Device Access Program (see cost estimate under that project profile) ▪ IT Support Events: $7,000 - $7,500 per event ○ $4,000 IT support staff ○ $1,500 other staff ○ $1,000 advertising ○ $500 - $1,000 printing/misc.
Potential Implementation Funding Sources	Potential Sources for Project/Action Implementation ▪ National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) Digital Equity Competitive Grant ▪ NC Dept. of Information Technology (NDIT) Digital Opportunity Grant (for staffing) ▪ BAND-NC Implementation Funds (for IT support events)
Project Estimated Timeline	▪ Continuous program ▪ IT support events can be one time events or recurring on a schedule (such as semi-annually or annually)
Priority Rating	Medium
Performance Measures	▪ Establishment of device repair and technical support program ▪ Number of residents provided with technical support ▪ Number of residents receiving device repair services ▪ Number of IT support events ▪ Number of residents attending IT support events

MID-EAST REGION DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN

Resiliency Back-Up Networks

Project Summary	
Project Description	Develop satellite-based public wi-fi networks as back-up networks which can provide internet service in the event that broadband infrastructure is temporarily out of service or is destroyed by a disaster.
Project Scope	This project would establish back-up satellite-based internet networks at existing public wi-fi access sites and at all essential government buildings. The back-up networks can work through the same internet equipment with a router that supports multiple WAN connections and a configuration that prioritizes the primary connection and automatically switches to the satellite back-up when necessary. When setting up these resilience back-up networks, it is important to ensure that bandwidth is sufficient to serve large populations that would rely on the public network in disaster times. Initial engineering/design should be completed to ensure that the satellite back-up network operates as reliably and efficiently as possible. An inventory of needs at essential public buildings should occur. A first step will be to talk with local government entities and school systems to see if they already have back-up networks available at their essential buildings and what their needs are. The need to power resilience back-up networks should be considered. Some essential buildings may have generator power back-up. Partnerships should be developed with electric providers, and potentially private data centers and distribution centers. Options for renewable energy back-ups (solar panel and wind turbine with battery system) should also be explored. Additionally, broadband network resiliency should be considered as an essential utility during planning processes. Examples include Regional Hazard Mitigation Plans, county Emergency Operations Plans, and local Resilience Plans.
Type of Solution	List Strategy Area (Availability, Affordability, Access to Devices, Digital Skills Training, Implementation Resources) ▪ Availability

Partner Agencies	▪ Mid-East Commission ▪ County Emergency Management Departments ▪ Churches ▪ Community Centers ▪ Community Colleges ▪ ECU Health ▪ Libraries ▪ Local Governments ▪ NC Works Career Centers ▪ Public Health Departments ▪ Senior Centers ▪ Other community based organizations operating public wi-fi networks ▪ Electric providers ▪ Satellite based internet service providers ▪ Data centers and distribution centers ▪ BAND-NC (technical assistance)

Project Estimated Cost	▪ $5,000 - $10,000 initial set-up per satellite back-up network (engineering/design, equipment, installation)
	▪ Annual operating costs per satellite back-up network
	  ○ Subscription cost: $2,100 (500 GB), $3,600 (1 TB), or $6,600 (2 TB)
	  ○ Equipment maintenance: $1,000 - $2,000 (assuming 5-year service life)

Potential Implementation Funding Sources	Potential Sources for Project/Action Implementation ▪ Duke Energy Foundation ▪ Local government funds (for essential government buildings) ▪ NC Community Foundation ▪ National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) Digital Equity Competitive Grant ▪ NC Dept. of Public Safety ▪ Private donations received by community organizations ▪ US Dept. of Agriculture (USDA) Distance Learning and Telemedicine Grant ▪ Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Next Generation Warning System Grant
Project Estimated Timeline	▪ 2 - 8 months for new resiliency back-up network set-up once funded
Priority Rating	Medium
Performance Measures	▪ Number of new resiliency back-up networks ▪ All public wi-fi networks have satellite based back up networks ▪ All essential government buildings have satellite based back up networks

Resiliency Back-Up Networks

MID-EAST REGION DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN

Public Access Locations

Project Summary	
Project Description	Add free public wi-fi networks in public areas across the region and increase the number of community based organizations offering internet and public device access, including specialized options such as community resource hubs and telehealth kiosks.
Project Scope	This project seeks to add additional free public internet access sites across the region. Outdoor public places such as downtown districts and public parks should be targeted for free public wi-fi locations in partnership with local governments across the region. Community based organizations (churches, community centers, community colleges, libraries, senior centers, etc.) should be targeted for both new public access locations, and to improve the quality and/or equipment available at existing public access locations. For new public access locations, security may be a concern for participating organizations. Training on how to operate secure public access networks will be essential. Additionally, information on personal privacy and data security should be available for residents that use the public wi-fi networks. There is a desire to expand the number of Community Resource Hubs being managed by ECU Health. The hubs serve provide access to virtual care as well as offer a gateway to community resources. Health Hubs are located at local churches, businesses and organizations, and are equipped with necessary devices, including a computer with a webcam and microphone, and vital sign monitors like blood pressure cuffs, pulse oximeters and thermometers. Martin Community College and Albemarle Regional Library have expressed interest in adding Community Resource Hubs at their locations. Additional locations across the region would be beneficial to residents.
Type of Solution	List Strategy Area (Availability, Affordability, Access to Devices, Digital Skills Training, Implementation Resources) ▪ Availability
Partner Agencies	▪ Mid-East Commission ▪ Churches ▪ Community Centers ▪ Community Colleges

	▪ ECU Health ▪ Libraries ▪ Local Governments ▪ NC Works Career Centers ▪ Public Health Departments ▪ Senior Centers ▪ Other community based organizations open to the public ▪ Internet Service Providers ▪ BAND-NC/Institute for Emerging Issues (technical assistance) ▪ NC Office of Rural Health (technical assistance)
Project Estimated Cost	▪ New public wi-fi networks ○ $5,000 - $10,000 initial set-up per wi-fi network (engineering/design, equipment, installation) ○ Annual operating cost per wi-fi network ▪ Subscription cost: $1,800 - $2,500 (1 GB) ▪ Equipment maintenance: $1,000 - $2,000 (assuming 5-year service life) ○ Desktop computers: $500 - $1,000 each ▪ Improvements to existing public wi-fi locations (network improvements, equipment, devices, etc.) ○ Varying cost depending on needs at each location ○ Desktop computers: $500 - $1,000 each
Potential Implementation Funding Sources	Potential Sources for Project/Action Implementation ▪ Internet Service Provider sponsorships ▪ NC Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment (BEAD) Grant ▪ NC Community Foundation ▪ National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) Digital Equity Competitive Grant ▪ Private donations received by community organizations ▪ Roanoke-Chowan Foundation ▪ US Dept. of Agriculture (USDA) Distance Learning and Telemedicine Grant
Project Estimated Timeline	▪ 2 - 8 months for new network set-up or improvement to existing network once funded
Priority Rating	Medium
Performance Measures	▪ Number of new public wi-fi locations ▪ Number of improvements to existing public wi-fi locations ▪ At least one public wi-fi location in all municipalities in the region ▪ At least five public wi-fi locations in rural areas of each county.

Public Access Locations

MID-EAST REGION DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN

Public Informational Portal

Project Summary	
Project Description	Develop a public informational portal in dual functioning web and app based format to direct citizens to digital inclusion resources in the region.
Project Scope	This project will develop a public informational portal in dual functioning web and app based format to direct citizens to digital inclusion resources in the region. Examples of resources include public wi-fi and device access points, telehealth kiosks, information on applying for affordability and device access programs, local digital skills courses, free or low cost software programs, etc. A marketing plan should be developed to help promote the portal.
Type of Solution	List Strategy Area (Availability, Affordability, Access to Devices, Digital Skills Training, Implementation Resources) ▪ Implementation Resources
Partner Agencies	▪ Mid-East Commission lead agency ▪ All partner agencies help to promote and contribute material to the portal
Project Estimated Cost	▪ Portal Development: $35,000 ▪ Marketing: $20,000 ▪ Maintenance (staff time and hosting fees): $5,000 - $6,000 per year
Potential Implementation Funding Sources	Potential Sources for Project/Action Implementation ▪ BAND-NC Implementation Funds ▪ National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) Digital Equity Competitive Grant (as part of a larger project) ▪ NC Dept. of Information Technology (NCDIT) Digital Opportunity Grant ▪ NC Community Foundation ▪ Southeast Crescent Regional Commission
Project Estimated Timeline	▪ 6 – 8 months to establish portal once funded ▪ Continuous maintenance required
Priority Rating	Low
Performance Measures	▪ Portal is developed in web and app based format ▪ Number of electronic advertisements ▪ Number of public places with information on the portal posted ▪ Web traffic to the portal ▪ Portal is kept up to date

MID-EAST REGION DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN

Advocacy Coalition

Project Summary	
Project Description	Develop a regional Advocacy Coalition to advocate for digital inclusion policies and funding at the state and federal levels.
Project Scope	Develop a regional Advocacy Coalition to advocate for digital inclusion policies and funding at the state and federal levels. In addition to advocacy measures from the group itself (letters, phone calls, in person visits), the group can also organize to educate the public and promote opportunities for citizens to contact their elected officials to advocate for digital inclusion policies and funding. The group will conduct advocacy for policies and funding but will not engage in lobbying.
Type of Solution	List Strategy Area (Availability, Affordability, Access to Devices, Digital Skills Training, Implementation Resources) ▪ Implementation Resources
Partner Agencies	▪ Mid-East Commission ▪ Mid-East Area Agency on Aging ▪ Rivers East Workforce Development Board ▪ County Economic Development Departments ▪ Community Colleges ▪ Local Governments ▪ Community Non-Profit Organizations ▪ Businesses ▪ Digital Skills Agents and similar positions ▪ Other organizations with interest in advancing digital inclusion policies and funding
Project Estimated Cost	▪ Staffing: $10,000 per year for lead person to committee (assuming 10% FTE) ▪ Committee meeting expenses: $5,000 per year ▪ Public event expenses: $1,000 - $2,000 per event
Potential Implementation Funding Sources	Potential Sources for Project/Action Implementation ▪ Supported by partner agencies with existing staff positions
Project Estimated Timeline	Continuous program
Priority Rating	Not rated

Performance Measures	▪ Development of the coalition ▪ Number of participating members ▪ Number of meetings ▪ Number of letters to elected officials at state and federal level ▪ Number of phone calls to elected officials at state and federal level ▪ Number of in person visits to elected officials at state and federal level ▪ Number of public education and outreach opportunities

Advocacy Coalition

MID-EAST REGION DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN

Coalition of Churches

Project Summary	
Project Description	Develop a regional Coalition of Churches to support digital inclusion.
Project Scope	Develop a regional Coalition of Churches to support digital inclusion. The group should include Pastors and other church leaders interested in supporting the cause. A supporting agency to guide the group would be beneficial (such as BAND-NC, the Friday Institute, the Mid-East Commission, or another regional or statewide organization focused on digital inclusion). Churches can share resources, compare service offerings, identify and address gaps, and partner to better serve residents in the region. Churches can potentially serve as locations for digital skills classes, can appoint volunteers to be trained as digital skills ambassadors for the church, can refer residents to available programs, serve as locations for distribution of devices, etc. A regular meeting schedule for the group should be established.
Type of Solution	List Strategy Area (Availability, Affordability, Access to Devices, Digital Skills Training, Implementation Resources) ▪ Implementation Resources
Partner Agencies	▪ Churches ▪ Mid-East Commission ▪ Local governments ▪ BAND-NC ▪ Friday Institute ▪ Digital Skills Agents and similar positions
Project Estimated Cost	▪ $10,000 staffing (assuming 10% FTE)
Potential Implementation Funding Sources	Potential Sources for Project/Action Implementation ▪ BAND-NC ▪ Friday Institute ▪ NC Dept. of Information Technology (NCDIT) Digital Opportunity Grant
Project Estimated Timeline	Continuous program
Priority Rating	Not rated

Performance Measures	▪ Development of the coalition ▪ Number of participating churches ▪ Number of meetings ▪ Number of programs implemented at churches ▪ Number of classes taught at churches ▪ Number of collaborations and new partnerships

Coalition of Churches

MID-EAST REGION DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN

Digital Skilling Coalition

Project Summary	
Project Description	Develop a regional Digital Skilling Coalition comprised of digital skills educators, navigators, curriculum developers, and program leaders.
Project Scope	Develop a regional Digital Skilling Coalition comprised of digital skills educators, navigators, curriculum developers, and program leaders. The group can share resources, compare service offerings, identify and address gaps, and partner on classes and other initiatives to better serve residents in the region. A regular meeting schedule for the group should be established.
Type of Solution	List Strategy Area (Availability, Affordability, Access to Devices, Digital Skills Training, Implementation Resources) ▪ Implementation Resources
Partner Agencies	▪ Mid-East Area Agency on Aging ▪ BAND-NC ▪ Beaufort County Community College ▪ Bertie County Cooperative Extension ▪ ECU College of Health and Human Performance ▪ ECU Health ▪ Friday Institute ▪ Martin Community College ▪ NC Office of Rural Health ▪ Our Journey 2Gether ▪ Roanoke Electric Membership Cooperative ▪ Other agencies with digital skills staff members
Project Estimated Cost	▪ Low or no cost as this is a collaboration between existing positions.
Potential Implementation Funding Sources	Potential Sources for Project/Action Implementation ▪ Supported by participating agencies
Project Estimated Timeline	Continuous program
Priority Rating	Not rated
Performance Measures	▪ Development of the coalition ▪ Number of participating members ▪ Number of meetings ▪ Number of collaborations

MID-EAST REGION DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN

Implementation Resources Portal

Project Summary	
Project Description	Develop an implementation resources portal in dual functioning web and app based format to support partner agencies implementing the Mid-East Region Digital Inclusion Pan.
Project Scope	This project will develop an implementation resources portal in dual functioning web and app based format to support partner agencies implementing the Mid-East Region Digital Inclusion Plan. Examples of resources include asset mapping, implementation tracking, information on grants, training resources, etc. Existing resources should be utilized to pull information for the portal (BAND-NC, Connecting Counties, NC Rural Center, NC Office of Rural Health, NCDIT). The portal should include a "knowledge bank" that all Digital Navigators, Digital Skills Agents and similar positions can contribute to and utilize.
Type of Solution	List Strategy Area (Availability, Affordability, Access to Devices, Digital Skills Training, Implementation Resources) ▪ Implementation Resources
Partner Agencies	▪ Mid-East Commission lead agency ▪ All partner agencies can utilize the portal
Project Estimated Cost	▪ Portal Development: $35,000 ▪ Maintenance (staff time and hosting fees): $10,000 per year
Potential Implementation Funding Sources	Potential Sources for Project/Action Implementation ▪ National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) Digital Equity Competitive Grant ▪ NC Dept. of Information Technology (NCDIT) Digital Opportunity Grant
Project Estimated Timeline	▪ 6 – 8 months to establish portal once funded ▪ Continuous maintenance required
Priority Rating	Not rated
Performance Measures	▪ Portal is developed in web and app based format ▪ Number of partner agencies utilizing the portal ▪ Portal is kept up to date

Appendix A: Steering Committee Members

REGIONAL

Area Agency on Aging

Mid-East Commission
Annette Eubanks, Director of Area Agency on Aging
aeubanks@mideastcom.org
252-946-8043

Lucas Heller, Digital Navigator
lheller@mideastcom.org
252-946-8043

Broadband

BAND-NC
Jess Epsten, Digital Inclusion Lead
jmepsten@ncsu.edu
919-513-0805

Kylie Foley, Digital Inclusion Initiative Associate
kdfoley@ncsu.edu
919-515-3542

Samantha Graham, Director of Community Initiatives
sjgraha2@ncsu.edu
919-515-9567

Broadband Catalysts
Brian Rathbone, Partner
brian@broadbandcatalysts.com

Deborah Watts, Partner
deborahwatts@gmail.com

East Carolina University, College of Health and Human Performance
Dr. Leslie Cofie, Assistant Professor of Health Education and Promotion
cofiel18@ecu.edu
252-328-5995

Dr. Joseph Lee, Professor of Health Education and Promotion
Leejose14@ecu.edu
252-328-4661

ESG Foundation NC
Teresa Rush-Edwards, President
teresa@esgfoundationnc.org

NC Dept. of Information Technology (NCDIT)
Phillip Holloway, Program Coordinator, Digital Equity and Literacy Program
phillip.holloway@nc.gov

NC Rural Center
Michael Kelly, Director of Collaborative Broadband and Innovation
mkelly@ncruralcenter.org
919-250-4314

Dave Kaiser, Senior Director of Policy, Advocacy and Innovation
dkaiser@ncruralcenter.org

Wesley Community Development Corporation
JC Lyle, Director of Client Engagement
jclyle@wesleycdc.com
(910)540-5326

Joel Gilland, Senior Vice President of Strategic Planning
joel@wesleycdc.com
(980)441-5123

<u>Economic Development</u>

Economic Development Partnership of NC (EDPNC)
Sarah Bernart, Manager of Northeast Region

sarah.bernart@edpnc.com
252-343-2653

Greenville-ENC Alliance
Uconda Dunn, Vice President of Business Development
dunn@encalliance.com
252-751-6018

Mid-East Commission
Pat Harris, Director of Planning, Economic Development and Community Services
pharris@mideastcom.org
252-946-8043

Halley Zhang, AmeriCorps Fellow
hzhang@mideastcom.org
252-946-8043

NC Dept. of Commerce, Rural Economic Development Division
Sharon Smith, Northeast Prosperity Zone Community Economic Development Planner
sharon.smith@commerce.nc.gov
919-923-3212

Healthcare

ECU Health
Dr. Kasheta Jackson, Vice President of Community Health
kasheta.jackson@ecuhealth.org

NCDHHS, Office of Rural Health
Mira Sampath, Rural Health Information Technology and Telehealth (RITT)
mira.sampath@dhhs.nc.gov
919-527-6469

Courtney Moore, Rural Health Information Technology and Telehealth (RITT)
courtney.moore@dhhs.nc.gov

Internet Service Providers

Bright Speed
McKinley Perkinson, Government Affairs and Public Policy Manager
mckinley.perkinson@brightspeed.com

HarvestBeam
Jessica Zufolo, Vice President, Rural Infrastructure Strategy
jz@harvestbeam.com

Cooper Hilbert
hilbertc22@students.ecu.edu

Jack McNairy
jack@harvestbeam.com

Patrick Keith
patrickkeith225@gmail.com

Noah Biggs
biggsn20@students.ecu.edu

Mediacom Communications
Kim Mason, Director of Area Operations
kmason@mediacomcc.com
252-497-0328

Optimum
Elton Hart, Vice President and General Manager of Mid-Atlantic Region
elton.hart@alticeusa.com
252-468-1399

River Street Networks
Greg Coltrain, Vice President of Business Development
gregcoltrain@myriverstreet.net
877-773-4874

Roanoke Connect/FYBE
Angella Dunston, Coordinator, Public Relations and Engagement
adunston@roanokecooperative.com

252-209-2272

Sarah Tinkham
stinkham@gofybe.com

Angela Battle, Digital Health Navigator
abattle@roanokecooperative.com
267-304-6456
Spectrum
Eric Collins, Director of Government Affairs
eric.collins@charter.com
910-401-5168

Libraries

Albemarle Regional Library
Lee Bryant, Systems Administrator
lbryant@arlnc.org
252-358-7864

Beaufort-Hyde-Martin (BHM) Regional Library
Paula Hopper, Director
phopper@bhmlib.org
252-946-6401

Minority/Underserved Populations Support Organizations

AARP NC
Maria Semple, Volunteer
Mariasemple@yahoo.com
908-256-4433

Association of Mexicans in NC (AMEXCAN)
Juvencio Rocha-Peralta, Director
juvenciorp@amexcannc.org
252-757-3916

Greenville Minority and Women Business Enterprise (MWBE)
Wanda House, Financial Services Manager
whouse@greenvillenc.gov

252-329-4862

Our Journey 2Gether
Brian Scott, Executive Director
brian.scott@ourjourney2gether.com

Workforce Development

Mid-East Commission
Jennie Bowen, Director of Workforce Development
jbowen@mideastcom.org
252-946-8043

Northeast NC Career Pathways
Brandi Bragg, NENC Career Pathways Facilitator
Brandi.bragg@nencpathways.org

BEAUFORT COUNTY

County Staff

Beaufort County Economic Development Dept.
Sue Squires, Economic Development Director
susan.squires@beaufortedc.com
252-946-3970

Elected Official

Beaufort County
John Rebholz, County Commissioner (through December 2024)
john.rebholz@co.beaufort.nc.us

Chamber of Commerce

Washington-Beaufort County Chamber of Commerce
Catherine Glover, Director
cglover@wbcchamber.com
252-946-9168

Robin McKeithan, Assistant Director
rmckeithan@wbcchamber.com

Cooperative Extension

Beaufort County Cooperative Extension
Chasady Wudwych, 4-H Extension Agent
cquinn@ncsu.edu
252-946-0111

Faith Based Organization

Cornerstone Community Based Programs
Lavikina Grimes, Community Advocate
lgrimes.ccbps@gmail.com
(252)946-6109

Institutes of Higher Education

Beaufort County Community College
Dr. Stacey Gerard, President of Continuing Education
stacey.gerard@beaufortccc.edu
252-940-6241

Private Sector

Carver Machine Works
Lindsey Crisp, President and CEO
lcrisp@cmwglobal.com
252-975-3101

Senior Center

Grace Martin Harwell Senior Center
Deb Bauer, Supervisor
dbauer@washingtonnc.gov
252-975-9368

Social Services

Beaufort County Social Services Dept.
Amy Spring
amy.spring@beaufortdss.com
252-940-6077

BERTIE COUNTY

County Staff

Bertie County Economic Development Dept.
Franklin Williams, Economic Development Director
franklin.williams@bertie.nc.gov
252-794-5301

Elected Officials

Bertie County
Ron Wesson, Bertie County Commissioner
ronald.wesson@gmail.com
252-794-1340

Bertie County
Corey Ballance, Bertie County Commissioner
(Also serving for Faith Based Organization.)

Town of Windsor
Lewis Hoggard, Town of Windsor Mayor
(Also serving for Chamber of Commerce.)

Chamber of Commerce

Windsor Bertie Chamber of Commerce
Lewis Hoggard, Executive Director
windsorbertie@gmail.com
252-794-4277

Cooperative Extension

Bertie County Cooperative Extension
Rebecca Jinnette, Digital Skills Educator
rjinnet@ncsu.edu
252-794-5317

Billy Barrow, Director
wbarrow@ncsu.edu

Faith Based Organization

Colerain First Baptist Church
Pastor Corey Ballance
Coreyb4Bertie@gmail.com

Mt. Olive Missionary Baptist Church
Jennifer Hill
Jenniferhill402@gmail.com

Senior Center

Bertie County Council on Aging/Senior Center
Rebecca Stapleton, Director
rebecca.stapleton@bertie.nc.gov
252-794-5315

Social Services

Bertie County Social Services Dept.
Daphine Little, Director
daphine.little@bertie.nc.gov
252-794-5320

HERTFORD COUNTY

County Staff

Hertford County Economic Development Dept.
Kelly Bowers, Economic Development Director
kelly.bowers@hertfordcountync.gov
252-358-7801

Elected Official

Town of Ahoskie
David Hunt, Town of Ahoskie Councilman
davidhunt@ahoskienc.gov
252-642-9725

Chambers of Commerce

Ahoskie Chamber of Commerce
Connie Poland, Director
connie.poland@ahoskiecoc.com
252-332-2042

Murfreesboro Chamber of Commerce
Daryl Williams, Executive Director
murfreesborochamber@gmail.com
252-398-4886

Cooperative Extension

Hertford County Cooperative Extension
Dylan Lilley, Director
dylan_lilley@ncsu.edu
252-358-7822

Becky Castello, Administrative Assistant
rebecca_castello@ncsu.edu

Faith Based Organization

Pastor Jarvis Parker and Pastor Flora Parker
Kingdom Building Healing and Deliverance for All People
Pastorjparker4457@icloud.com
(252)642-2072

Dr. Shirley Vinson
Kingdom Building Healing and Deliverance for All People
shirley@ultimatecaregiverguide.com
(919)740-1421

Institutes of Higher Education

Chowan University
Dr. Brenda Tinkham, Associate Provost of External Relations
tinkhb@chowan.edu
252-398-6304

Roanoke Chowan Community College
Dr. Steven Mathews, Vice President of Workforce Development
sjmathews@roanokechowan.edu
252-862-1255

Private Sector

Alfiniti Inc.
Steve James, President
sjames@alfiniti.com
252-358-5811

Senior Center

Hertford County Aging/Senior Center
Diedra Evans, Director
diedra.evans@hertfordcountync.gov
252-358-7856

Social Services

Hertford County Social Services
Tiffany Walton, Director
tiffany.walton@hertfordcountync.gov
252-358-7830

MARTIN COUNTY

County Staff

Martin County Economic Development Corporation
Steve Biggs, President/CEO
sbiggs@martincountyedc.com
252-789-4904

Elected Officials

Martin County
Dempsey Bond, Martin County Commissioner
dbond@martincountyncgov.com
252-792-3516

Town of Bear Grass
Charlotte Griffin, Mayor of Bear Grass
ladybear45@outlook.com
252-792-7323

Chamber of Commerce

Martin County Chamber of Commerce
April Cooper, Executive Director
director@martinncchamber.com
252-792-4131

Cooperative Extension

Martin County Cooperative Extension
Lisa Smith, Director

lfsmith5@ncsu.edu
252-789-4370

Institutes of Higher Education

Martin Community College
Brian Busch, Vice President, Student Development Services
bb88772@martincc.edu
252-789-0244

Charles Banks, Small Business Center Director
Charles.banks@martincc.edu
252-789-0202

Senior Center

Martin County Adult & Aging Services
Madison Wilkinson, Director
madison.beacham@martincountyncgov.com
252-792-1027

Brianna Dickerson, Senior Administrative Support Specialist
brianna.dickerson@martincountyncgov.com

Social Services

Martin County Social Services Dept.
Angela Ellis, Director
angela.ellis@martincountyncgov.com
252-789-4400

Frank Halsey, Admin. Officer Director
frank.halsey@martincountyncgov.com
252-789-4444

PITT COUNTY

County Staff

Pitt County Economic Development Dept.
Kelly Andrews, Economic Development Director
kelly.andrews@pittcountync.gov
252-902-2078

Pitt County Management Information Systems Dept.
Michael Taylor, Management Information System Director
michael.taylor@pittcountync.gov
252-902-3800

Elected Officials

Pitt County
Melvin McLawhorn, Pitt County Commissioner
king2006mac@yahoo.com
252-327-6559

Town of Winterville
Veronica Roberson, Town of Winterville Councilwoman
veronica.roberson@wintervillenc.com
252-355-5053

Chamber of Commerce

Winterville Chamber of Commerce
Rebecca Caveness, Director
director@wintervillechamber.com
252-814-0192

Cooperative Extension

Pitt County Cooperative Extension
Matt Stevens, Director
matt_stevens@ncsu.edu

252-902-1702

Institutes of Higher Education

Pitt Community College
Ernis Lee, Vice President of Strategic Initiatives and Community Engagement
ealee685@my.pittcc.edu
252-341-5696

Sheila Black-Ormond, Industrial Training Coordinator
sbormond348@my.pittcc.edu

Senior Center

Pitt County Council on Aging/Senior Center
Richard Zeck, Executive Director
rzeck@pittcoa.com
252-752-1717

Social Services

Pitt County Social Services Dept.
Harvey White, Systems Administrator
harvey.white@pittcountync.gov
252-902-1274

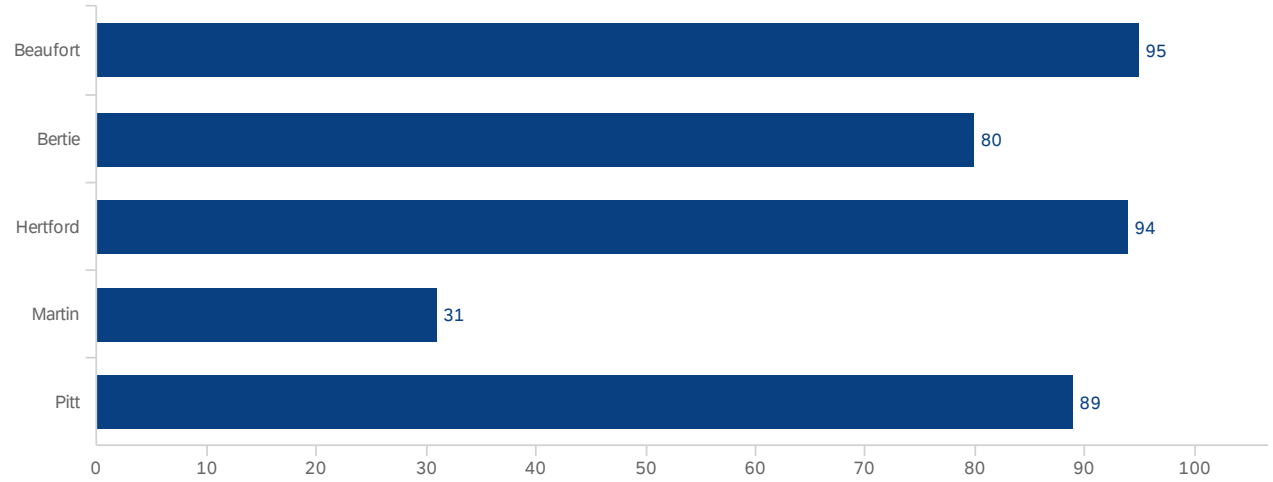
Appendix B: Public Survey Results

Mid-East Commission

NC ODEL DE Survey-Spring 2023

January 11, 2025 7:23 PM EST

Q2.1 - In which county do you live?



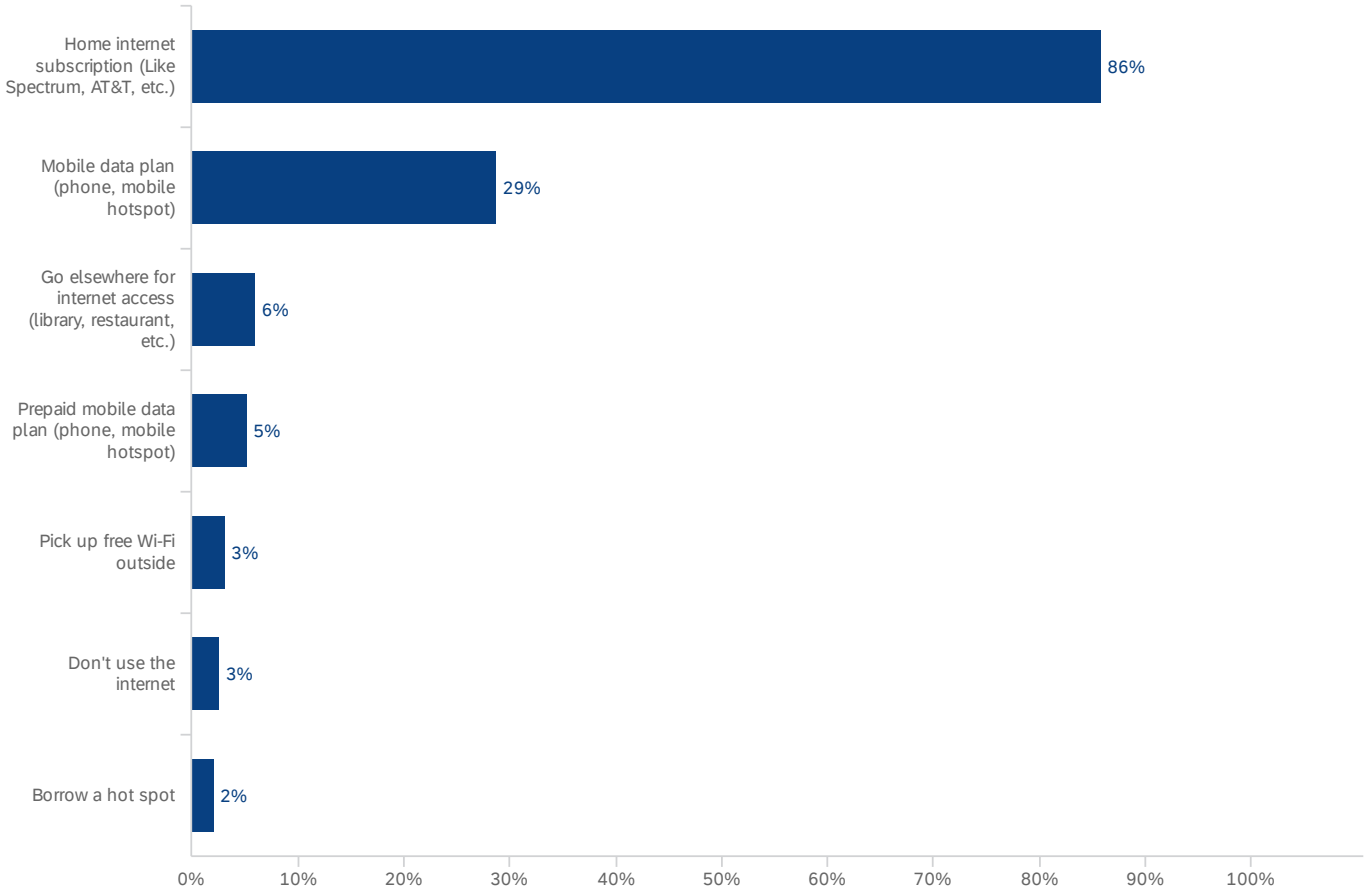
#	Field	Choice Count	
7	Beaufort	24.42%	95
8	Bertie	20.57%	80
46	Hertford	24.16%	94
58	Martin	7.97%	31
74	Pitt	22.88%	89
			389

Showing rows 1 - 6 of 6

#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	In which county do you live?	7	74	36	28	760	389

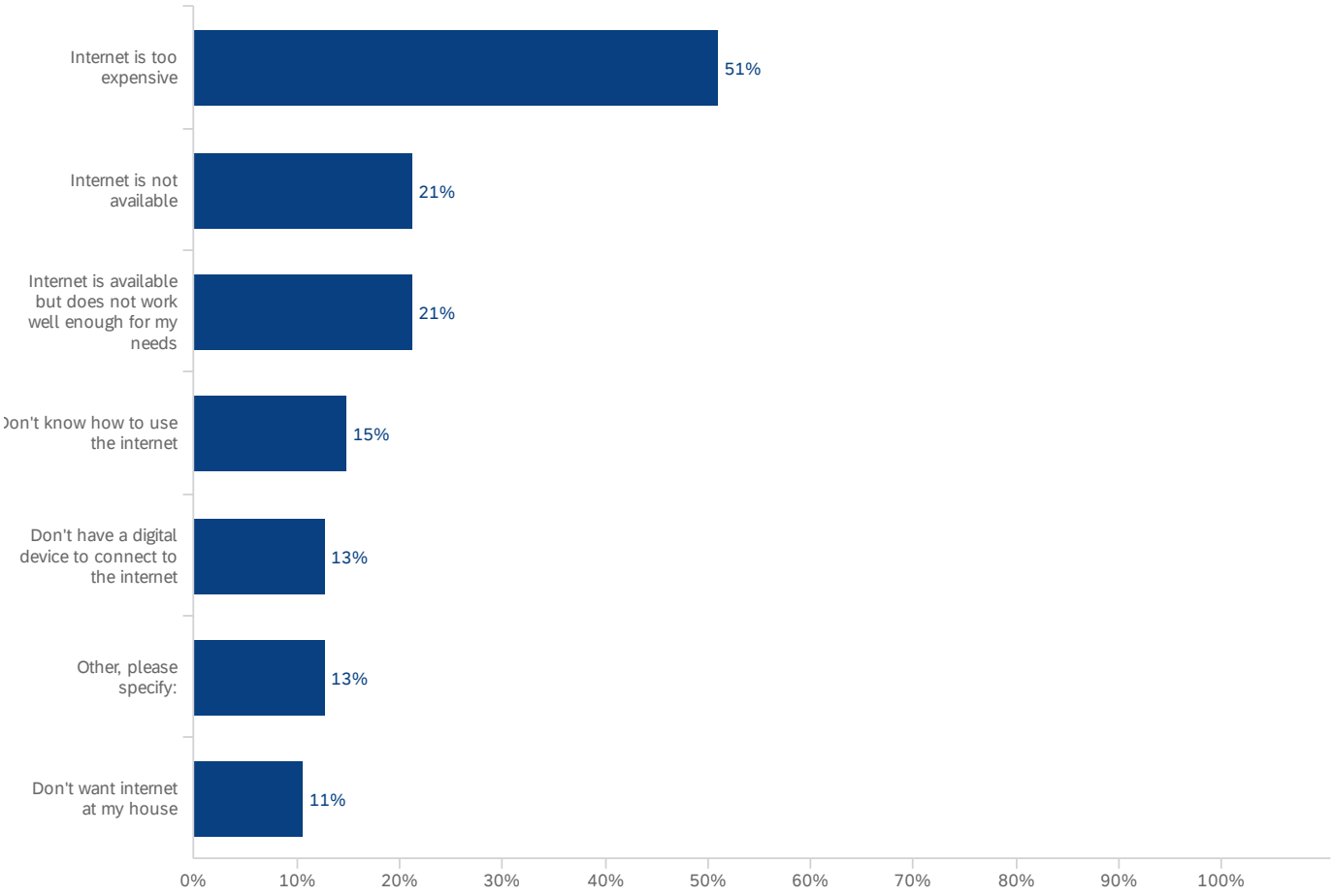
Note: Question #2 (zip code) was eliminated from summary due to inability to aggregate responses.

Q3.1 - How do you and other members of your household primarily connect to the internet in your home? (Select all that apply)



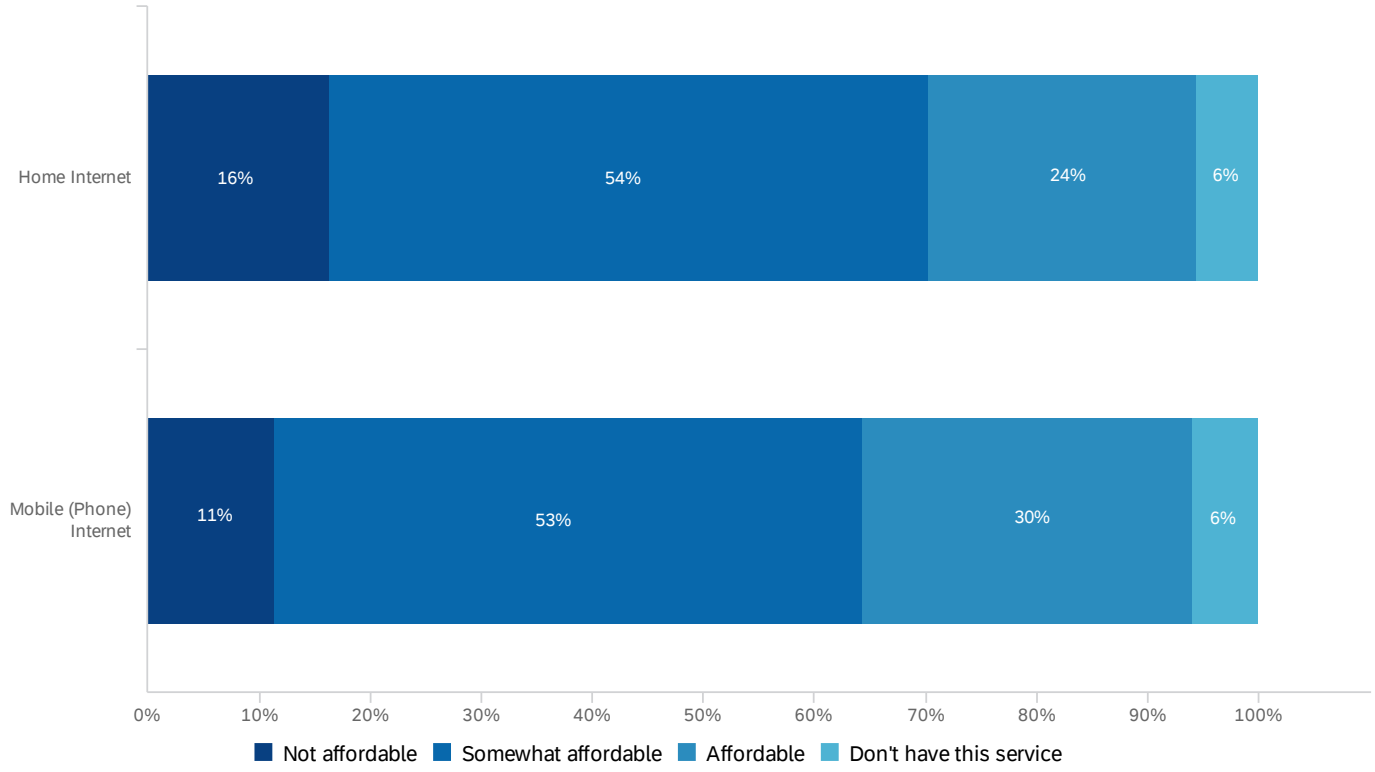
Field		Choice Count
Home internet subscription (Like Spectrum, AT&T, etc.)	64%	328
Pick up free Wi-Fi outside	2%	12
Mobile data plan (phone, mobile hotspot)	22%	110
Prepaid mobile data plan (phone, mobile hotspot)	4%	20
Borrow a hot spot	2%	8
Go elsewhere for internet access (library, restaurant, etc.)	5%	23
Don't use the internet	2%	10
		511

Q3.2 - What is preventing you from accessing the internet in your home?



Field		Choice Count
Internet is too expensive	35%	24
Internet is not available	15%	10
Internet is available but does not work well enough for my needs	15%	10
Don't know how to use the internet	10%	7
Don't want internet at my house	7%	5
Don't have a digital device to connect to the internet	9%	6
Other, please specify:	9%	6
		68

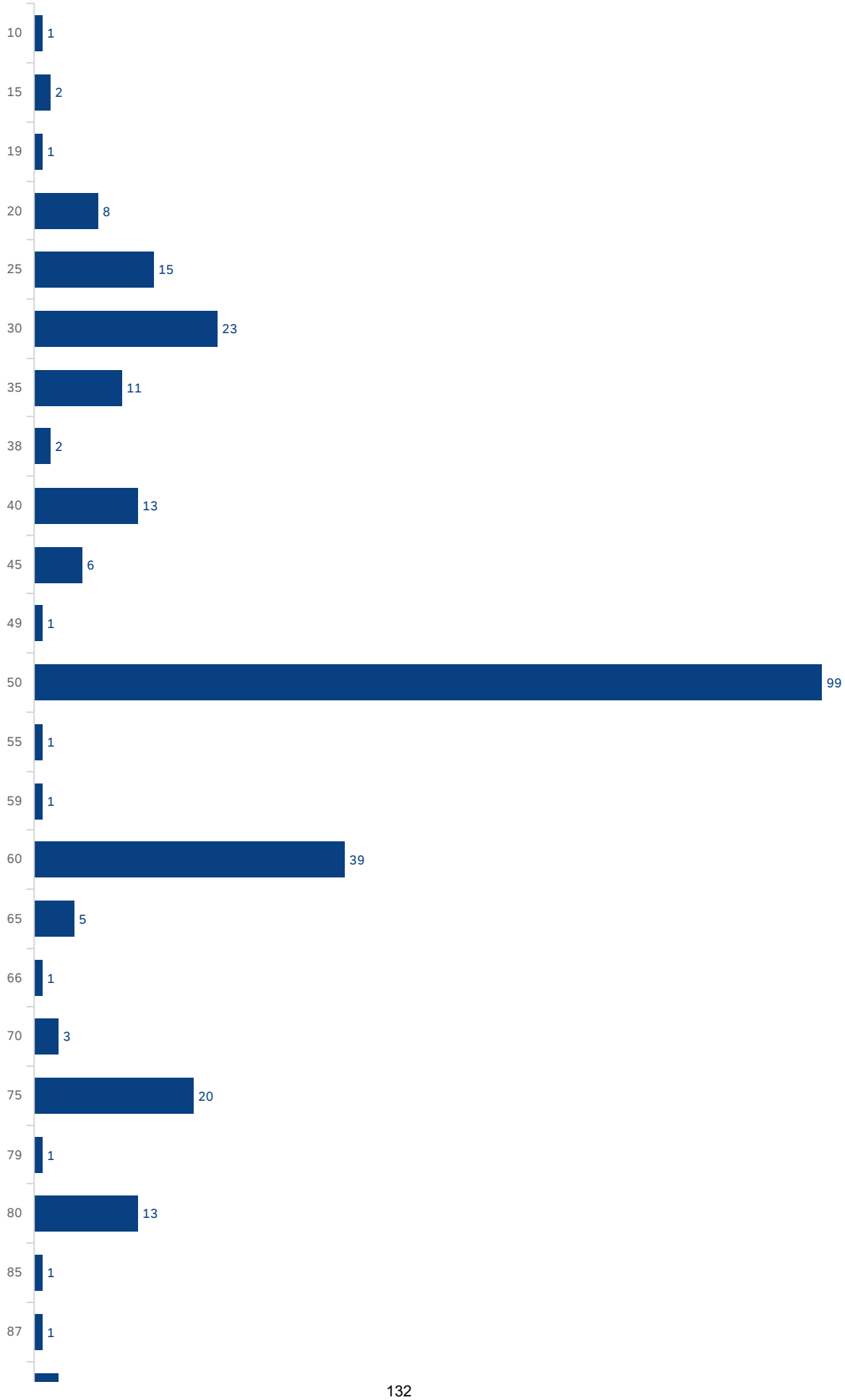
Q4.1 - How affordable is your monthly internet bill?



#	Field	Not affordable	Somewhat affordable	Affordable	Don't have this service	Total
1	Home Internet	16.42% 56	53.96% 184	24.05% 82	5.57% 19	341
2	Mobile (Phone) Internet	11.42% 33	52.94% 153	29.76% 86	5.88% 17	289

Showing rows 1 - 2 of 2

Q4.2 - What is the highest price per month you would consider a subscription for home internet to be affordable? (Please enter only numbers)


10
1
15
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1
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15
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11
38
2
40
13
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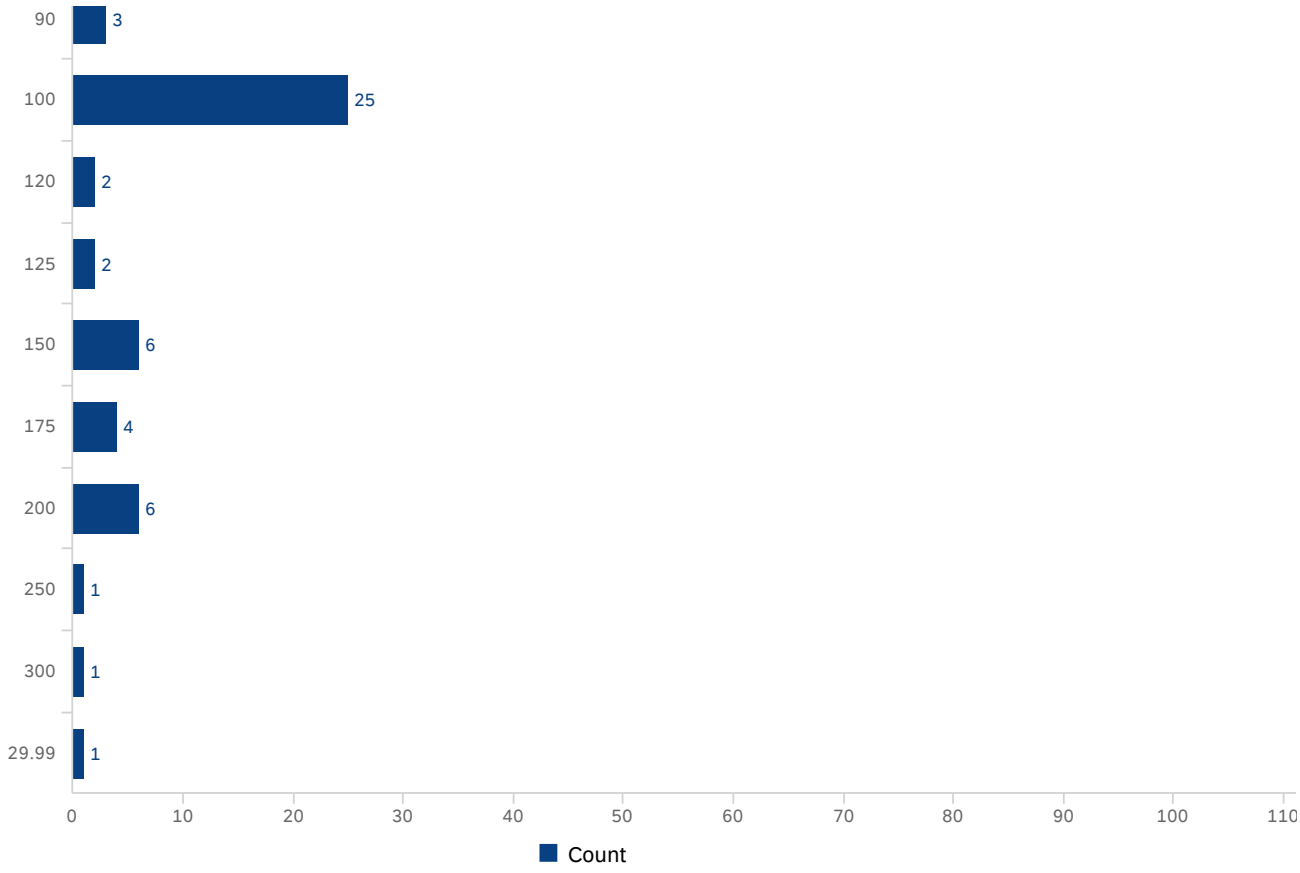
6
49
1
50
99
55
1
59
1
60
39
65
5
66
1
70
3
75
20
79
1
80
13
85
1
87
1



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	What is the highest price per month you would consider a subscription for home internet to be affordable? (Please enter only numbers)	10	300	63	38	1461	319

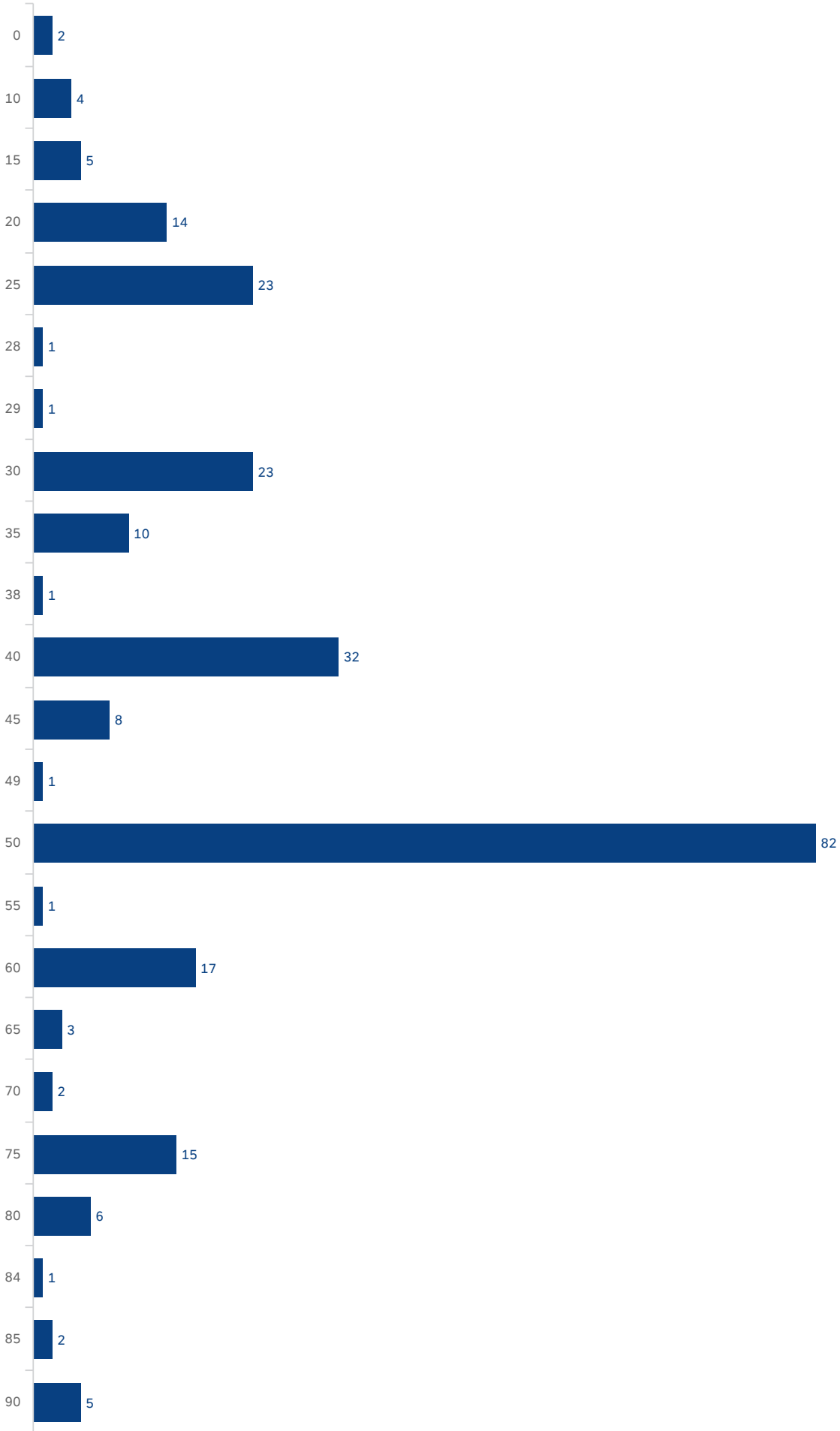
#	Field		Choice Count
10	10	0%	1
15	15	1%	2
19	19	0%	1
20	20	3%	8

#	Field	Choice Count	
25	25	5%	15
30	30	7%	23
35	35	3%	11
38	38	1%	2
40	40	4%	13
45	45	2%	6
49	49	0%	1
50	50	31%	99
55	55	0%	1
59	59	0%	1
60	60	12%	39
65	65	2%	5
66	66	0%	1
70	70	1%	3
75	75	6%	20
79	79	0%	1
80	80	4%	13
85	85	0%	1
87	87	0%	1
90	90	1%	3
100	100	8%	25
120	120	1%	2
125	125	1%	2

#	Field		Choice Count
150	150	2%	6
175	175	1%	4
200	200	2%	6
250	250	0%	1
300	300	0%	1
29.99	29.99	0%	1
			319

Showing rows 1 - 34 of 34

Q4.3 - What is the highest price per month you would consider a subscription for mobile internet to be affordable? (Please enter only numbers)


0
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29
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30
23
35
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38
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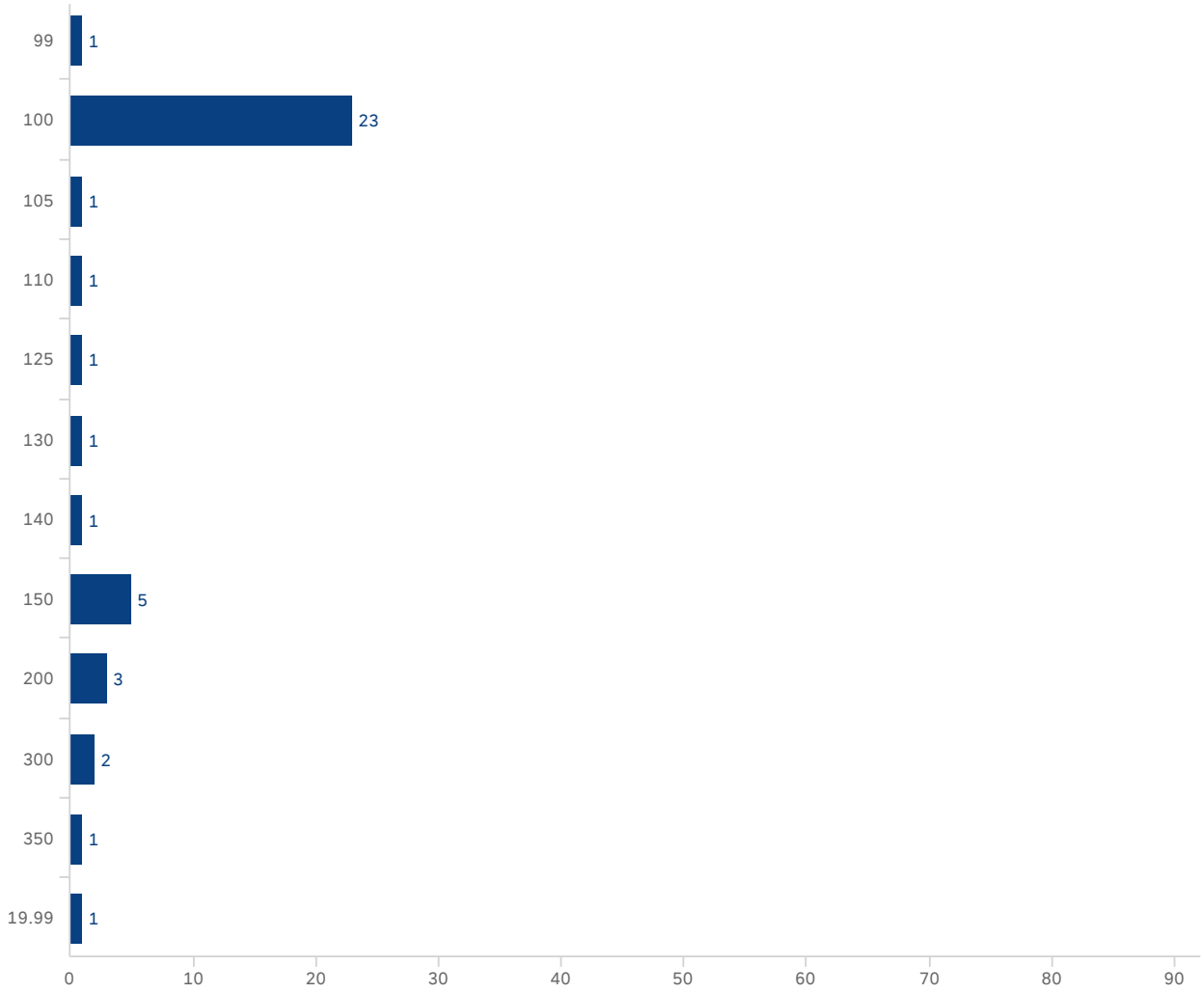
32
45
8
49
1
50
82
55
1
60
17
65
3
70
2
75
15
80
6
84
1
85
2
90
5



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	What is the highest price per month you would consider a subscription for mobile internet to be affordable? (Please enter only numbers)	0	350	56	41	1658	300

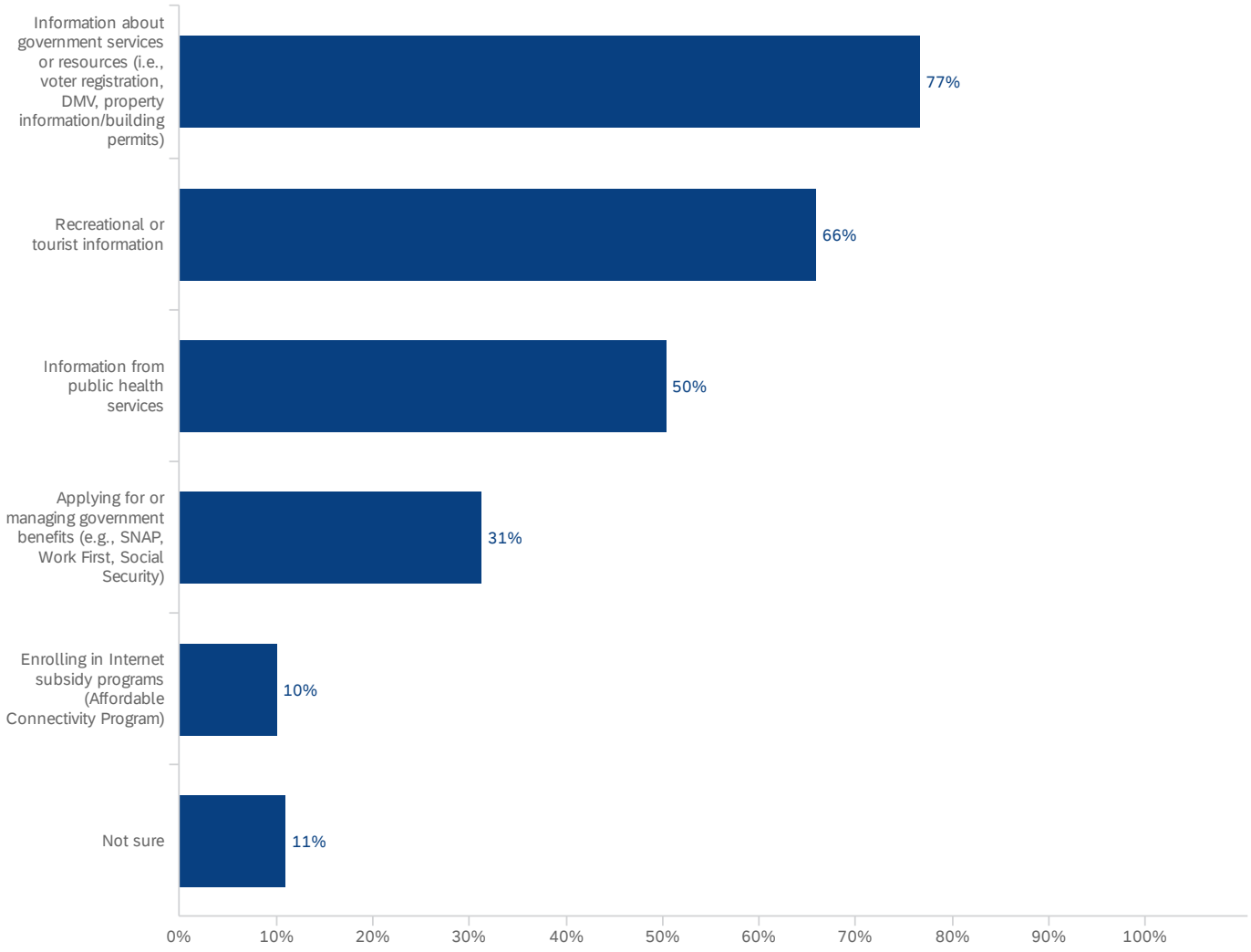
#	Field		Choice Count
0	0	1%	2
10	10	1%	4

#	Field	Choice Count	
15	15	2%	5
20	20	5%	14
25	25	8%	23
28	28	0%	1
29	29	0%	1
30	30	8%	23
35	35	3%	10
38	38	0%	1
40	40	11%	32
45	45	3%	8
49	49	0%	1
50	50	27%	82
55	55	0%	1
60	60	6%	17
65	65	1%	3
70	70	1%	2
75	75	5%	15
80	80	2%	6
84	84	0%	1
85	85	1%	2
90	90	2%	5
99	99	0%	1
100	100	8%	23

#	Field		Choice Count
105	105	0%	1
110	110	0%	1
125	125	0%	1
130	130	0%	1
140	140	0%	1
150	150	2%	5
200	200	1%	3
300	300	1%	2
350	350	0%	1
19.99	19.99	0%	1
			300

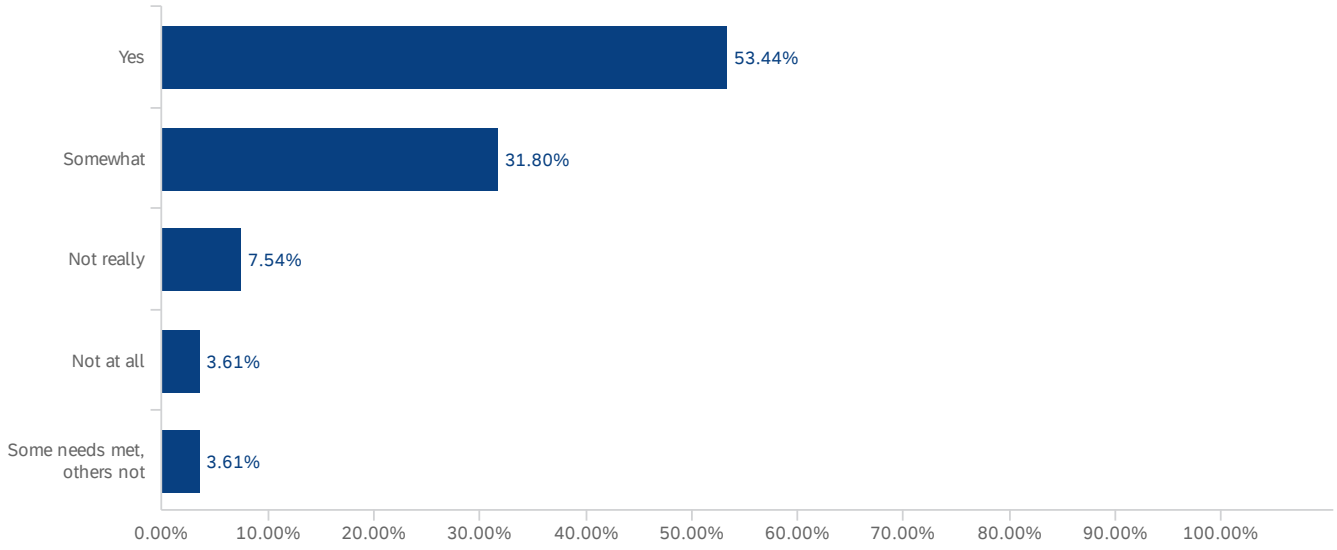
Showing rows 1 - 36 of 36

Q5.1 - In the past year, have you used the internet to search for any of the following public resources or services? (Select all that apply)



Field		Choice Count
Information about government services or resources (i.e., voter registration, DMV, property information/building permits)	31%	257
Recreational or tourist information	27%	221
Information from public health services	21%	169
Applying for or managing government benefits (e.g., SNAP, Work First, Social Security)	13%	105
Enrolling in Internet subsidy programs (Affordable Connectivity Program)	4%	34
Not sure	4%	37
		823

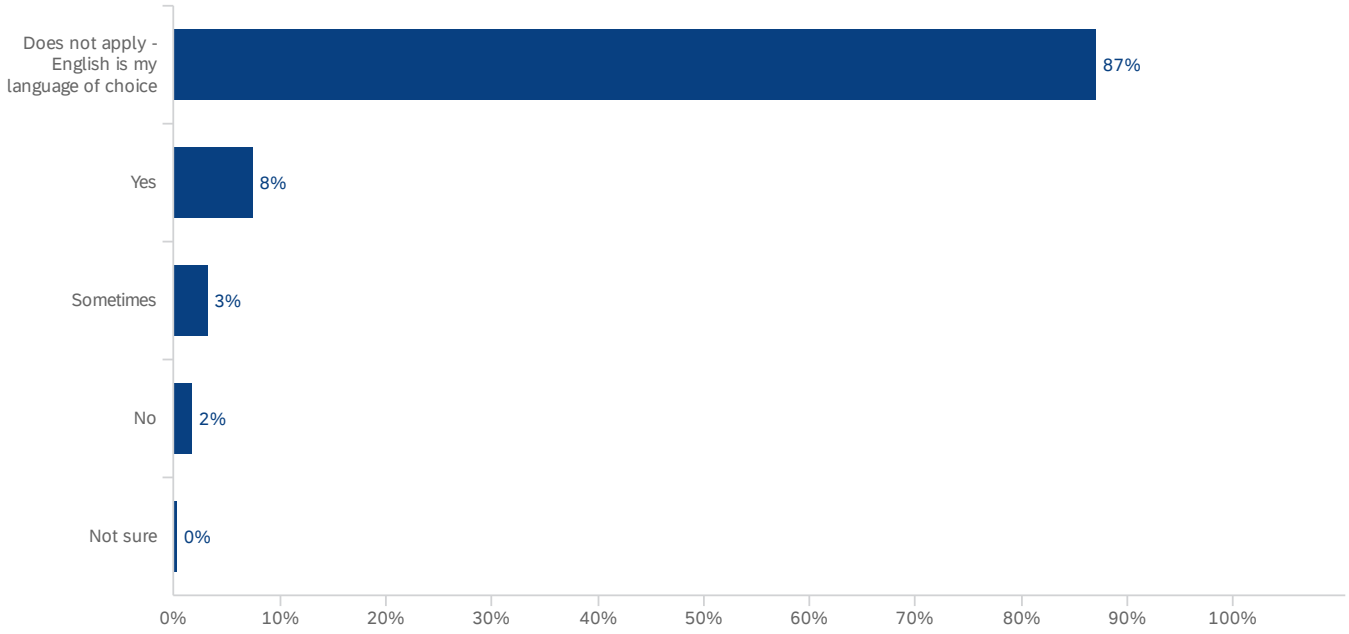
Q5.2 - Did your internet searches for public resources or services meet your needs?



#	Field	Choice Count	
1	Yes	53.44%	163
2	Somewhat	31.80%	97
3	Not really	7.54%	23
4	Not at all	3.61%	11
5	Some needs met, others not	3.61%	11
			305

Showing rows 1 - 6 of 6

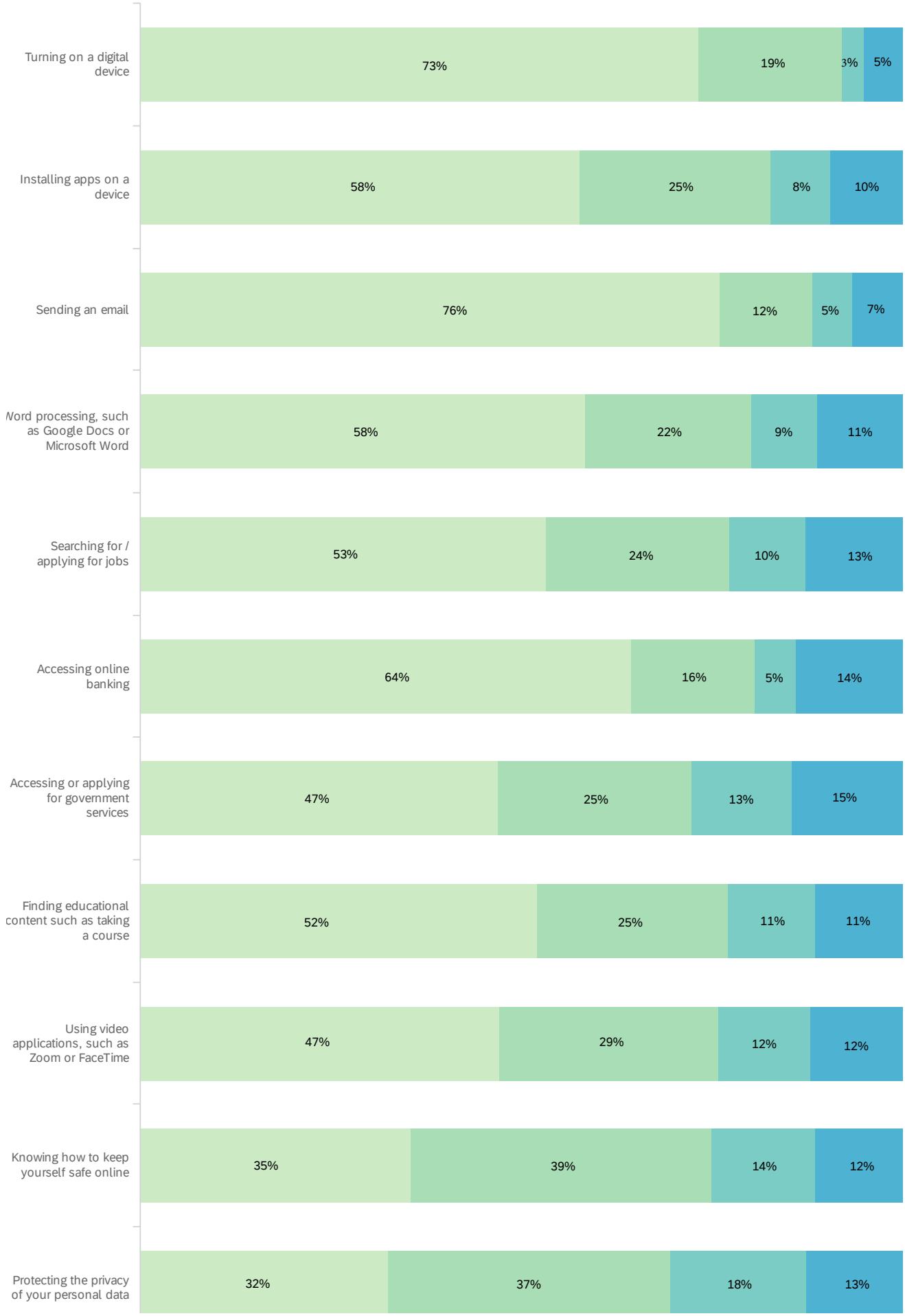
Q5.3 - If English is not your primary language, were you able to access these public resources in your language of choice?

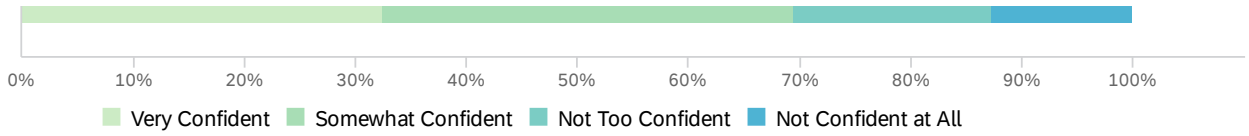


Field		Choice Count
Does not apply - English is my language of choice	87%	244
Yes	8%	21
Sometimes	3%	9
No	2%	5
Not sure	0%	1
		280

Showing rows 1 - 6 of 6

Q6.1 - How confident are you in your abilities for each of the following tasks or skills?

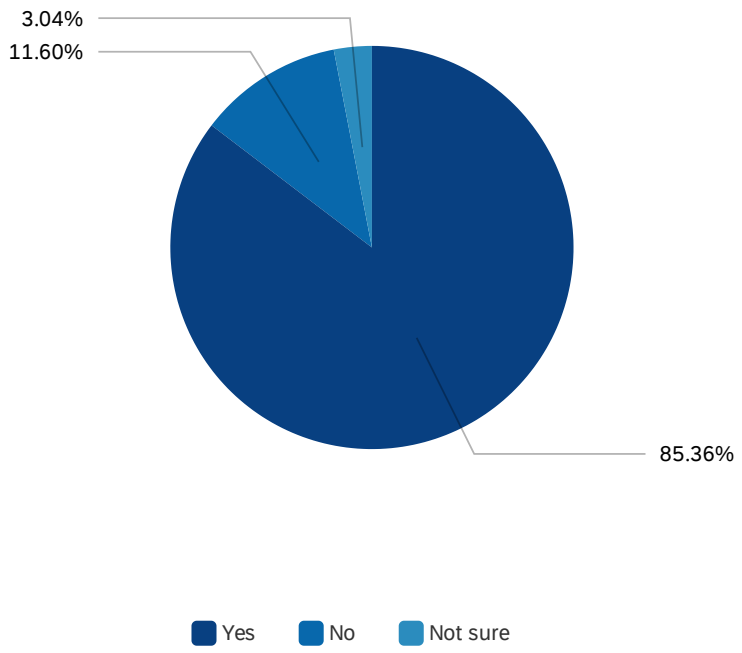

Turning on a digital device
73%
19%
3%
5%
Installing apps on a device
58%
25%
8%
10%
Sending an email
76%
12%
5%
7%
Word processing, such as Google Docs or Microsoft Word
58%
22%
9%
11%
Searching for / applying for jobs
53%
24%
10%
13%
Accessing online banking
64%
16%
5%
14%
Accessing or applying for government services
47%
25%
13%
15%
Finding educational content such as taking a course
52%
25%
11%
11%
Using video applications, such as Zoom or FaceTime
47%
29%
12%
12%
Knowing how to keep yourself safe online
35%
39%
14%
12%
Protecting the privacy of your personal data
32%
37%
18%
13%



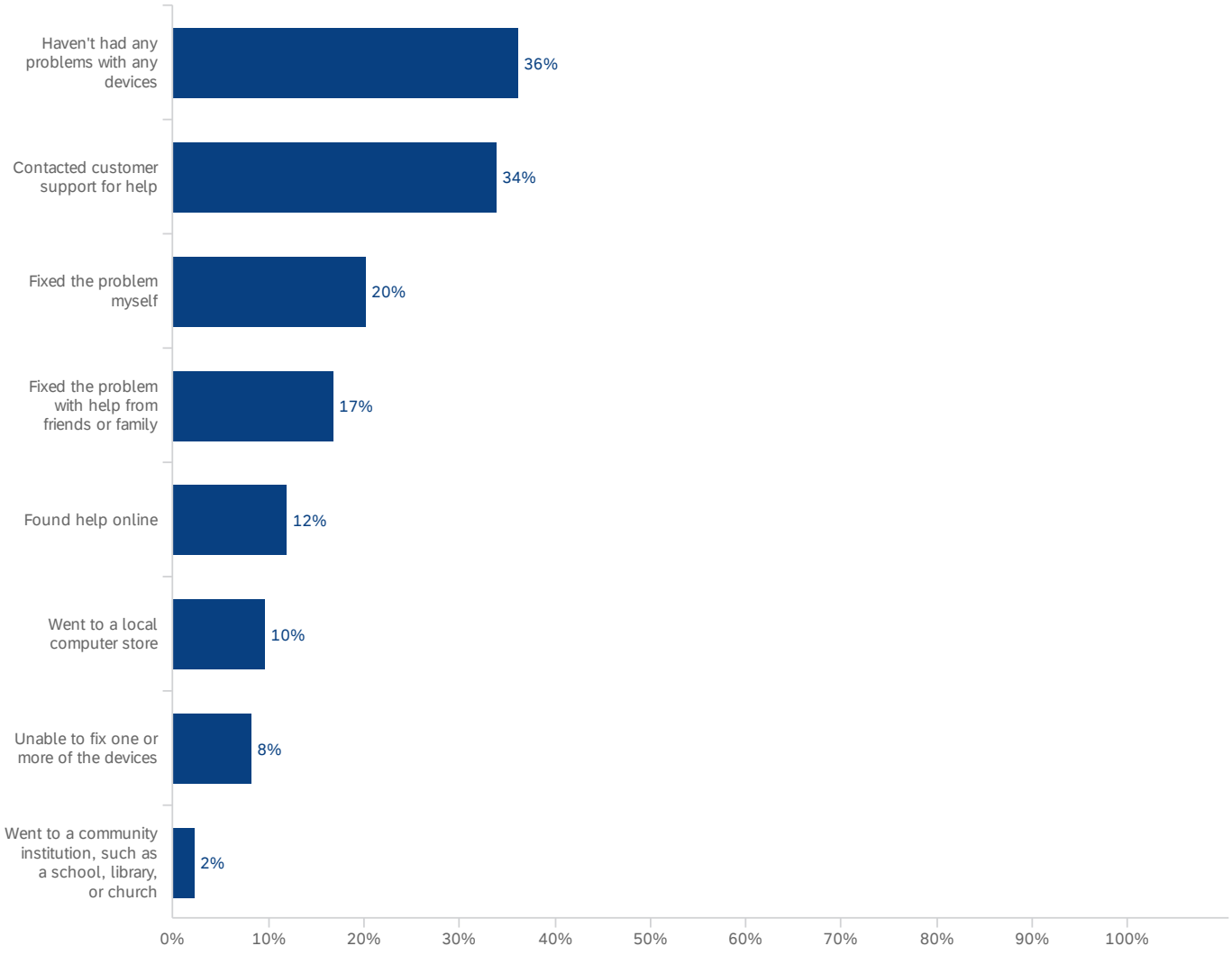
Field	Not at all confident	Not too confident	Somewhat confident	Very confident	Total
Sending an email	6.65% 23	5.20% 18	12.14% 42	76.01% 263	346
Turning on a digital device	5.13% 18	2.85% 10	18.80% 66	73.22% 257	351
Accessing online banking	13.96% 49	5.41% 19	16.24% 57	64.39% 226	351
Word processing, such as Google Docs or Microsoft Word	11.21% 39	8.62% 30	21.84% 76	58.33% 203	348
Installing apps on a device	9.51% 33	7.78% 27	25.07% 87	57.64% 200	347
Searching for / applying for jobs	12.72% 43	10.06% 34	23.96% 81	53.25% 180	338
Finding educational content such as taking a course	11.47% 39	11.47% 39	25.00% 85	52.06% 177	340
Using video applications, such as Zoom or FaceTime	12.07% 42	12.07% 42	28.74% 100	47.13% 164	348
Accessing or applying for government services	14.58% 50	13.12% 45	25.36% 87	46.94% 161	343
Knowing how to keep yourself safe online	11.53% 40	13.54% 47	39.48% 137	35.45% 123	347
Protecting the privacy of your personal data	12.64% 44	17.82% 62	37.07% 129	32.47% 113	348

Showing rows 1 - 11 of 11

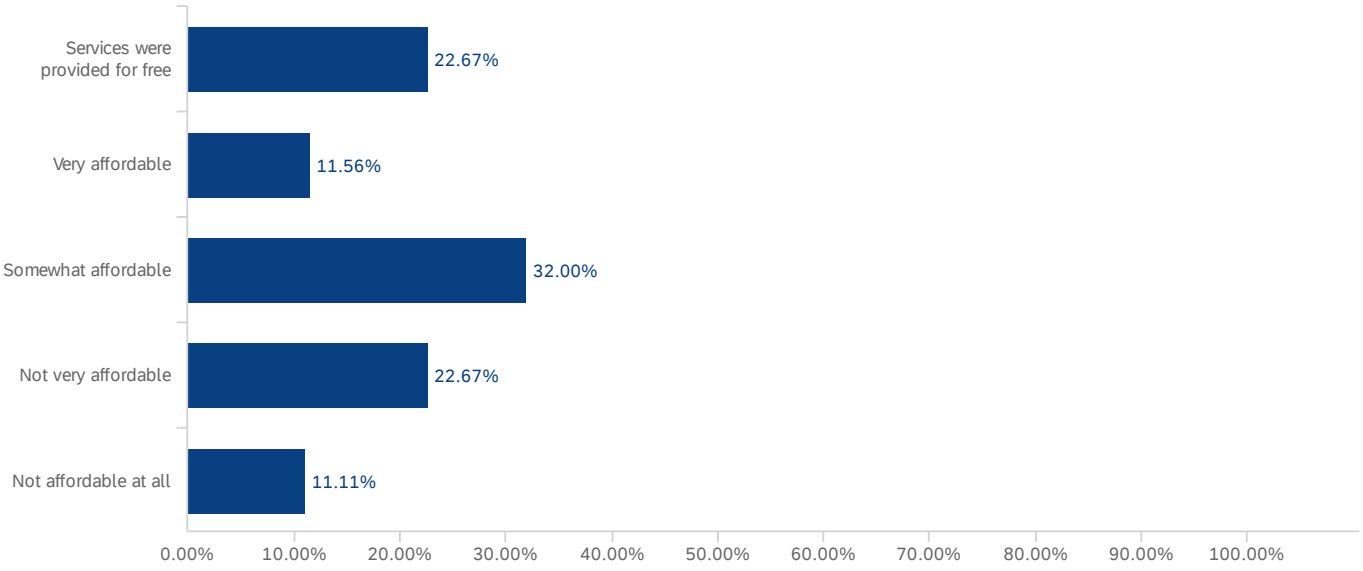
Q7.1 - Does your household have enough working digital devices (computers, smart phones, tablets) available to meet the needs of everyone living in this home?



Q7.2 - In the past 6 months, if one of your digital devices failed to function, broke, or stopped working properly how did you deal with the problem you encountered? (Select all that apply)



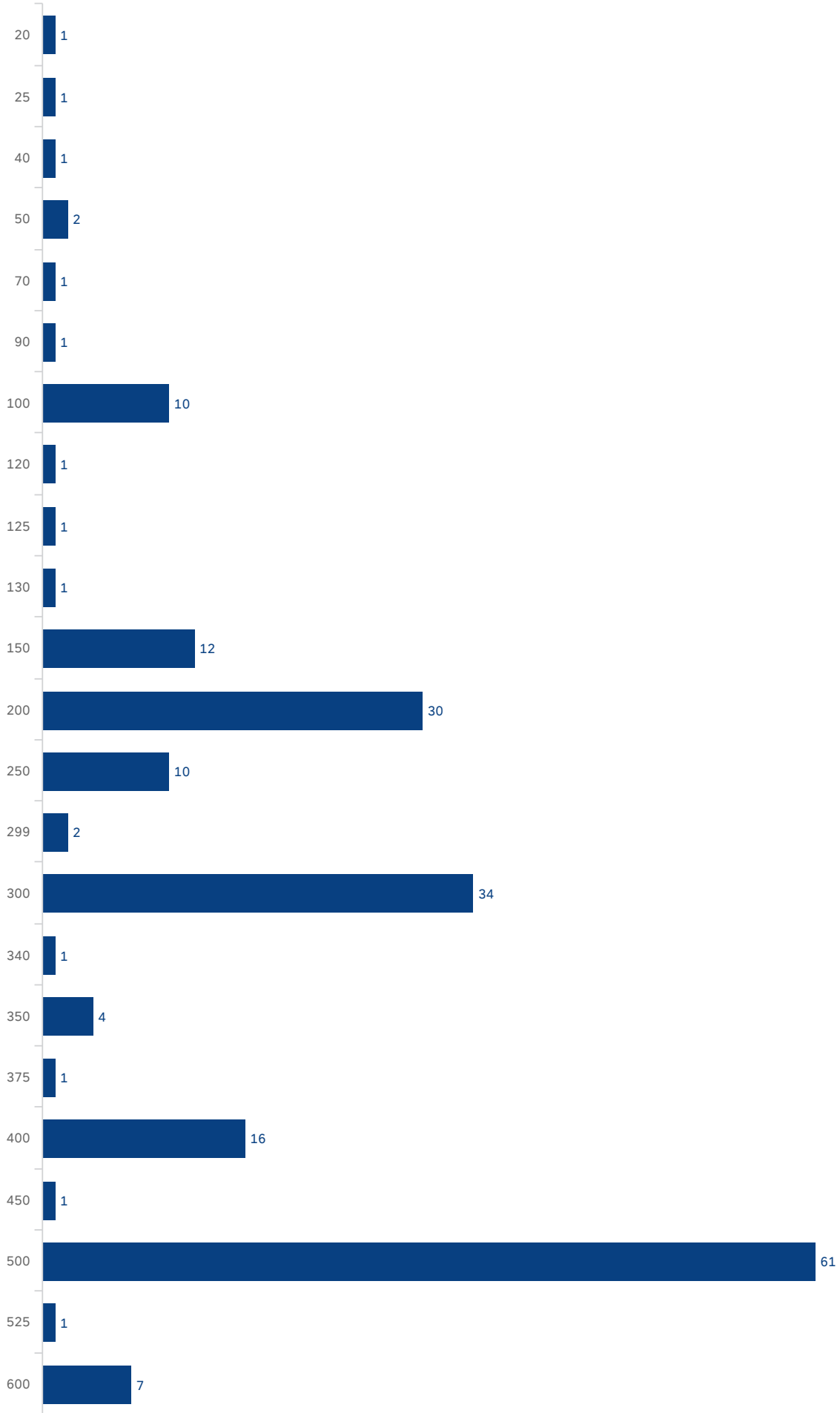
Q7.3 - How would you rate the affordability of the services you received?

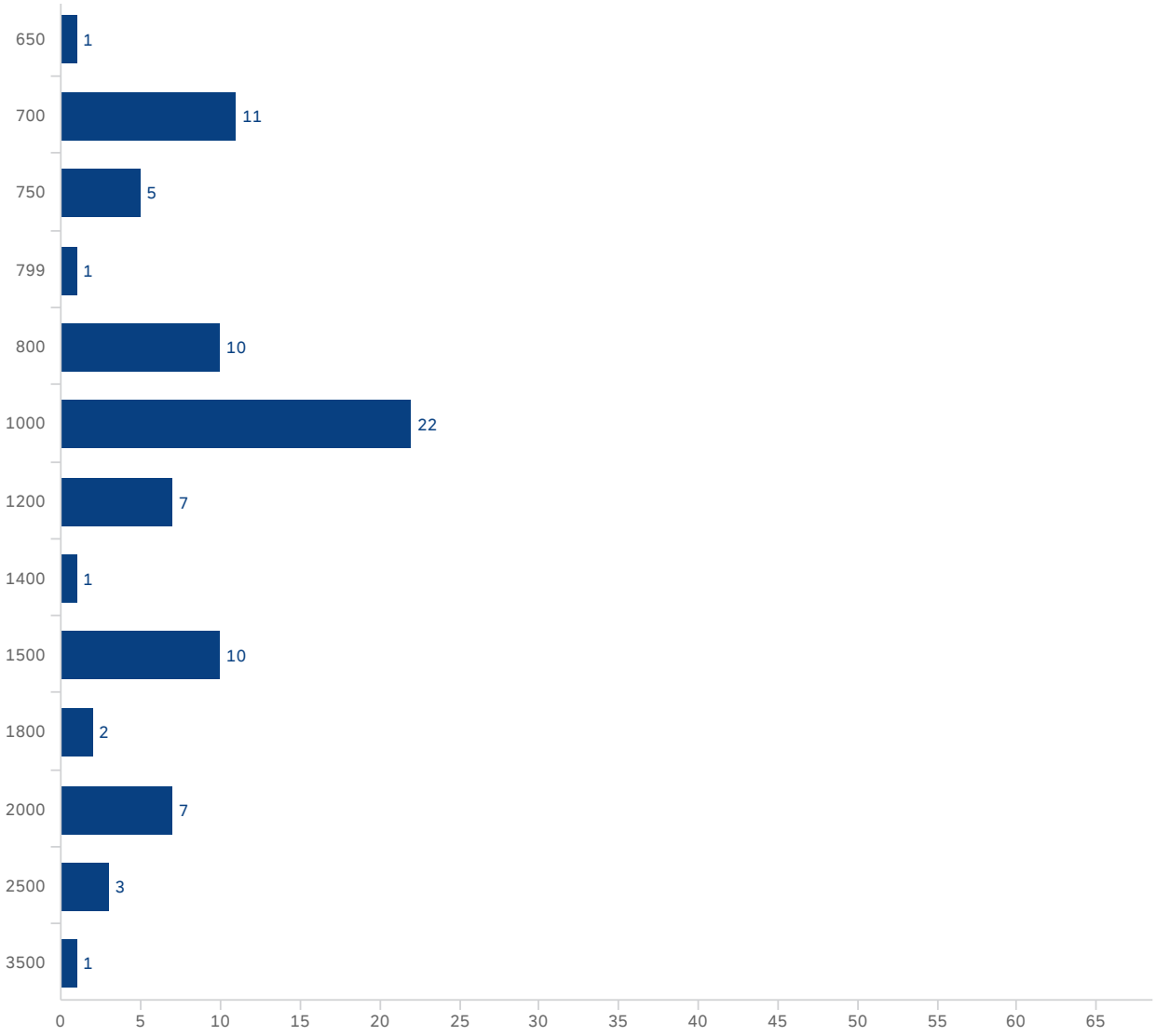


#	Field		Choice Count
1	Services were provided for free	23%	51
2	Very affordable	12%	26
3	Somewhat affordable	32%	72
4	Not very affordable	23%	51
5	Not affordable at all	11%	25
			225

Showing rows 1 - 6 of 6

Q7.4 - In thinking about purchasing a computer or tablet that meets your needs, what is the highest price you would consider to be affordable? (Please enter only numbers)


20 1
25 1
40 1
50 2
70 1
90 1
100 10
120 1
125 1
130 1
150 12
200 30
250 10
299 2
300 34
340 1
350 4
375 1
400 16
450 1
500 61
525 1
600 7



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	In thinking about purchasing a computer or tablet that meets your needs, what is the highest price you would consider to be affordable? (Please enter only numbers)	20	3500	581	499	248509	281

Q7.5 - If there anything else you would like to tell us about how you access and use the internet and digital devices, please enter it here. Please do not provide any personal information such as health conditions, address, or phone number.

If there is anything else you would like to tell us about how you access an...
Bring back the ACP
Not fast at all
No
1. Use the office 2. Library (public)
internet service can be spotty - (spectrum) phone service/internet service is not good at all in many areas
Signal is poor
Internet too slow Not enough data
No
Use internet for information, research, online banking. Very concerned about security and identity theft.
N/A
No
More choices equals better value
Need more training/instructions on technology to be able to do things.
It doesn't make sense to me, in 2024, that there are still areas that have NO internet access.
I am paying a monthly fee for a modum that is very inexpensive if I could purchase one. They dont have any to purchase and I am not allowed to purchase one elsewhere. That is so wrong.

If there is anything else you would like to tell us about how you access an...

Internet options are very limited. For initiating service and/or having a technician come out, wait times are 3 weeks or longer. This turnaround time is unacceptable for individuals who may be working from home, having students enrolled in online classes and/or unable to drive. Fast turnaround times are not a priority. Likewise, if company prefers you to contact from the location and your service isn't working properly, it poses an additional barrier for getting help since nearby Wi-Fi doesn't reach. In fact, our internet doesn't reach the end of our home. The town of Askewville cannot use their phone's internet while traveling through its town, down Askewville Road, Pine Ridge Road, and the nearby areas. Also, no signal prevents the ability to call for help should the need arise.

Work related, New Outlets, Family Connections

Apparently, I use internet to complete surveys. Read medical updat3 articles. Recipes. Calendar plann8ng. For everything where info is needed. Check out multiple sources for accuracy

Apartment provides internet services as part of included rent.

On line banking

na

Search on phone look up on computer

Our household is still on a wired internet over phone line connection which goes down frequently. Brightspeed appears to have no interest in extending high speed fiber optic cable to this location but is very happy charging over $180 per month for the existing service. Our only option is to go to satellite service provider like Starlink, which is probably the future of ISPs. Will be making the change as soon as we can afford the equipment and installation.

Fybe has supposed to have been coming to our area for over 3 years now but they keep jumping over my area but has setup connections in Chowan county before finishing serving the Bertie County customers who are in dire need of internet access

Starlink, only satellite internet at my address

there needs to be a better selection of internet service in this county

no

I live in a area that having outage issues. Would like to have internet service with no outage. Especially if I have to pay for the service.

If there is anything else you would like to tell us about how you access an...

nothing

Options are limited for household internet

N/a

NO

N/A

no

No

Local internet service became avable about 6 months ago, best service I have had

need more broadband in our area

Nothing

Not enough options in rural areas, so the one or two cable choices that are available have a monopoly on the market and low income families cannot afford it.

N/A

Information resources, scheduling, retail purchasing

The internet is both my primary source of information for things such as weather and government information, business communication and other essentials, but also my primary source of entertainment as I don't subscribe to conventional TV sources such as cable or satellite TV.

I am unable to get high speed internet at my address. Brightspeed does not offer a plan at my address. They will not provide fiber optics service to me.

Spotty cell service in some rural areas

If there is anything else you would like to tell us about how you access an...

Cellular service is generally weak in Beaufort County, regardless of vendor.

I had the discounted government program and now I have a relative in Seattle loaning me money to pay my internet bill. It's very humiliating. I have to pay them back and I am unable to right now. I am disabled with no transportation. As a Veteran, I am very ashamed of how this country is moving. Internet should be low cost or free from our government to all Veterans and seniors!

Fiber Optic .. its great....

Directions, medical records, get in touch with family, email

Inconsistently consistent connection over subpar infrastructure for cellular and internet. In Beaufort County a bandaid will be implemented that is obsolete technology unable to meet the demands of the community nor the initiatives of the federal incentive programs available.

What I consider affordable vs reasonable is different. I have to have the service, therefore have to pay what is asked. Additionally, there is little recourse when the service I pay for is not received. i.e. High Speed Internet, is rarely high speed, and frequently down.

It could be a little cheaper for those that have a fixed income

No

Note that since I moved closer to town, I can access the internet via Optimum. However, the cost is very high ($126 per month) and I require quality internet for my public job which is full-time and from my home office. More affordable options would be most welcome, as well as better options for rural areas. (Previously, I chose to go to a library rather than use unreliable satellite internet, which is all that was available where I was at that time.)

FTTH

Access is OVERPRICED

NA

No amount is "affordable" when families can't even afford housing and groceries. But internet/mobile access is no longer a luxury, it's a necessity

If there is anything else you would like to tell us about how you access an...

I get 50 mbps with Verizon 5G router which is OK for most applications except downloading movies, etc.

As a household full of gamers, we often use the internet to play games online as well as download new games we purchase, as well as stream videos through services such as Peacock, YouTube, and Paramount Plus

access is ok

I just want to get information of broadband expansion to Spring Drive, Aurora, NC 27806. 7-8 miles away Spectrum offers 1 GB speeds, but nothing is available to Spring Drive, Aurora, NC. Seems that expanding the 10 mile radius would benefit hundreds of residents. We understand the density is not as high, but since the area is looking to renovate and reinvigorate this is a good first step for residents and businesses.

N/A

no

Connectivity is a huge issue in the counties east of Pitt. I drive through Craven and/or Beaufort daily and cannot get internet (or phone) access in certain places. Where I work in Pamlico my students have trouble getting internet access at their houses due to the few low quality options.

I consider home internet to be up there in my family's hierarchy of needs. We would not be able to function properly in this society without that access. That being said, the cost we are having to pay for the basic right to access the internet and maintain devices is untenable. Additionally, while my employer allows for the option to telework, I must fund that option myself on a salary that does not increase to meet the demands.

I have two main problems with internet: local monopolies and lack of availabilty for the rural communities. Please consider more municipal offerings to force private entities to compete.

Increase the security in social media and take action to stop spam on phones and web sites. In social media, the meta company must guarantee security. When somebody reports something, for example, extorsion, Meta doesn't do anything. For normativity, social media must ask Id for every profile and should do validation in a public database in order to identify the person

Algunas veces uso wi fi free en los lugares que esta disponible.

Deberian de haber mas puntos wifi gratuitos en oarques u estaciones de buses y lugares publicos

If I choose to attend the community college for senior fundamental computing use to get more familiar with my

device, I have to pay $70 for a twice a week 4-week class. This is unaffordable.

Senior 83yr age, unaffordable satellite internet, rural area

No

Service is spotty. Not reliable.

Virus protection can be rather costly.The price of this laptop was over $300,so I had to borrow the money and paid back as I was able.

Starlink is very expensive but no other service is reliable.

Needs to be more user friendly for older adults

Still stuck with 1.5mbs DSL and it SUCKS!!!!!!!!! Where is the high speed internet the government say is so essential to everyday life in the 21st century??

Our rural internet service is very slow and very unreliable at times.

no

We are limited in our choices for internet access in our remote little town. Options would be beneficial.

I have no issues

Only 2 options for home internet. Very expensive satellite or very slow 10 mb landline.

Internet service it seems is constantly going up and statements are way too complicated with way too many additional fees and taxes on top of the initial charge

I get help through program. If weren't for that can not afford. Plus signal weak here.

Trying to make the Internet less and less of a daily part of our lives

The internet service is not very reliable and frustrating to work with

If there is anything else you would like to tell us about how you access an...

Hughes Net is my provider.

Need competition to bring price down

None

Internet cost should be lower.

Suddenlink sis a monopoly and unfair. Before I cancelled cable, internet was about $50 and cable was about $50. When I cancelled cable internet went to $110.

My internet service is not very reliable and I have to pay for two different services: StarLink and T-Mobile. Despite paying over $160/month, I still can't rely on the service.

I wish Beaufort County had better internet connection. Rural areas have been neglected.

the internet access i have is very limited and very slow. It is difficult some days to access anything. It really needs to be updated.

Intern in the home

n/a

In Martin county specifically Robersonville where I used to live for over a decade our road did not have availability for dsl or any type of home internet besides satellite internet that was the literal worst with download and upload speeds but did charge btw 150-300$ a month for. While the street next to us not even half a mile from us did have dsl availability. Now it is the same thing since I moved to Williamston this time though I am able to get 10mgbs upload and download which is not the greatest. When we live 10 minutes from the city of Williamston.the bill is around $60 a month and the internet is still very terrible and unreliable especially for me a full time student and someone who works remotely. 10mgbs upload and download speeds is the best I have ever had in my life and is really difficult to the point where I have to most of the time connect my hotspot because my atnt service is a bit faster.

N/A

We know that the county has been given money for our Southeast corner of Beaufort County. We, however, have seen from maps and lists of served addresses that we are not included in the grants. That leaves out the following: Spring Creek, Summerise, Windsong 1, Windsong 2, Windsong 3, Canady Landing, Jarvis Landing and others. Why?

If there is anything else you would like to tell us about how you access an...

Banking, insurance, bill paying, movies, research and reference, appointments, contacting friends, being informed of cultural events, medical records access. They are probably more.

To have enough data, I have 1 US Cellular routers. Each having only 300 gigs at high speed. After that it slows down.

I use social media groups to get health specialist recommendations from other disabled folks in my state. Other people with my conditions know best when it comes to recommending care.

have 2 adults in the household working from home

not having access to fiber optic communications is constraining

Broadband internet continues to be a monopoly everywhere

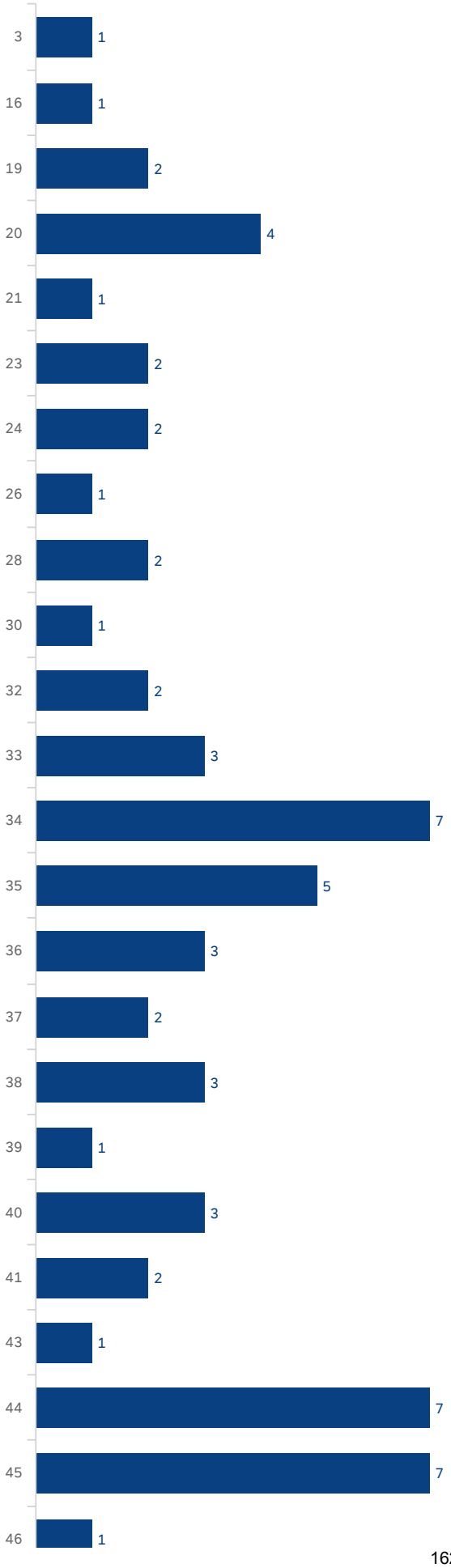
I would like to have more options for internet service. My Centurylink account recently switched to Brightspeed and their connectivity and customer service is beyond horrible.

If internet is required for education then every student should have access, parents should not have to choose between access and groceries. Especially those of us that live marginally above poverty level.

I do have internet access but it seems to be weak and/or unavailable more often lately. I still feel fortunate considering most in my area have no in-home internet available.

Hsve VERY low speed DSL.no other option in our area and we live 1/4 mile of public school. They only have slow dsl too

Q8.1 - What is your age? (Please enter only numbers)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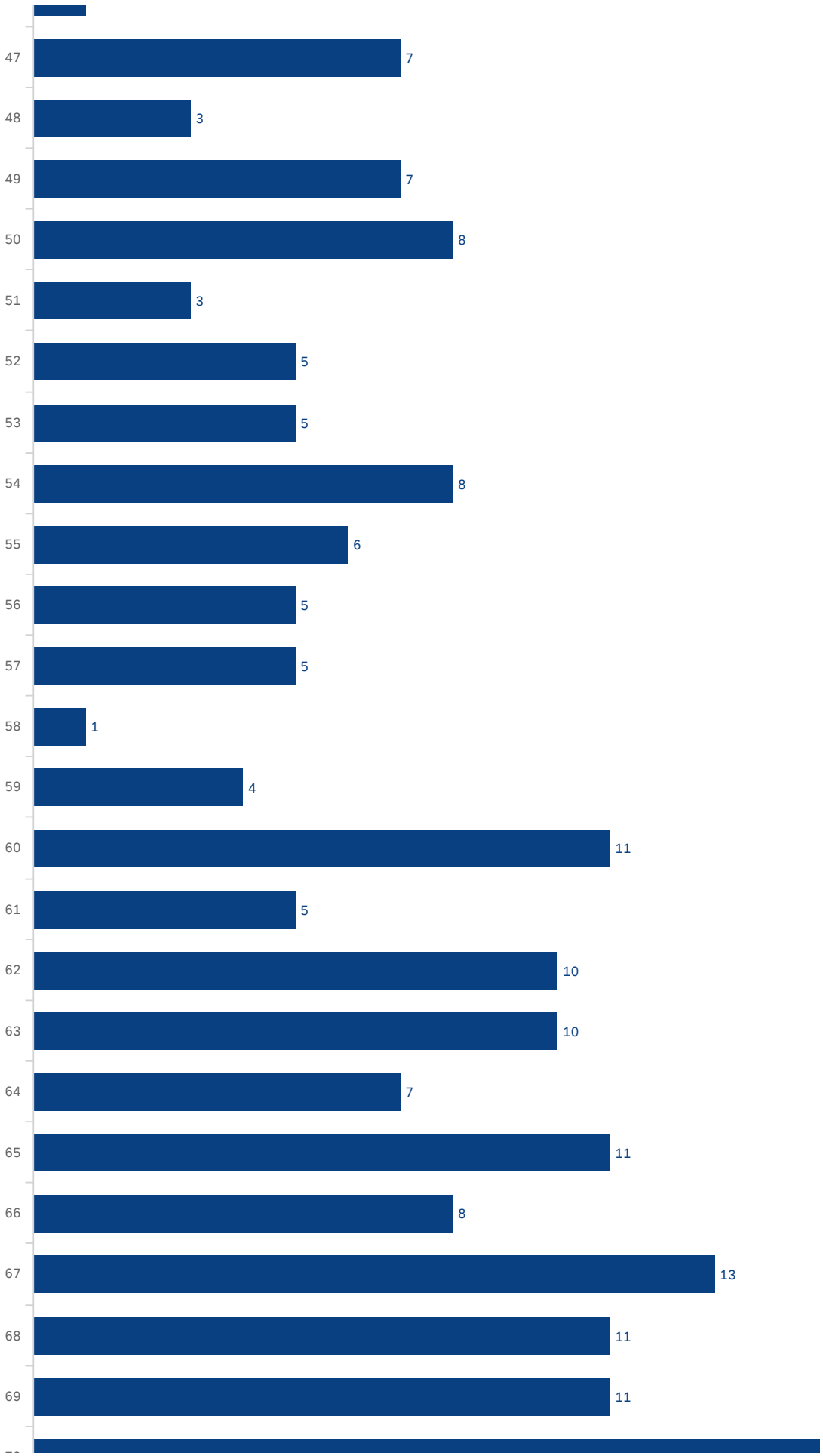
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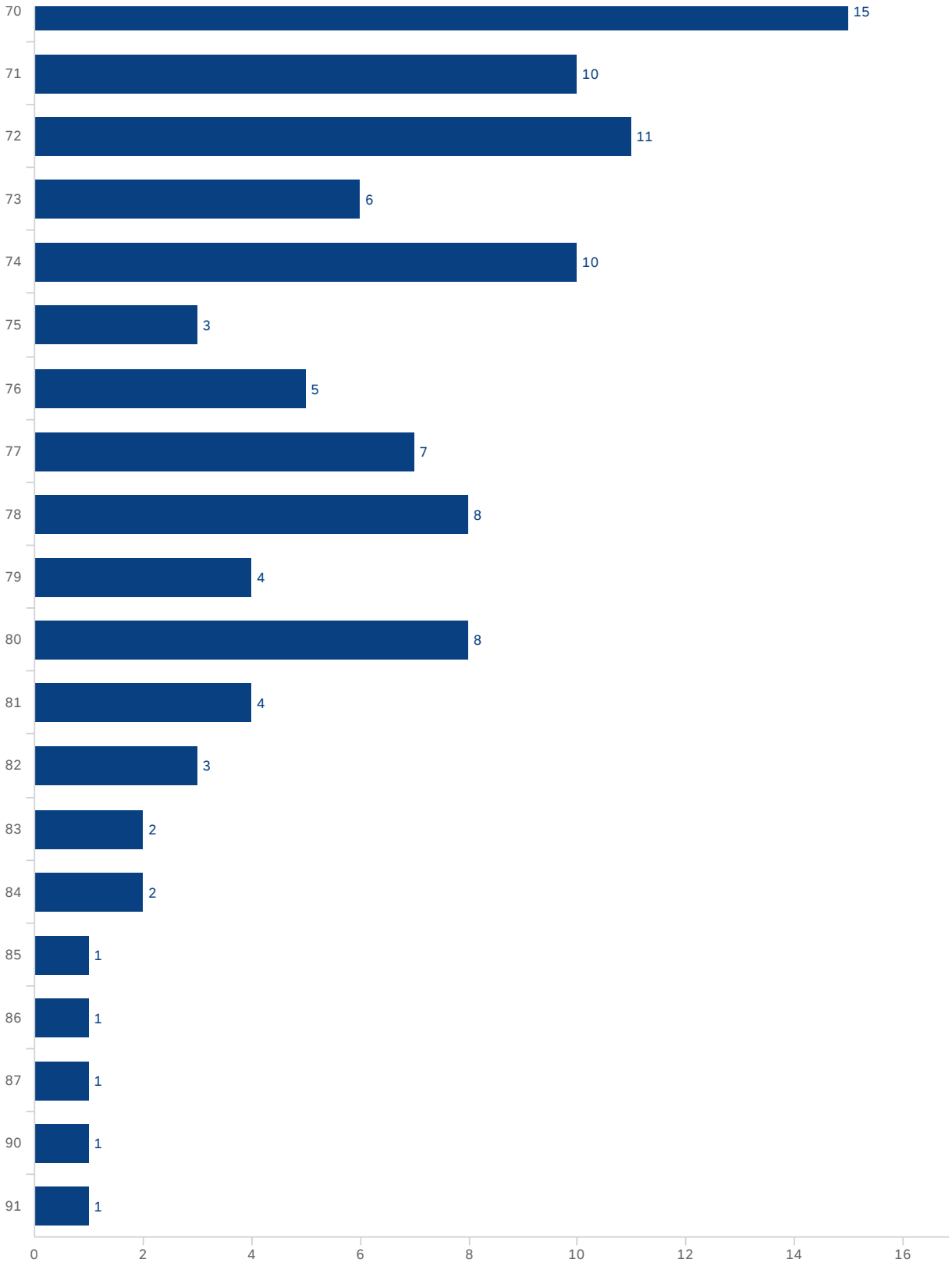
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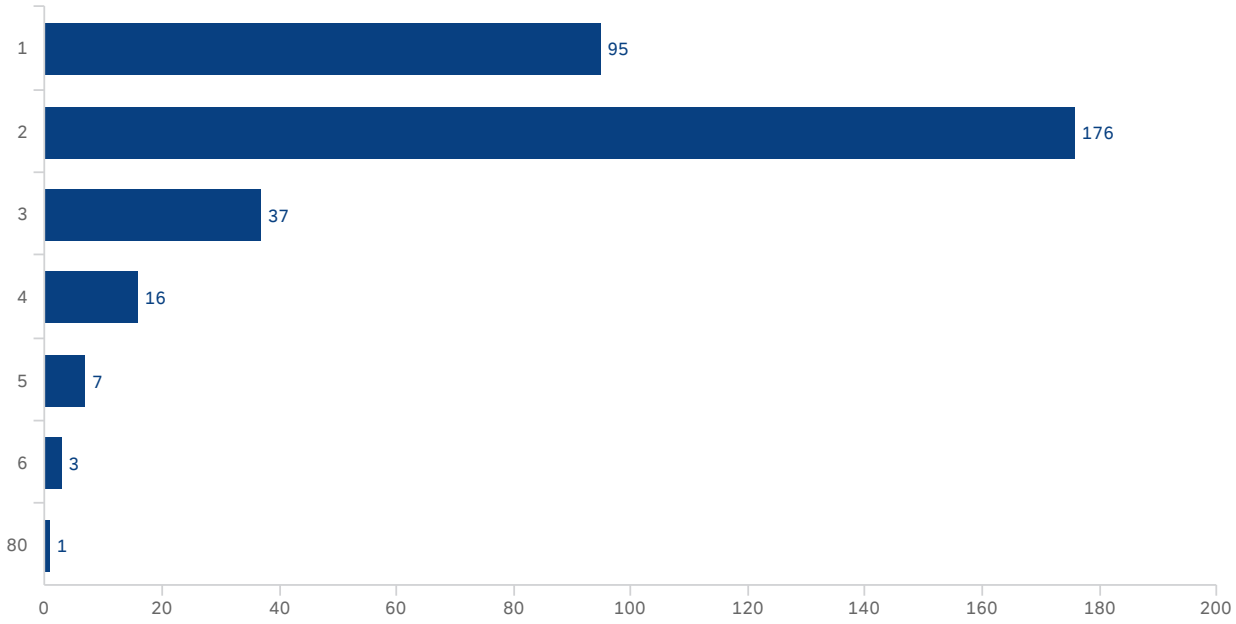
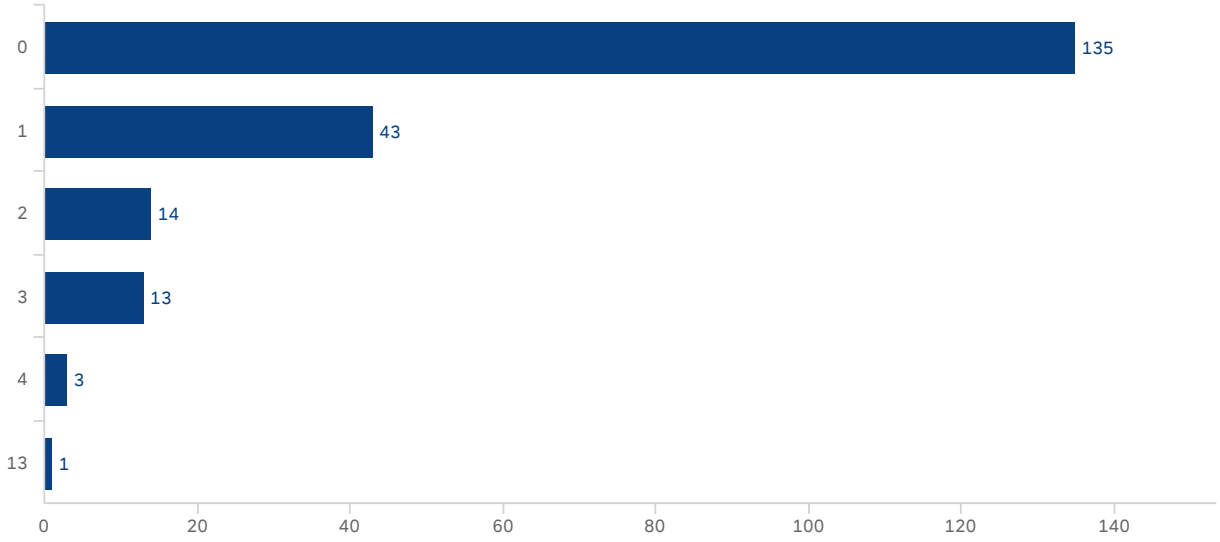
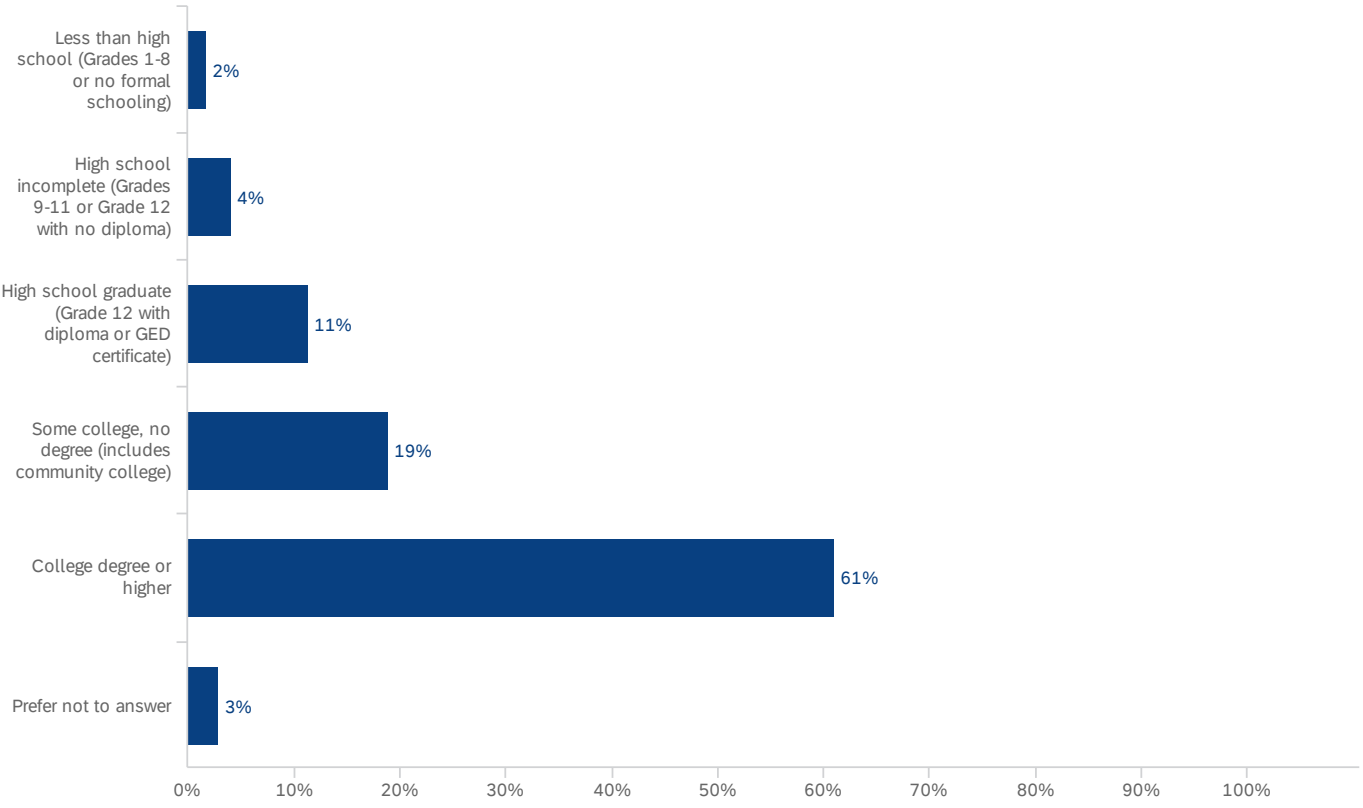
Q8.2 - How many people currently live in your household, including yourself?





The first bar chart indicates the number of adults living in the household. The second bar chart indicates the number of minors (<18) living in the household.

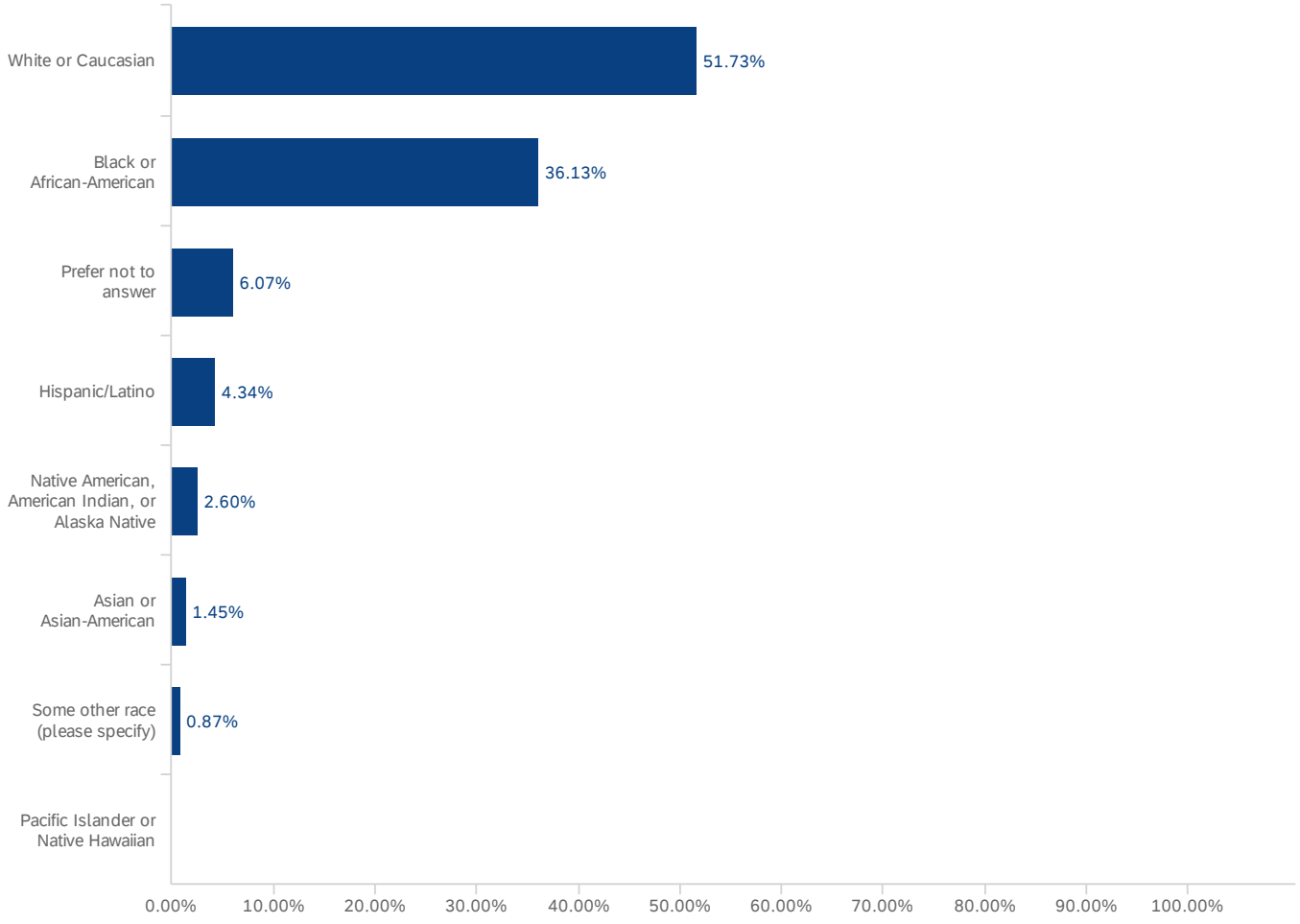
Q8.3 - What is the highest level of school you have completed?



Q8.4 - Which of the following best describes your race/ethnicity? (Select all that apply)

Q8.4_5_TEXT - Some other race (please specify)

Some other race (please specify)
Human/American
Mixed
Mexican

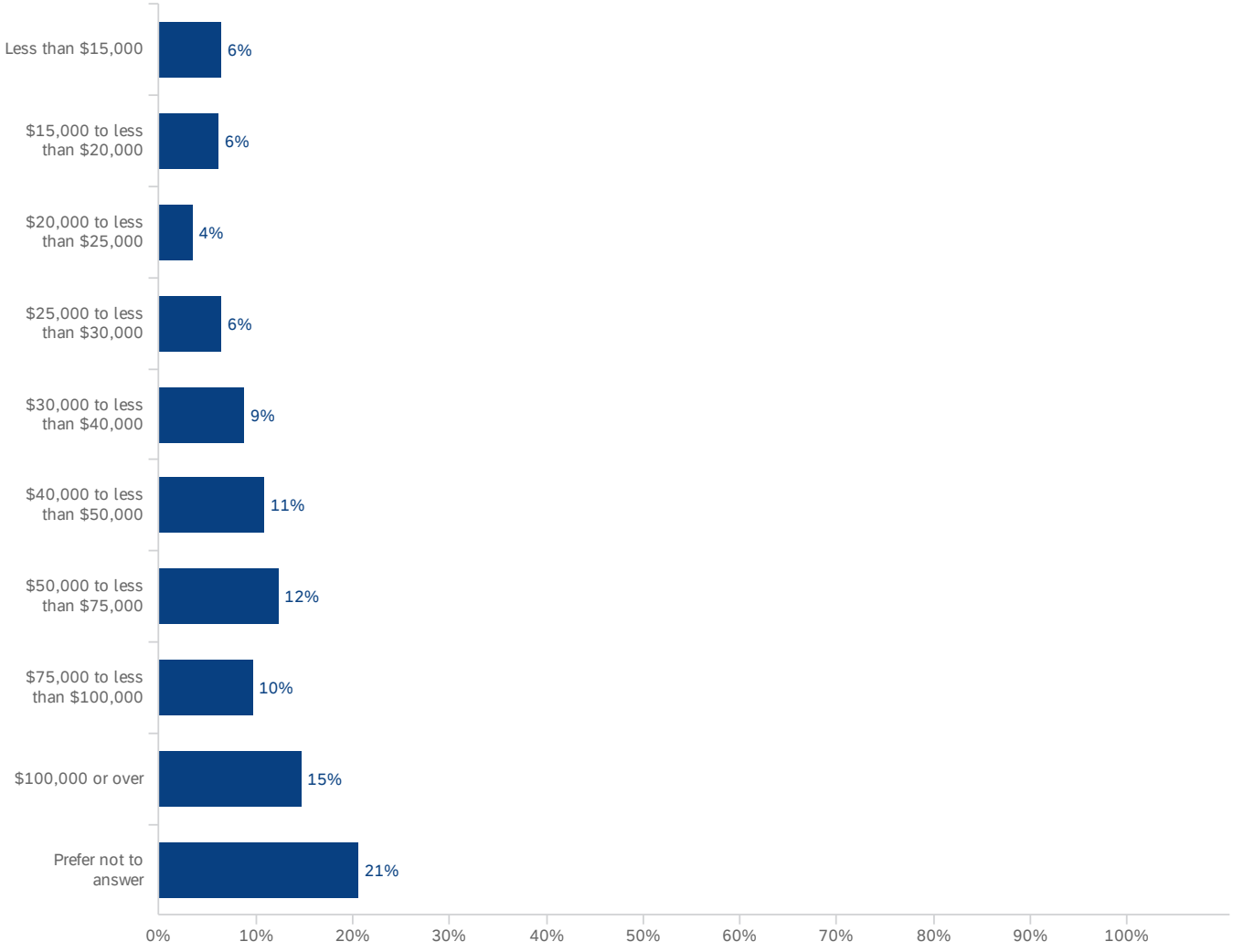


#	Field	Choice Count
1	Asian or Asian-American	1.40% 5

#	Field		Choice Count
2	Black or African-American	35.01%	125
3	Native American, American Indian, or Alaska Native	2.52%	9
4	Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian	0.00%	0
5	White or Caucasian	50.14%	179
6	Some other race (please specify)	0.84%	3
7	Prefer not to answer	5.88%	21
8	Hispanic/Latino	4.20%	15
			357

Showing rows 1 - 9 of 9

Q8.5 - What is your total annual household income from all sources, and before taxes?

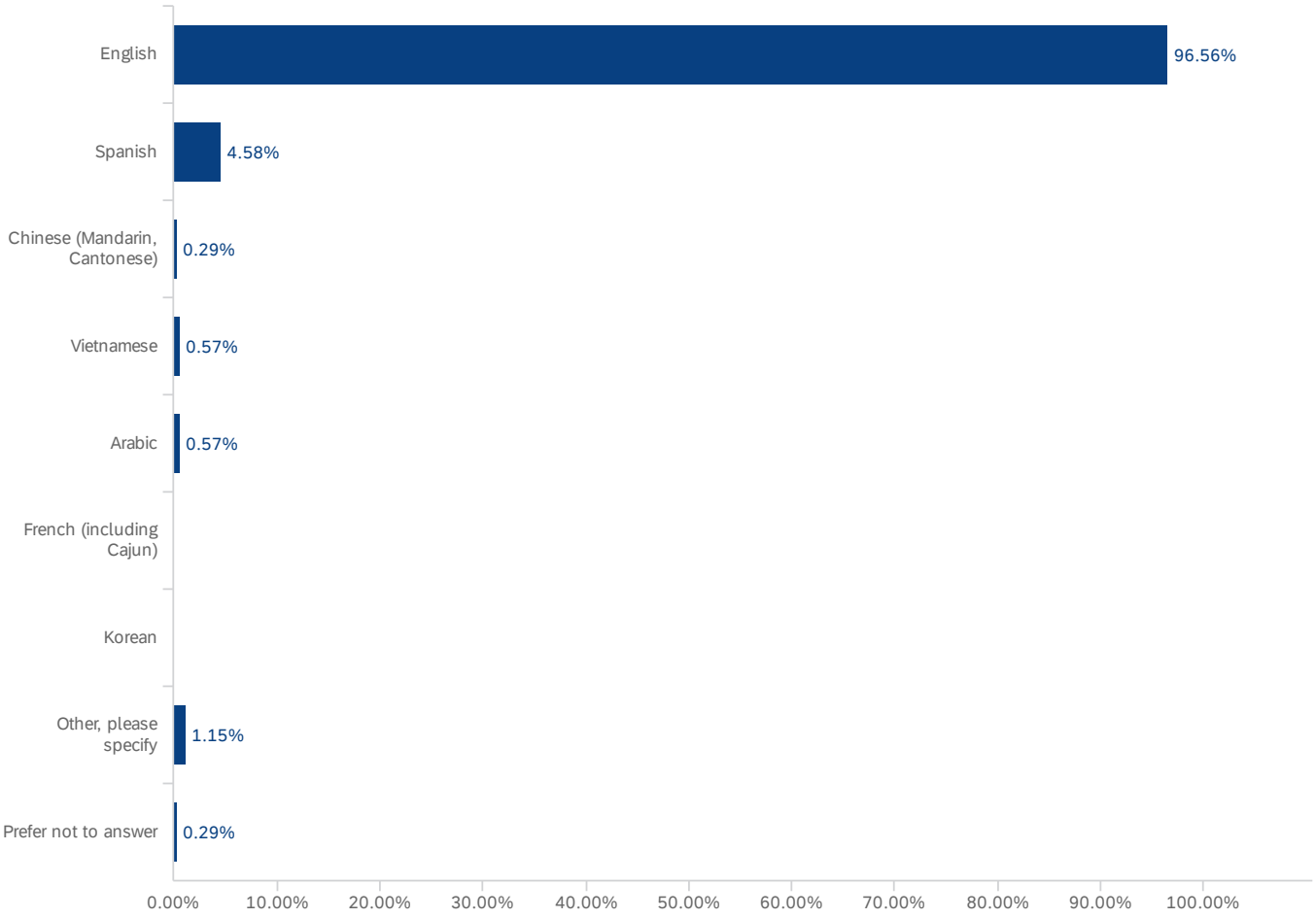


#	Field	Choice Count
1	Less than $15,000	6% 22
2	$15,000 to less than $20,000	6% 21
3	$20,000 to less than $25,000	4% 12
4	$25,000 to less than $30,000	6% 22
5	$30,000 to less than $40,000	9% 30
6	$40,000 to less than $50,000	11% 37
7	$50,000 to less than $75,000	12% 42

#	Field		Choice Count
8	$75,000 to less than $100,000	10%	33
9	$100,000 or over	15%	50
10	Prefer not to answer	21%	70
			339

Showing rows 1 - 11 of 11

Q9.1 - What language(s) do you speak at home? (Select all that apply)



Field	Choice Count	
English	92.84%	337
Spanish	4.41%	16
Chinese (Mandarin, Cantonese)	0.28%	1
Vietnamese	0.55%	2
Arabic	0.55%	2
French (including Cajun)	0.00%	0
Korean	0.00%	0
Other, please specify	1.10%	4
Prefer not to answer	0.28%	1
		363

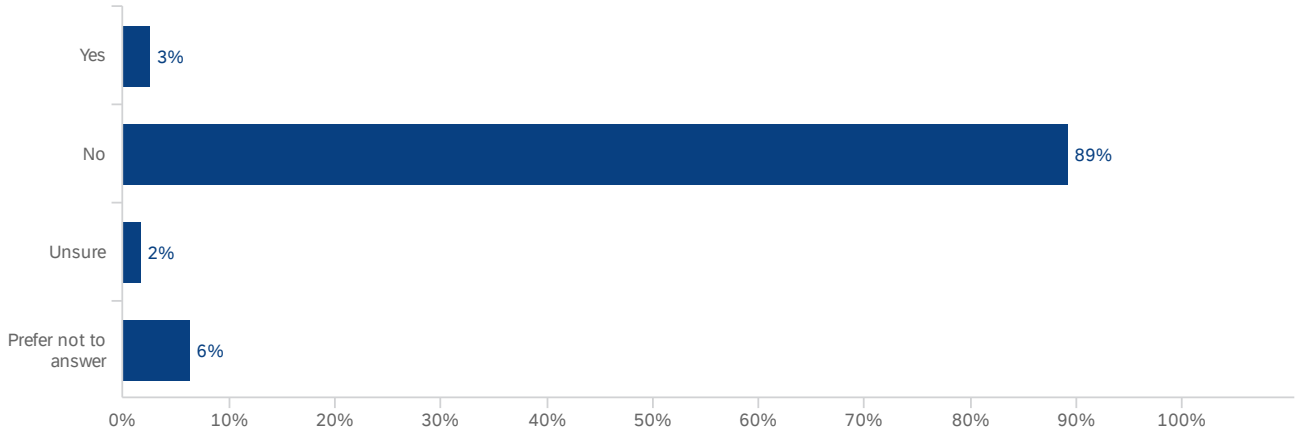
Field	Choice Count
	363

Showing rows 1 - 10 of 10

Field	Count
What language(s) do you speak at home? (Select all that apply) - Selected Choice	349

Showing rows 1 - 1 of 1

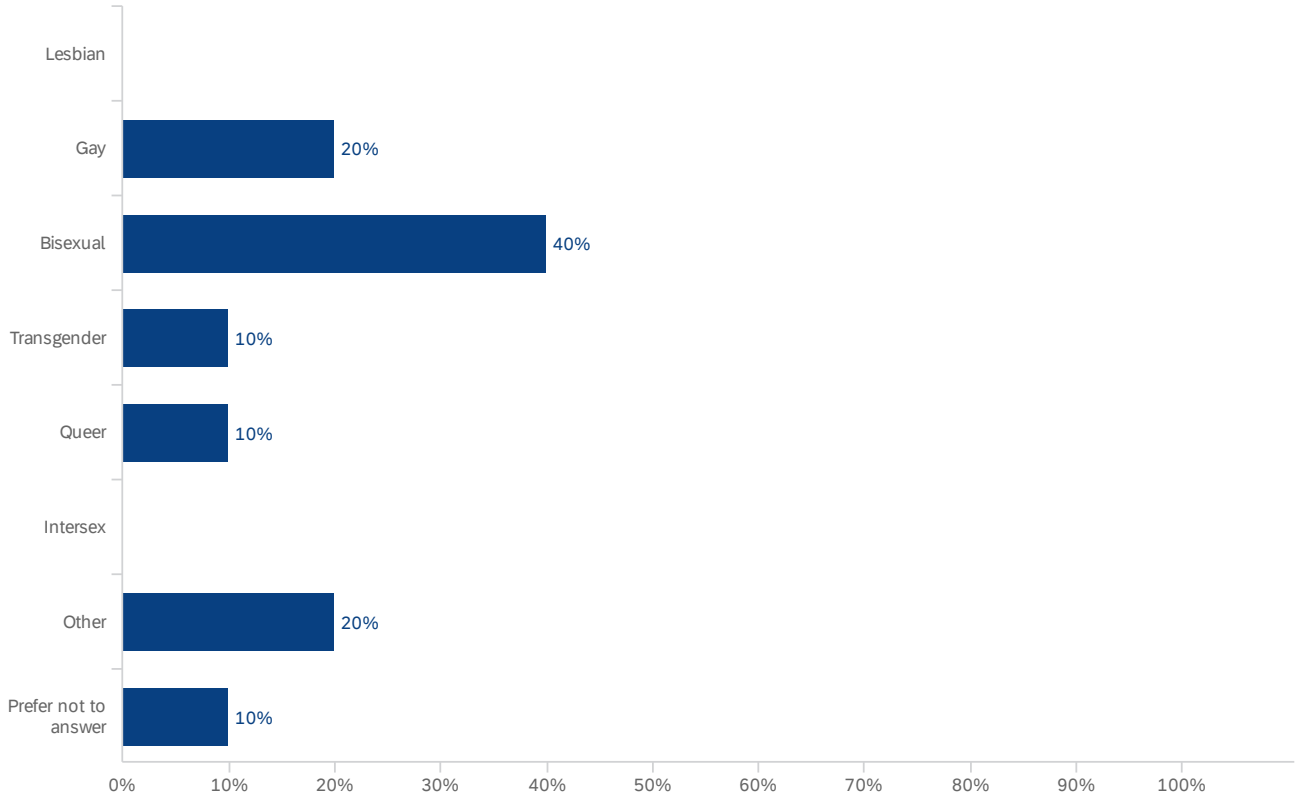
Q9.2 - Do you identify as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community?



Field		Choice Count
Yes	3%	9
No	89%	308
Unsure	2%	6
Prefer not to answer	6%	22
		345

Showing rows 1 - 5 of 5

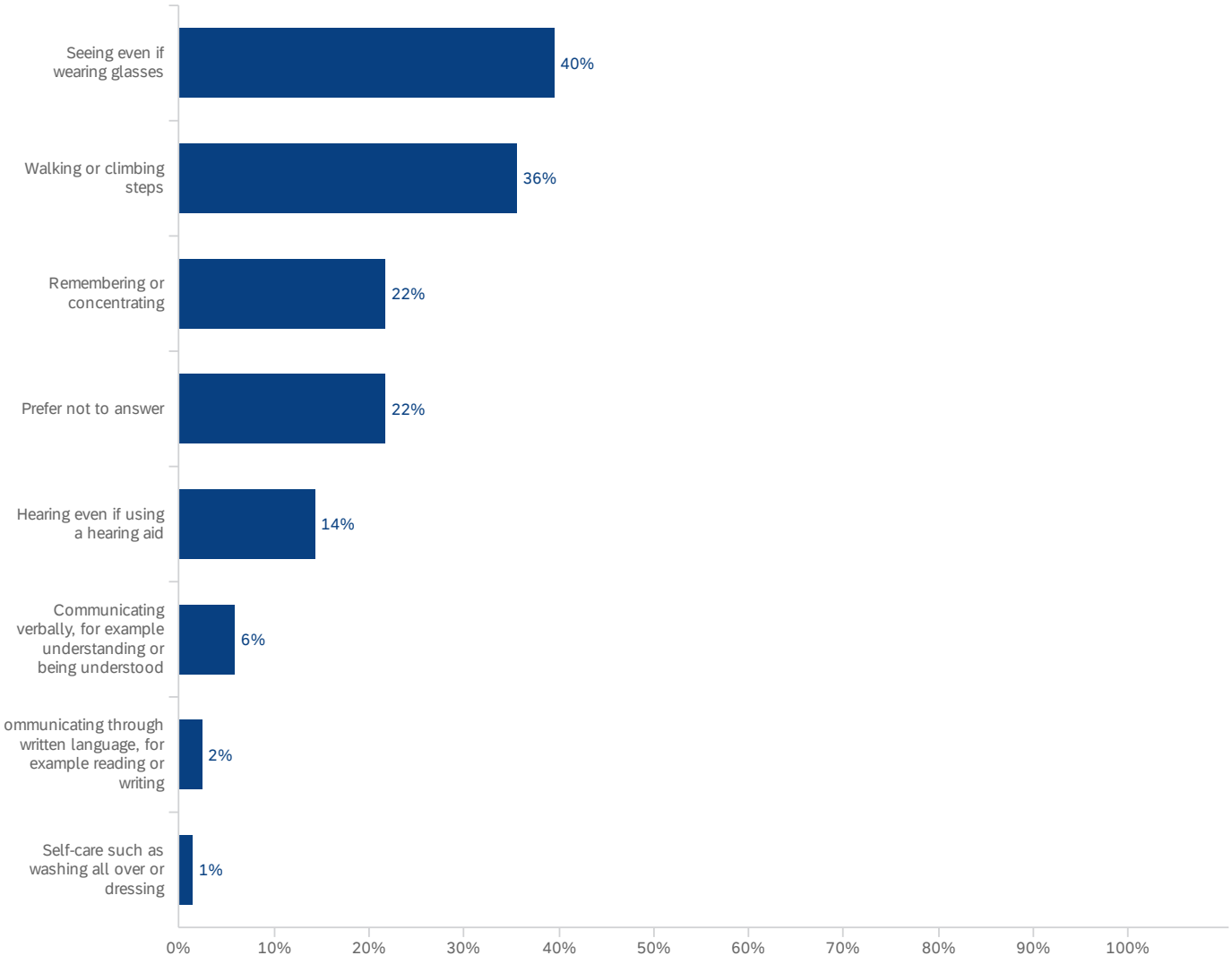
Q9.3 - Which of the following do you identify as? (Select all that apply)



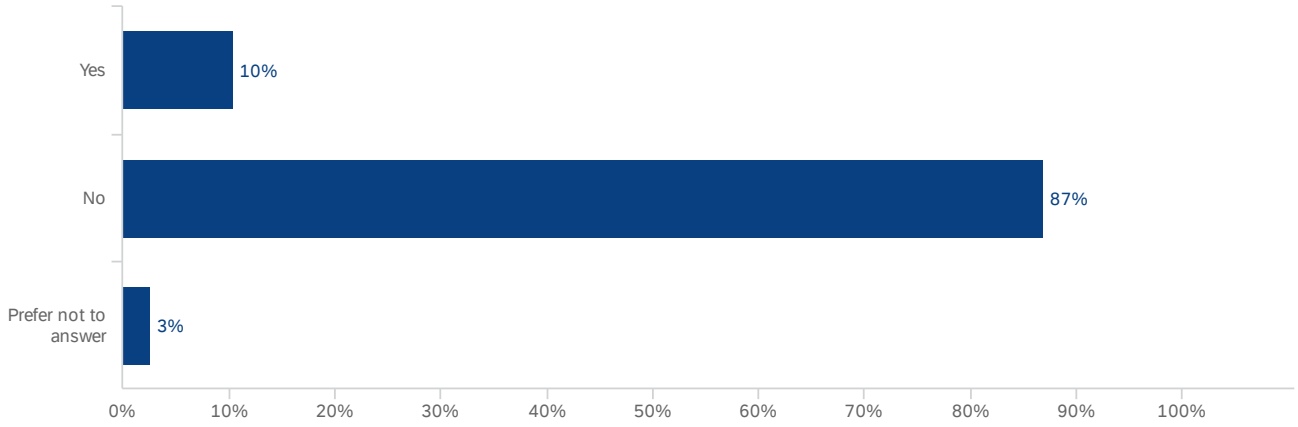
Field	Choice Count
Lesbian	0% 0
Gay	18% 2
Bisexual	36% 4
Transgender	9% 1
Queer	9% 1
Intersex	0% 0
Other	18% 2
Prefer not to answer	9% 1
	11

Showing rows 1 - 9 of 9

Q9.4 - Do you have difficulty in any of the following areas? (Select all that apply)



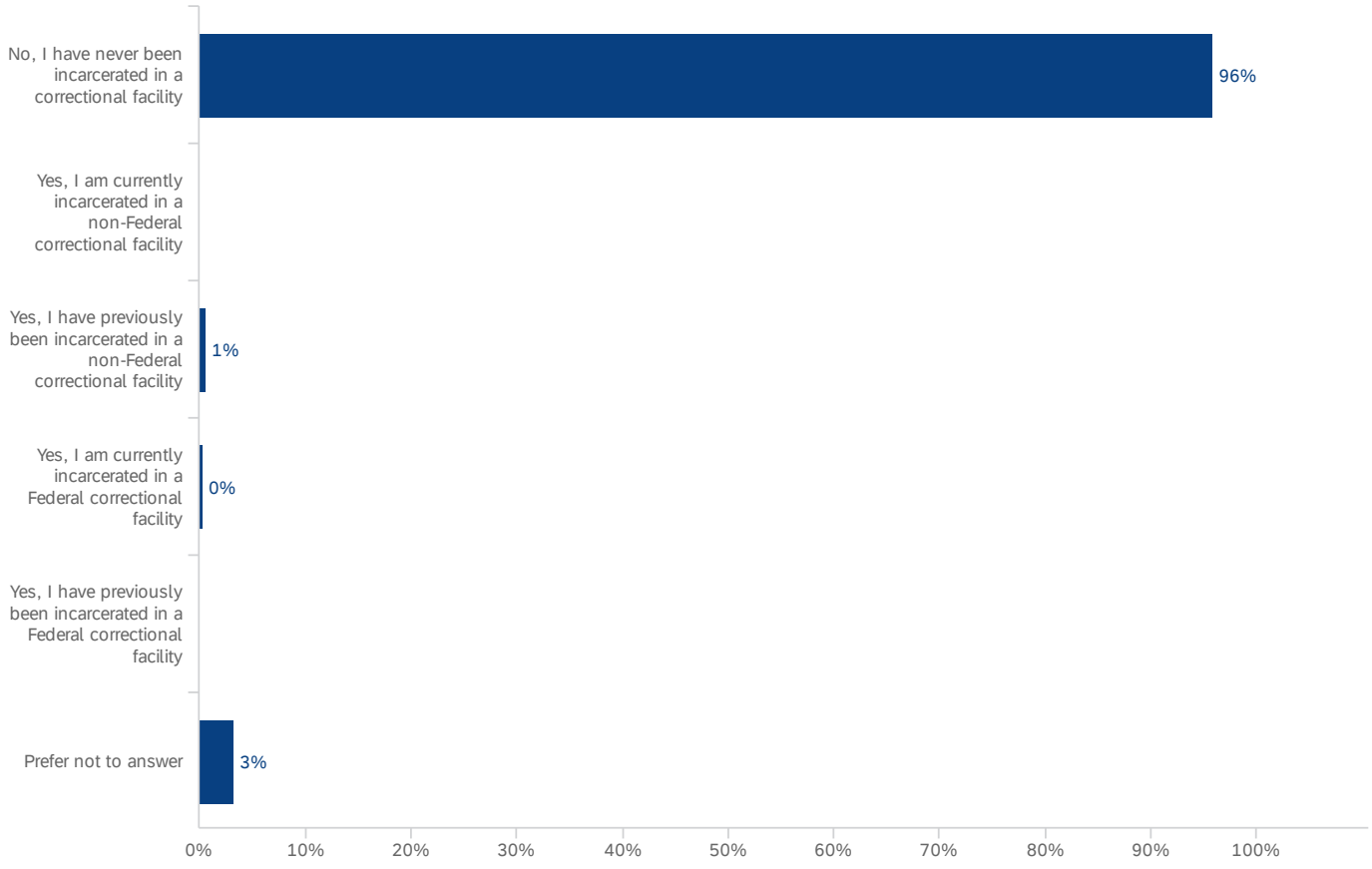
Q9.5 - Are you a veteran of the US Armed forces, Reserves or National Guard?



#	Field		Choice Count
1	Yes	10%	36
2	No	87%	300
3	Prefer not to answer	3%	9
			345

Showing rows 1 - 4 of 4

Q9.6 - Have you been or are you currently incarcerated in a correctional facility?



#	Field		Choice Count
1	No, I have never been incarcerated in a correctional facility	96%	326
2	Yes, I am currently incarcerated in a non-Federal correctional facility	0%	0
3	Yes, I have previously been incarcerated in a non-Federal correctional facility	1%	2
4	Yes, I am currently incarcerated in a Federal correctional facility	0%	1
5	Yes, I have previously been incarcerated in a Federal correctional facility	0%	0
6	Prefer not to answer	3%	11
			340

Showing rows 1 - 7 of 7

End of Report

Appendix C: Public Event Input Results

PUBLIC OPEN HOUSES

THURS., FEB. 13, 2025, 4:00 PM – 7:00 PM; BEAUFORT COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

TUES., FEB. 18, 2025, 4:00 – 7:00 PM; PITT COUNTY AGRICULTURAL CENTER

TUES., FEB. 25, 2025, 4:00 – 7:00 PM; MARTIN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Attendees:

- See sign-in sheets
- Note: Many Steering Committee members attended the Open House events but were not asked to sign in.

Notes:

Public Open Houses were held to present information from the digital inclusion planning process to stakeholders, obtain additional public input (initial input sought through survey), and to refer members of the public to digital inclusion resources in their communities.

Draft vision, mission, and goals statements were provided for public review, and the public had a chance to provide input on priorities around digital inclusion in the Mid-East Region. Flyers and brochures regarding digital skills programming, avoiding scams, affordability programs, and other resources were provided to attendees. Hard copies of the public survey results were made available and residents were instructed on how they can complete the Digital Equity Survey. Open house materials included various displays such as an overview of digital inclusion planning and posters asking questions regarding barriers to internet access and digital skills needs. Stakeholders were asked to rank vision, mission, and goals on the displays from 'no support' (1) to 'fully support' (5). A powerpoint slide show was also presented that contained additional information on digital inclusion planning, data for the region, and public survey results to date.

Draft projects were presented to the public. Attendess were asked to vote on projects to determine community priorities and assist the project team with the final round of project prioritization. Voting was conducted by placing stickers on the posters to vote for their favorite projects. Participants were given stickers labeled 1-3 and instructed to prioritize projects with the #1 sticker being their top project.

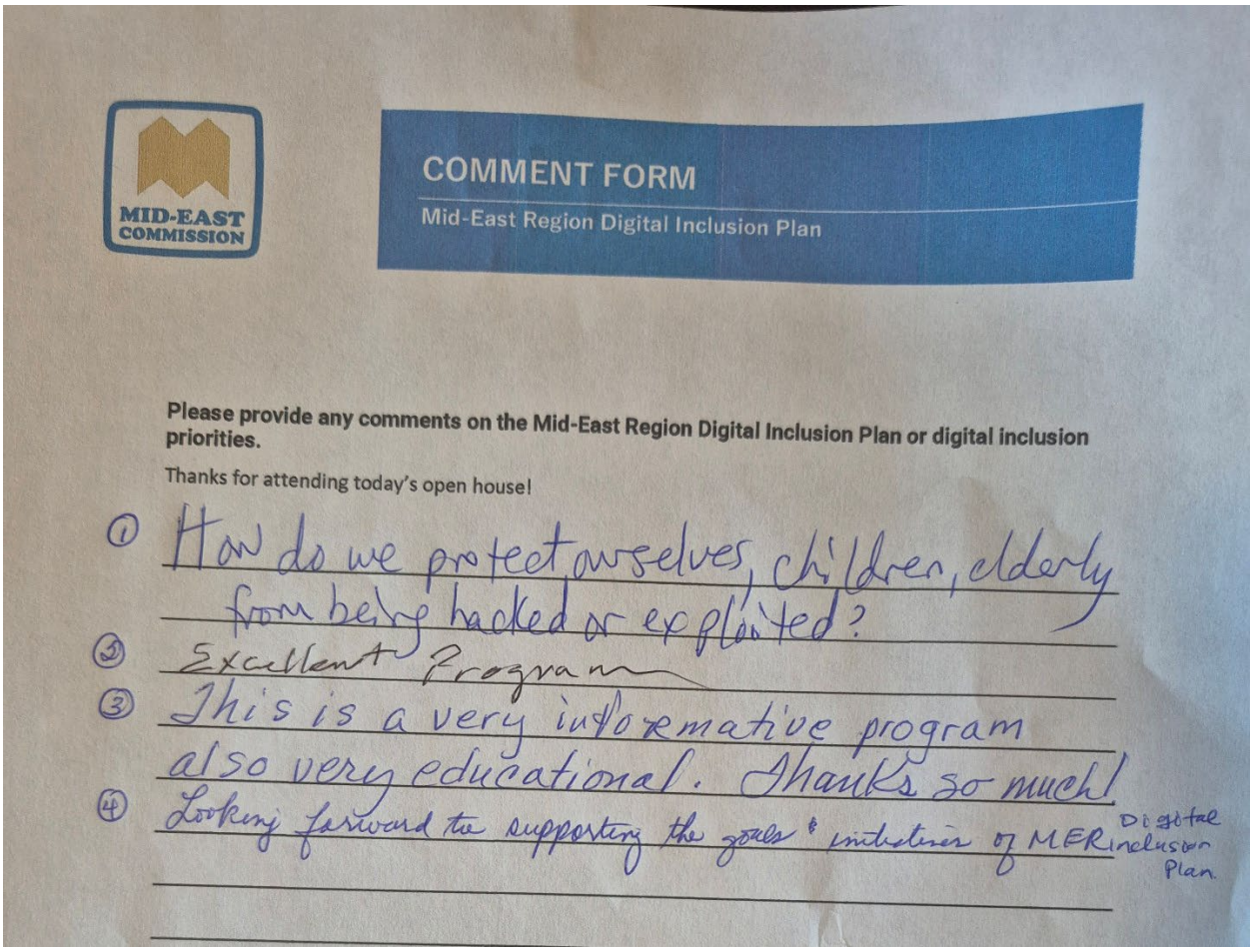
Scores received at the open houses are summarized in the photos below. Steering Committee members who did not attend an open house event will be given an opportunity to score projects before weighted scoring occurs.

Additional projects suggested include:

- Subsidized high speed broadband internet for health clinics / Federal Qualified Health Clinics (FQHCs) / Health Depts. / rural health clinics

Public input received will be used to inform priority programs and projects.

Comment Forms Received



MID-EAST COMMISSION

COMMENT FORM

Mid-East Region Digital Inclusion Plan

Please provide any comments on the Mid-East Region Digital Inclusion Plan or digital inclusion priorities.

Thanks for attending today's open house!

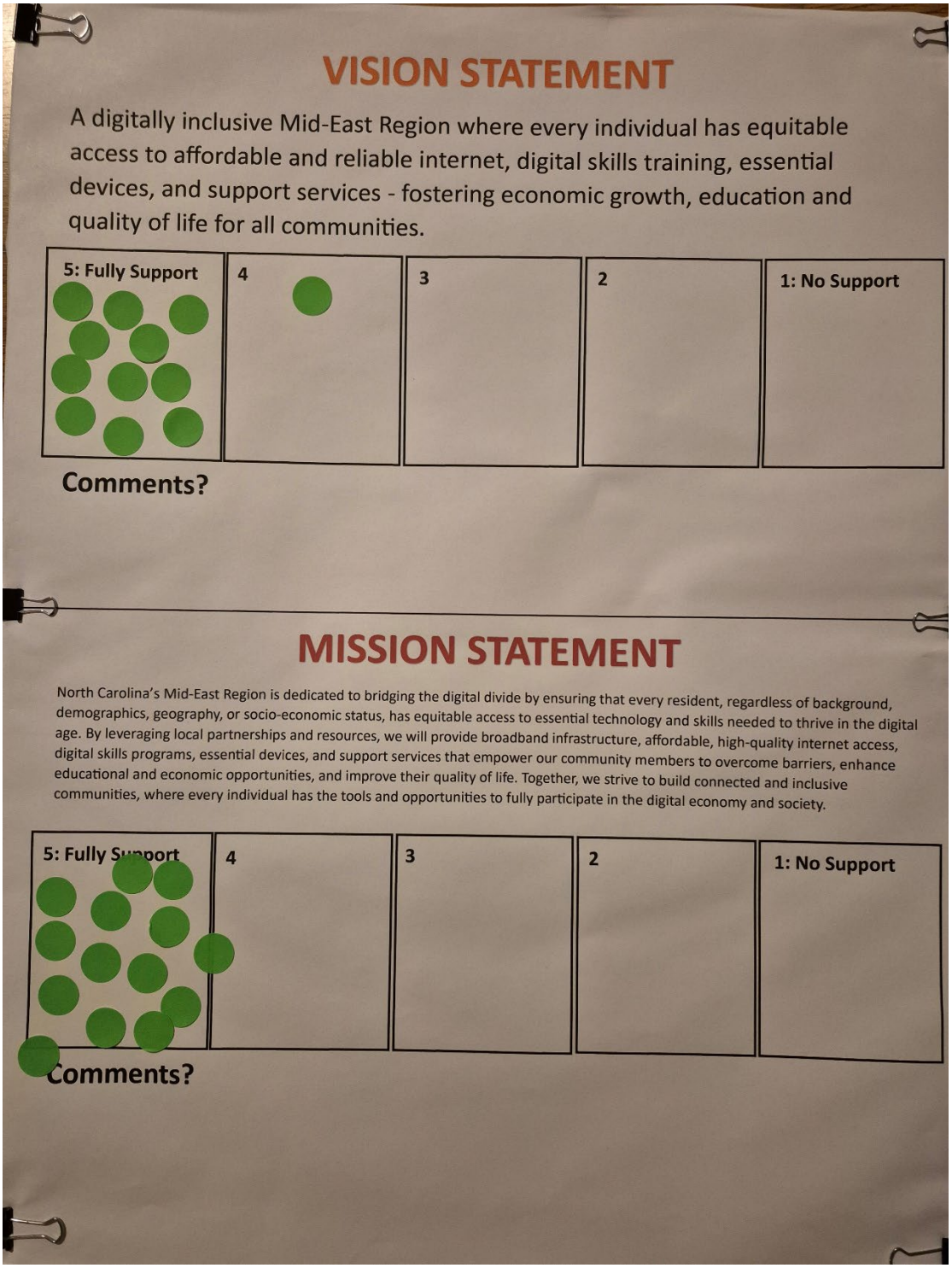
① How do we protect ourselves, children, elderly from being hacked or exploited?

② Excellent Program

③ This is a very informative program also very educational. Thanks so much!

④ Looking forward to supporting the goals & initiatives of MER Digital Inclusion Plan.

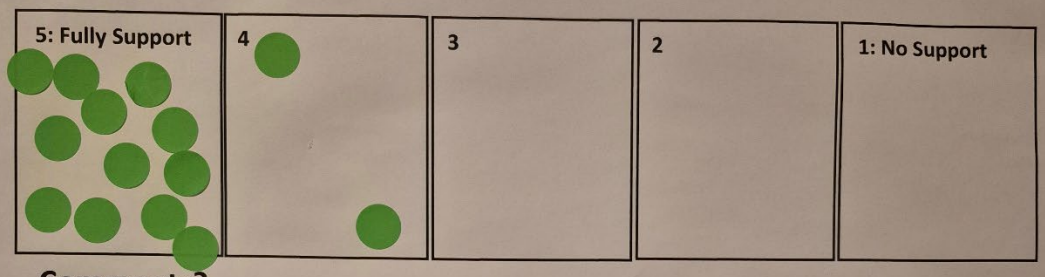
Mission, Vision, and Goals Input



GOAL 1

Access to Devices

Increase the number of residents in the Mid-East Region who have access to an affordable device that meets their needs and allows them to fully participate in the digital landscape.

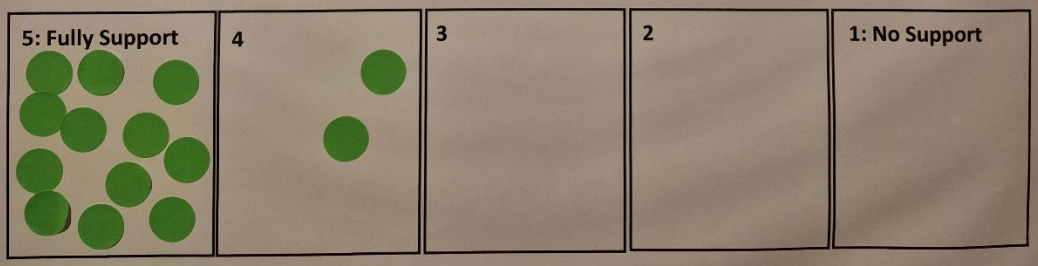


Comments?

GOAL 2

Affordability

Increase access to low cost or no-cost broadband across all demographic and socio-economic segments of the Mid-East Region through stipend or subsidy programs and services.

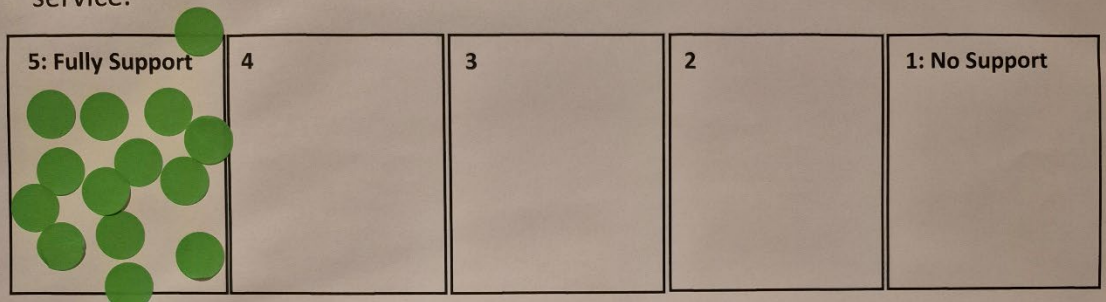


Comments?

GOAL 3

Availability

Improve and increase broadband connectivity throughout the Mid-East Region to provide residents and businesses access to reliable, high-speed broadband service.

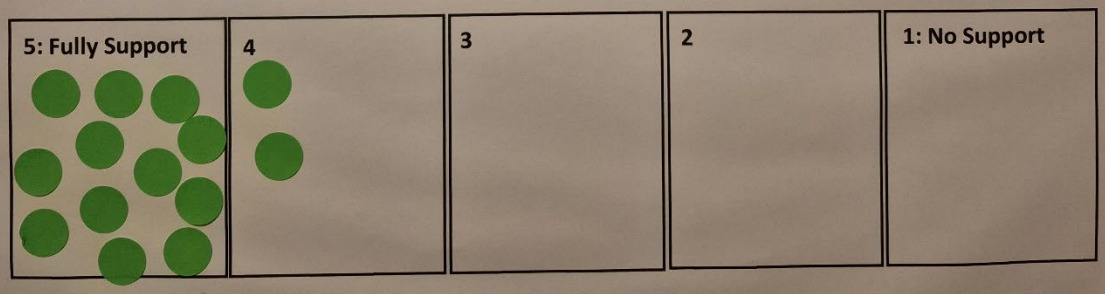


Comments?

GOAL 4

Digital Skills

Develop technology support and educational programming that meets a variety of needs and accommodates all skill levels; empowering community members to gain the necessary skills to fully participate in the digital world.

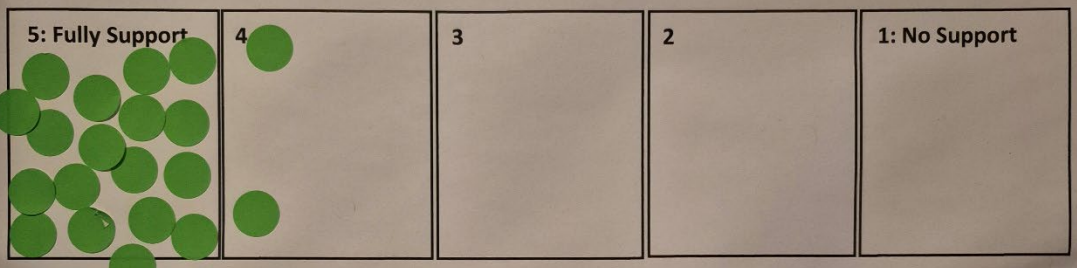


Comments?

GOAL 5

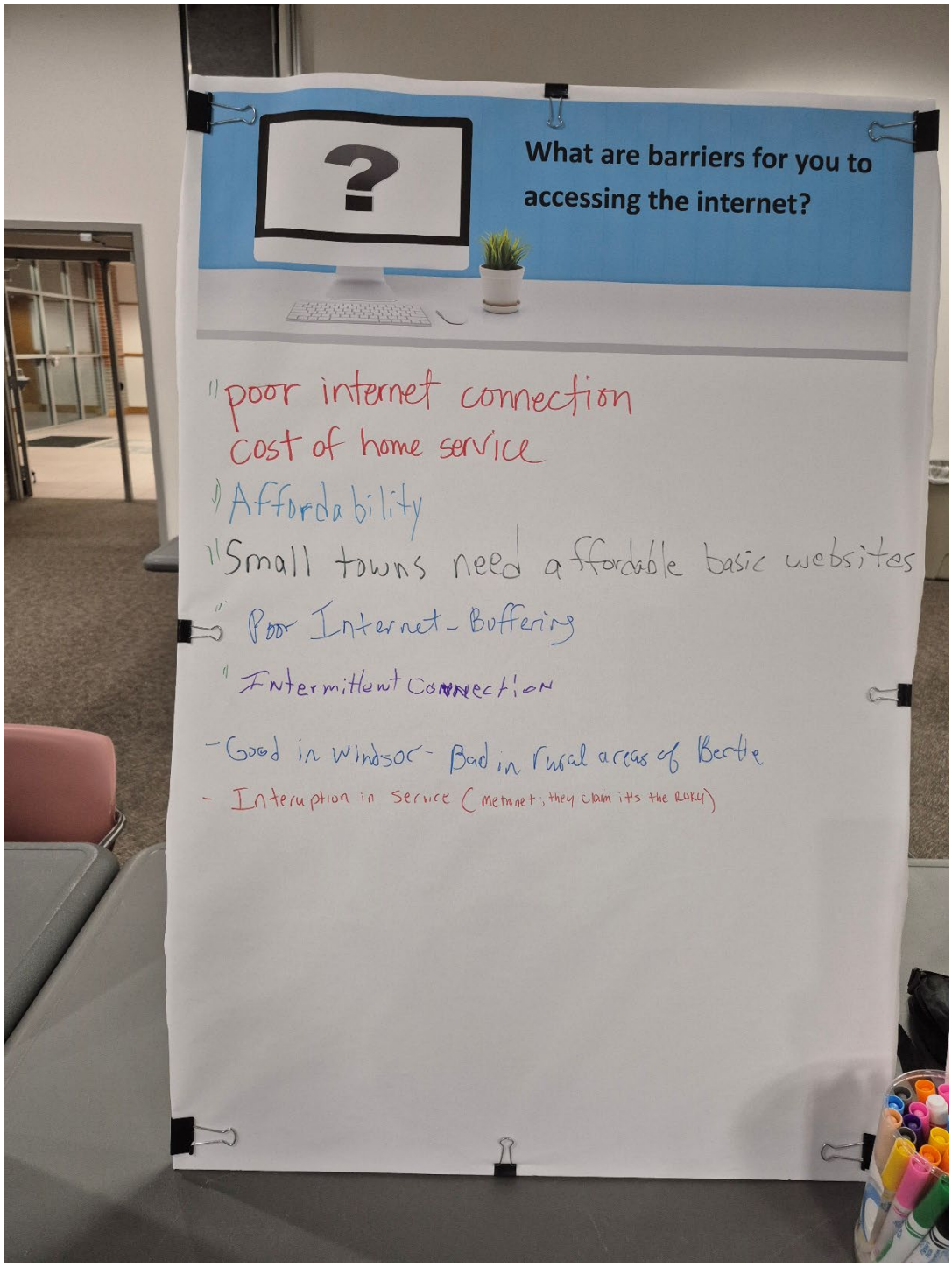
Implementation Resources

Build structure and organization to support long-term Digital Inclusion success and to empower partners to create their own digital inclusion programs and partnerships.

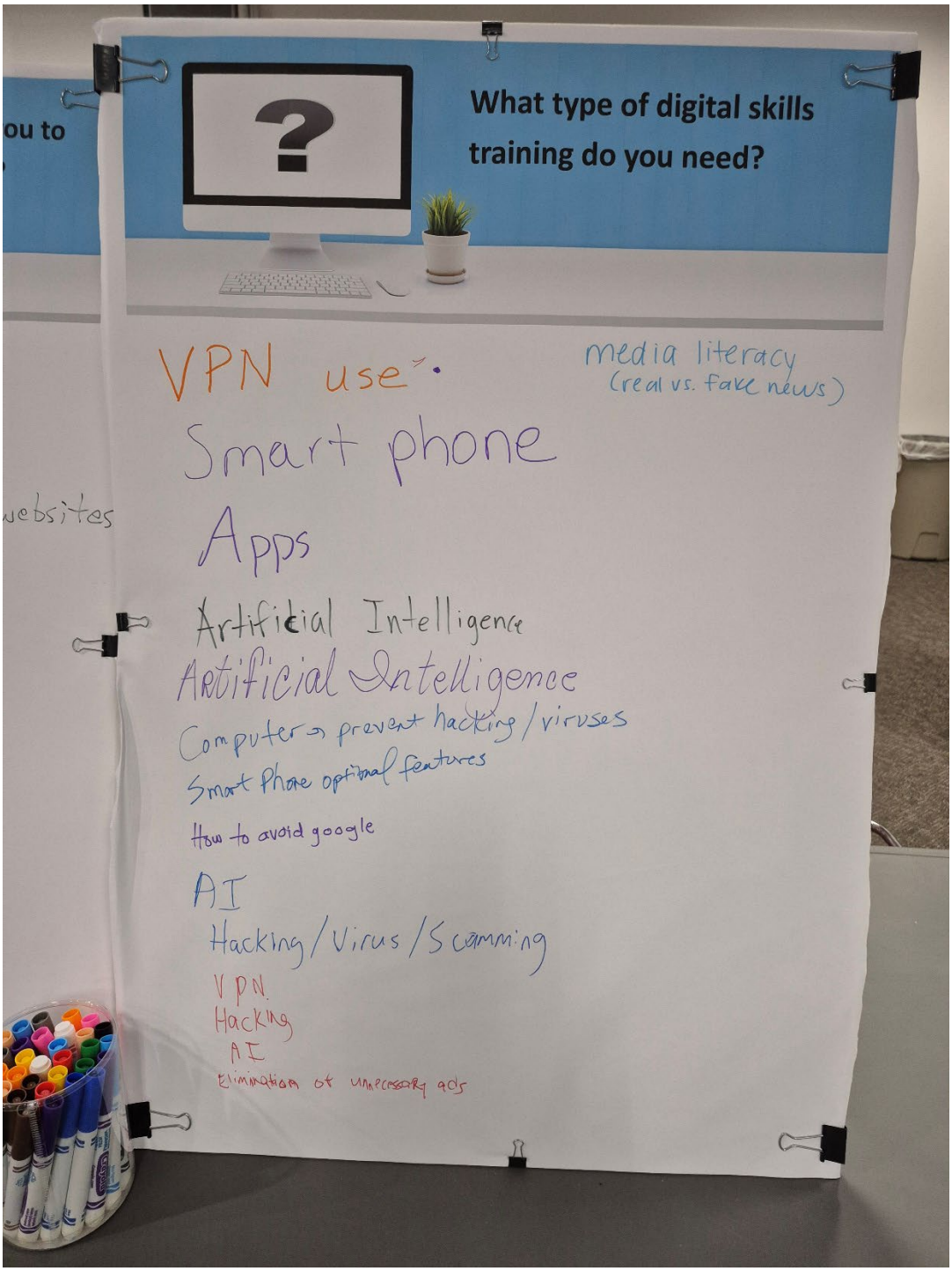


Comments?

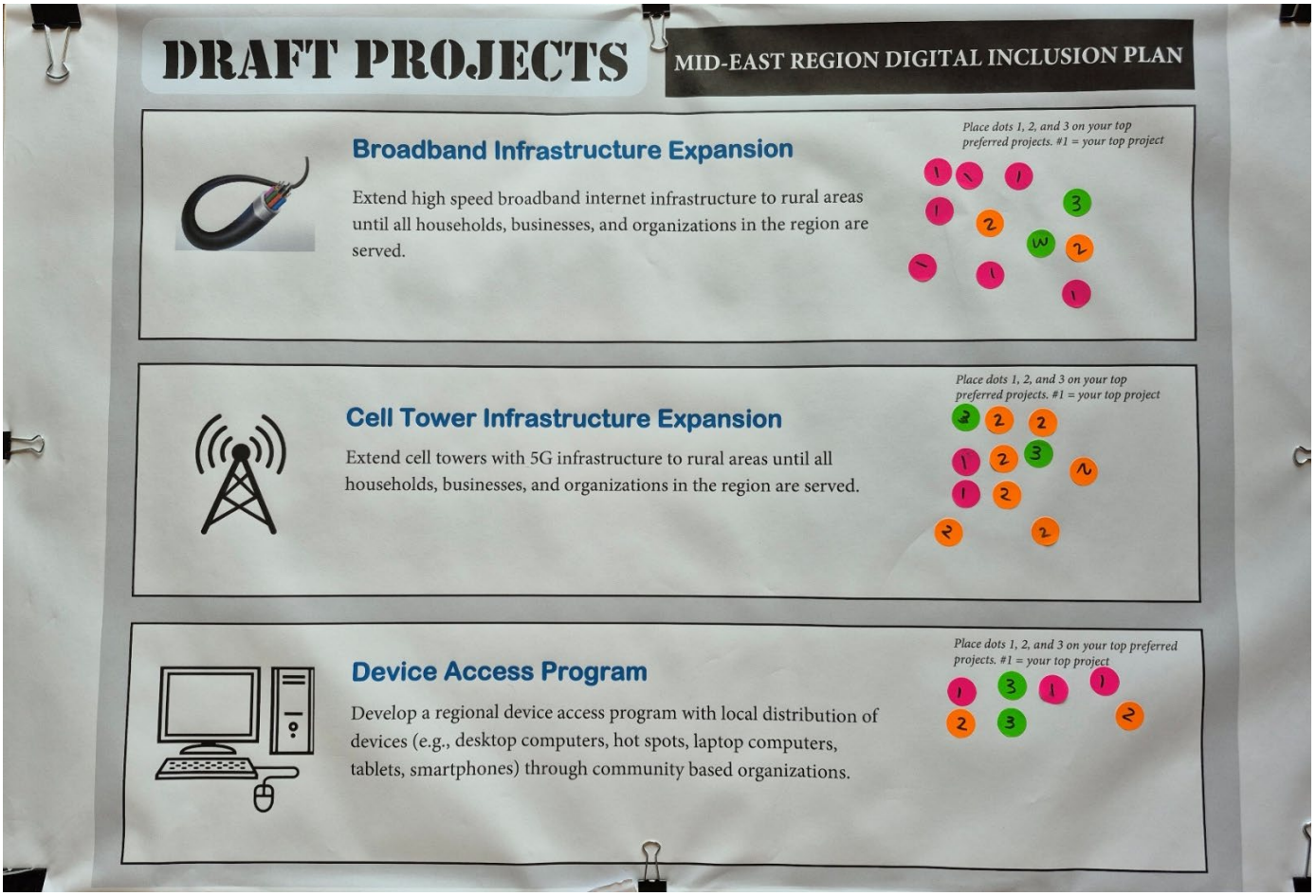
“What are barriers for you to accessing the internet?” Input



“What type of digital skills training do you need?” Input



Project Voting



DRAFT PROJECTS

MID-EAST REGION DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN

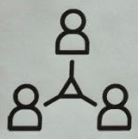
Device Repair & Technical Support Program

Develop a regional program to assist citizens who need repairs for their devices and/or technical support for device maintenance.

Place dots 1, 2, and 3 on your top preferred projects. #1 = your top project

2

1



Digital Skills Training

Provide digital skills training that targets specific community needs (basic computer use, basic smart phone use, communication, education, healthcare access, economic participation, democratic participation, and beyond). Expand current programs and develop additional programs until all communities in the region are adequately served.

Place dots 1, 2, and 3 on your top preferred projects. #1 = your top project

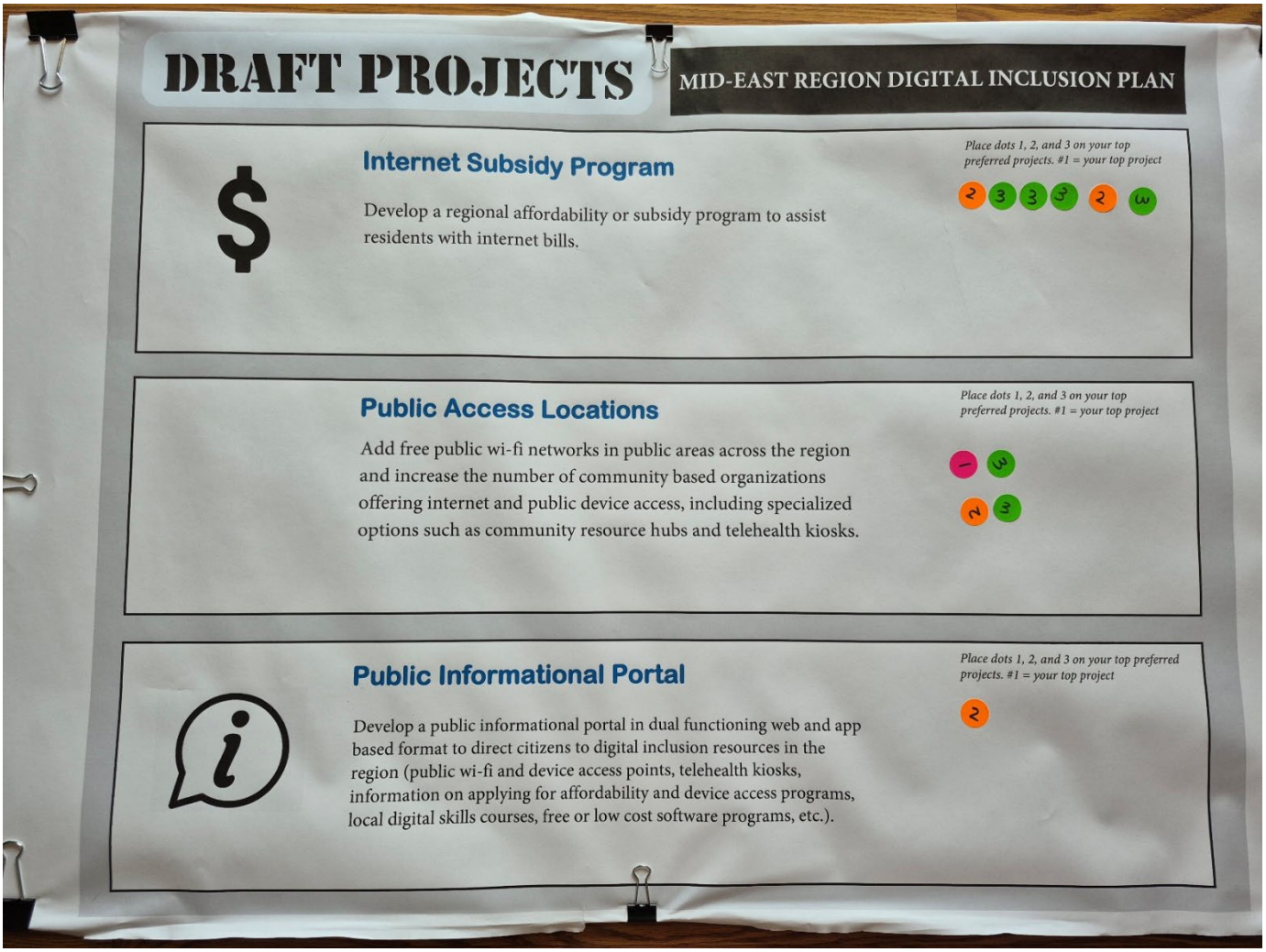
3 3 3 1 2 2 1 3 1

Improve the Quality of Broadband Networks

Identify problem areas and improve the reliability and speed of existing broadband networks.

Place dots 1, 2, and 3 on your top preferred projects. #1 = your top project

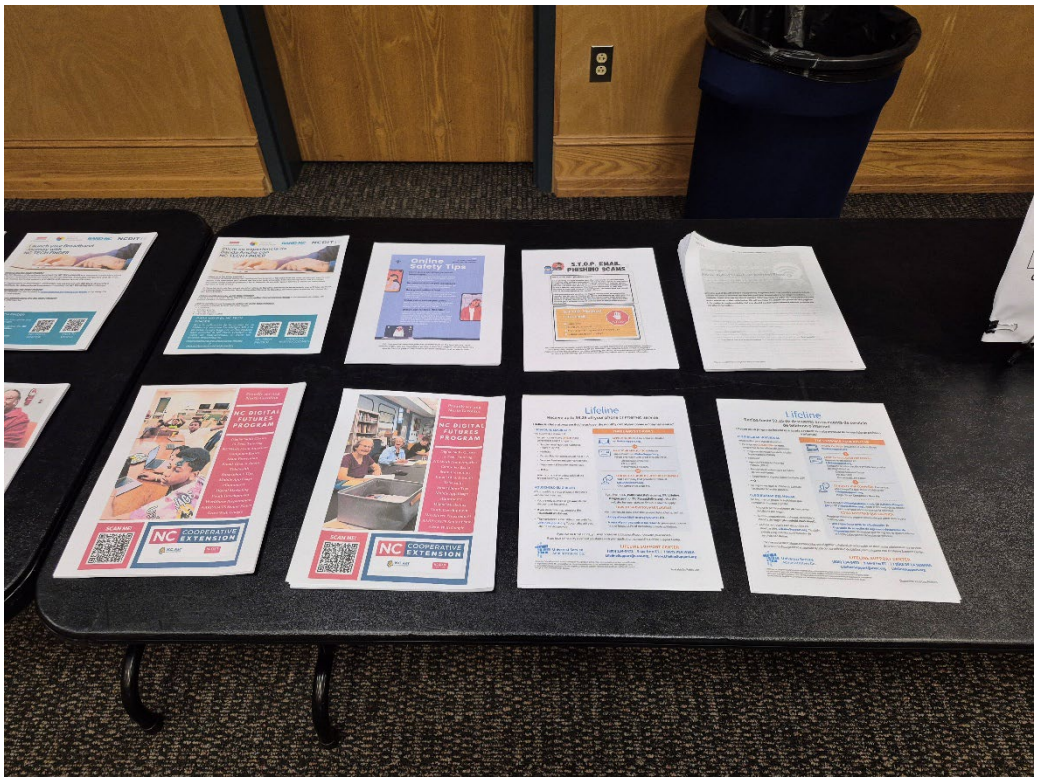
1 1 1


DRAFT PROJECTS
MID-EAST REGION DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN
Internet Subsidy Program
Develop a regional affordability or subsidy program to assist residents with internet bills.
Place dots 1, 2, and 3 on your top preferred projects. #1 = your top project
Public Access Locations
Add free public wi-fi networks in public areas across the region and increase the number of community based organizations offering internet and public device access, including specialized options such as community resource hubs and telehealth kiosks.
Place dots 1, 2, and 3 on your top preferred projects. #1 = your top project
Public Informational Portal
Develop a public informational portal in dual functioning web and app based format to direct citizens to digital inclusion resources in the region (public wi-fi and device access points, telehealth kiosks, information on applying for affordability and device access programs, local digital skills courses, free or low cost software programs, etc.).
Place dots 1, 2, and 3 on your top preferred projects. #1 = your top project


DRAFT PROJECTS
MID-EAST REGION DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN
Resiliency Back-Up Networks
Develop satellite-based public wi-fi networks as back-up networks which can provide internet service in the event that broadband infrastructure is destroyed by a disaster.
Place dots 1, 2, and 3 on your top preferred projects. #1 = your top project
3
Workforce Development Program Integration
Incorporate digital skills training into existing workforce development programs. Where feasible, appoint a person to be trained to be the digital skills trainer for that business.
Place dots 1, 2, and 3 on your top preferred projects. #1 = your top project
2
3
3
Other: Write in Your Project Ideas!
- Subsidized high(speed broadband for health clinics/FQHCs/Health Depts/Rural Health Clinics

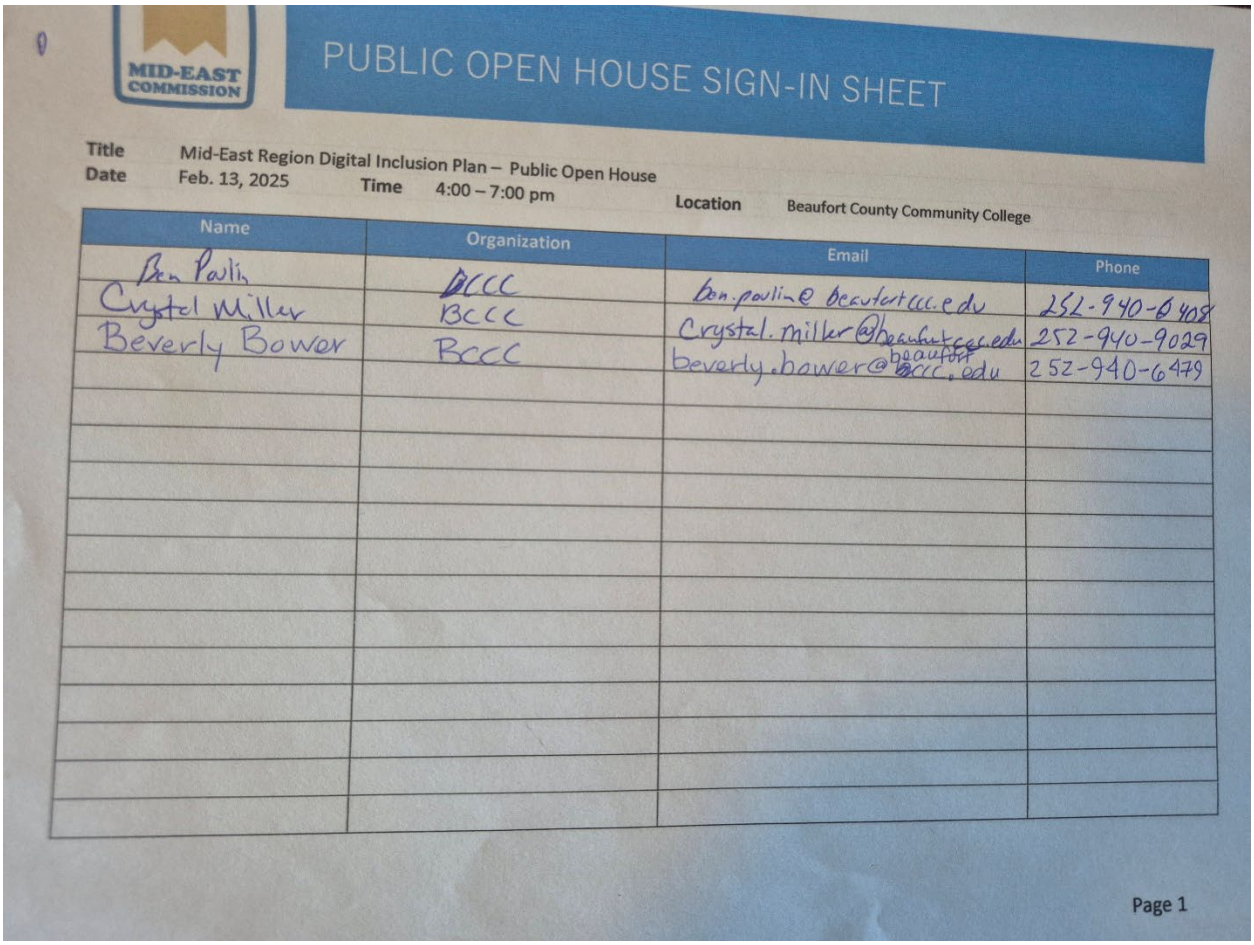
Event Photos


Welcome
DIGITAL RESOURCES
BCCC
UNLOCK YOUR DIGITAL POTENTIAL


Online Safety Tips
NC DIGITAL FUTURES PROGRAM
NC COOPERATIVE EXTENSION
Lifeline
Lifeline

Event Sign-In Sheets

- Note: Many Steering Committee members attended the Open House events but were not asked to sign in.



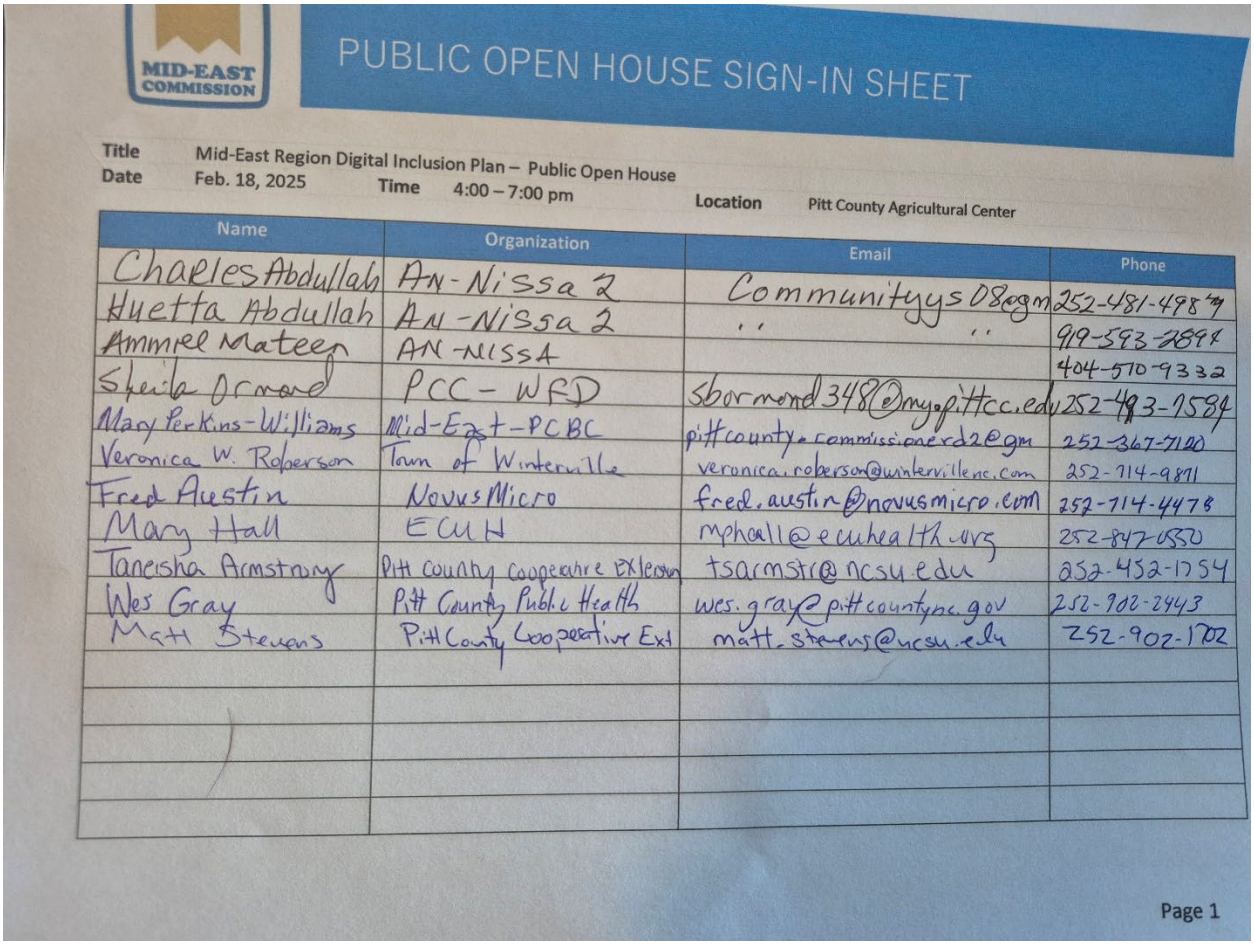
MID-EAST COMMISSION

PUBLIC OPEN HOUSE SIGN-IN SHEET

Title: Mid-East Region Digital Inclusion Plan – Public Open House
Date: Feb. 13, 2025 Time: 4:00 – 7:00 pm Location: Beaufort County Community College

Name	Organization	Email	Phone
Ben Pauli	BCCC	ben.pauli@beaufortccc.edu	252-940-6408
Crystal Miller	BCCC	Crystal.miller@beaufortccc.edu	252-940-9029
Beverly Bower	BCCC	beverly.bower@beaufortccc.edu	252-940-6479

Page 1



MID-EAST COMMISSION

PUBLIC OPEN HOUSE SIGN-IN SHEET

Title Mid-East Region Digital Inclusion Plan – Public Open House
Date Feb. 18, 2025 **Time** 4:00 – 7:00 pm **Location** Pitt County Agricultural Center

Name	Organization	Email	Phone
Charles Abdullah	AN-Nissa 2	Communityys08@gm	252-481-4984
Huetta Abdullah	AN-Nissa 2	" "	919-593-2894
Ammiel Mateen	AN-NISSA		404-570-9332
Sheila Ormond	PCC - WFD	sbormond348@mypitcc.edu	252-493-7584
Mary Perkins-Williams	Mid-East-PCBC	pittcounty.commissioner2@gm	252-367-7100
Veronica W. Roberson	Town of Winterville	veronica.roberson@wintervillenc.com	252-714-9871
Fred Austin	Novus Micro	fred.austin@novusmicro.com	252-714-4478
Mary Hall	ECUH	mphall@ecuhealth.org	252-847-0530
Taneisha Armstrong	Pitt County Cooperative Extension	tsarmstr@ncsu.edu	252-752-1754
Wes Gray	Pitt County Public Health	wes.gray@pittcountync.gov	252-902-2443
Matt Stevens	Pitt County Cooperative Ext	matt_stevens@ncsu.edu	252-902-1702

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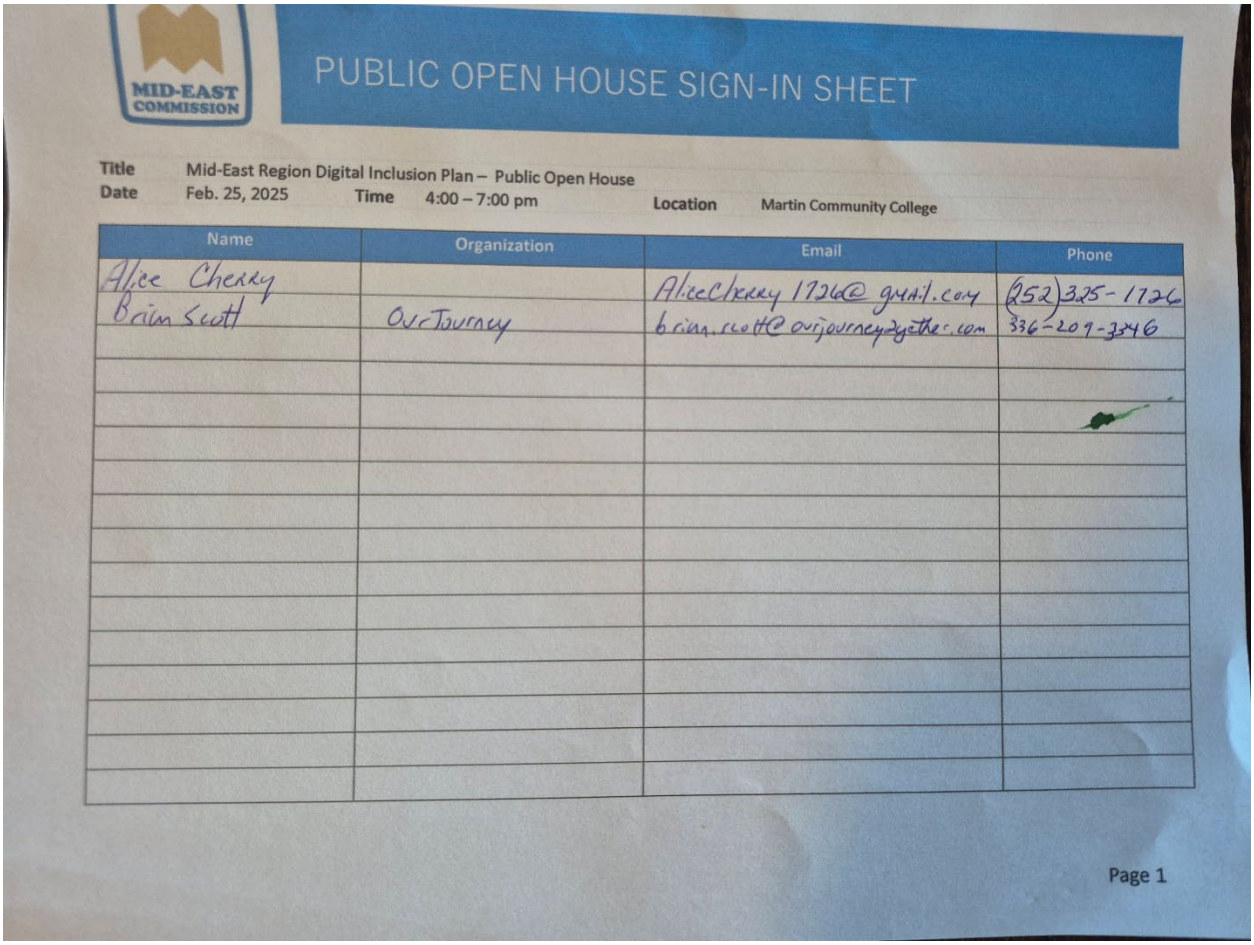

MID-EAST COMMISSION

PUBLIC OPEN HOUSE SIGN-IN SHEET

Title Mid-East Region Digital Inclusion Plan – Public Open House
Date Feb. 25, 2025 **Time** 4:00 – 7:00 pm **Location** Martin Community College

Name	Organization	Email	Phone
Alice Cherry		AliceCherry1726@gmail.com	(252) 325-1726
Brian Scott	OurJourney	brian.scott@ourjourneytogether.com	336-209-3346

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Bertie County

Community voices on digital opportunities.

Introduction

North Carolina has set a goal to become a national leader in high-speed internet adoption. To gain a better understanding of the community's needs regarding digital opportunities, researchers from the William and Ida Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at NC State University visited Bertie County, NC, on February 8, 2025. The purpose of this visit was to gather insights and perspectives from local community members. Kylie Foley at The Institute for Emerging Issues and Jamie Heath, Planner for the Mid East Council of Government, also joined the visit to address any questions or concerns raised by the community. The listening session was hosted by the Mount Olive Missionary Baptist Church in Windsor, NC, and all participants were members of the Black/African American community who live in rural communities. Among the group were also aging individuals (60+), individuals with disabilities, and veterans. This report aims to highlight the voices and viewpoints of those who participated in the listening session as they expressed their willingness to collaborate as partners in the pursuit of digital opportunities.

County Contexts

Bertie County, located in northeastern North Carolina, is a predominantly rural area with a strong agricultural heritage and a deep sense of community. The county covers a vast land area but has a relatively small population of approximately 18,000 residents. While the community maintains strong ties through local schools, churches, and businesses, it faces significant challenges related to digital access and economic development. Residents have historically supported each other, with many recalling times when "everybody raised each other's children." The county is home to many former educators and community leaders who emphasize the importance of preparing children for the future. However, despite these strengths, Bertie County faces significant challenges related to population decline, limited job opportunities, and inadequate digital access. Despite ongoing efforts to improve broadband infrastructure, many residents continue to experience unreliable internet service, affordability concerns, and a lack of digital literacy opportunities. The county's low population density further complicates broadband expansion, as service providers are reluctant to invest in infrastructure in sparsely populated areas.

Overview of Bertie County

1. **Total Population:** 17,934
2. **Land Area:** 699 mi²
3. **Employment:** 40%*
4. **Median Household Income:** $45,931
5. **Bachelor's Degree or Higher:** 17.8%
6. **Unserved**:** 17.95%
7. **Underserved***:** 0%
8. **Broadband subscription:** 43.75%
9. **No internet access:** 33.44%
10. **No internet devices:** 18.93%

Highlights

- Many households struggle with **internet access**, with issues related to **affordability** and **reliability.**
- There is a **significant digital divide among students**, with some unable to complete schoolwork due to lack of connectivity.
- The **community values collaboration** and is willing to explore solutions such as hotspot availability and digital skills training.
- Rural areas face difficulties in attracting **businesses and workforce opportunities**, further exacerbating digital access issues.

***Employment** is defined as full and part-time employees, including salaried officers and executives of corporations, who were on the payroll in the pay period. Included are employees on sick leave, holidays, and vacations; not included are proprietors and partners of unincorporated businesses.

****Unserved** is defined as no service 25mb/s download and 3mb/s upload or greater.

*****Underserved** is defined as no service 100mb/s download and 20mb/s upload or greater.

Key Findings

Bertie County faces significant challenges with internet access. Rising service costs from providers such as Verizon, Mediacom, Spectrum, and Fybe were a major concern, with affordability cited as a key barrier. Although fiber-optic services are expanding, many rural households remain without reliable access.

The digital divide's impact on students was a shared theme. Limited home internet access hindered students' ability to complete online assignments, with transportation barriers further limiting access to public hotspots provided by schools and businesses. Faith-based organizations, similar to those in Pamlico County, served as community study hubs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the gradual fiber-optic expansion, affordability remains a critical obstacle. Participants stressed the need for affordable service plans and broader broadband infrastructure investment. Additionally, they highlighted the importance of partnerships with local organizations, churches, and service providers to improve digital access and reduce transportation barriers for students.

This comparison with Pamlico County illustrates that the digital divide extends beyond individual counties. It underscores the need for regional collaboration to ensure equitable internet access for all communities.

Access to reliable and affordable Internet

Community members reported a mix of service providers, including Verizon, MediaCom, Spectrum, and Fybe. Some participants expressed satisfaction with fiber optic connections, noting improved reliability and affordability. However, disparities in service availability persist, particularly in the county's most rural areas. Some households remain without access to high-speed internet, and affordability remains a significant barrier for many families.

> *"Some of our kids still have to go to parking lots just to get internet access for their homework."*
>
> -Bertie County resident

During the COVID-19 pandemic, students without home internet access struggled to complete online assignments. While some solutions—such as hotspots at schools and free WiFi available at local businesses—were implemented, transportation and accessibility issues limited their effectiveness. Many residents emphasized the need for expanded internet service to reach underserved households.

Access to devices and training

Several participants highlighted the importance of providing residents with digital devices and training. Although schools have distributed devices such as Chromebooks and iPads, many families lack the necessary skills to fully utilize them. Digital literacy remains a challenge, with some adults struggling to complete essential online tasks such as applying for jobs, filling out government forms, and accessing virtual healthcare. Participants also noted a lack of structured digital literacy programs to help students and adults fully utilize these resources. Additionally, many teachers struggle to effectively integrate technology into their classrooms without proper training. This gap in digital literacy hinders both educational outcomes and community digital engagement. Residents emphasized the importance of equipping both students and adults with essential computer skills.

Faith communities and local organizations have the potential to play a vital role in bridging the digital divide. Participants suggested that churches and community centers should serve as digital learning hubs which provide training and resources for residents. Some churches have already begun offering digital skills classes, but many more could benefit from funding and structured programs. Participants noted the importance of relying on faith leaders to increase awareness of the community's need and available resources. However, these efforts remain limited in scope and require additional expanded efforts to meet the unique needs of the community. A suggested approach was to provide exposure to digital tools and show their real-life benefits, making technology adoption more meaningful to residents.

> *"If my pastor says something, I'm going to listen. We need community leaders to help spread awareness."*
>
> -Bertie County resident

Additionally, participants felt it was important to involve community leaders in digital opportunity initiatives. They emphasized that trusted local figures—such as pastors and educators—are key to encouraging participation in training programs. Expanding outreach efforts and providing transportation to digital learning sites were identified as essential steps to increasing engagement.

Existing resources

Bertie County has access to several digital and technical resources, but further expansion is needed to reach all residents. Some of the existing initiatives include:

- Cooperative Extension Digital Skills Classes: A Digital Skills Agent supports digital opportunities in Bertie County to provide a wide variety of courses to individuals of all age groups. These courses can be tailored to the needs and interests of individuals/groups. Some examples include courses on smartphone use, Zoom, and online shopping which were geared towards senior citizens.
- School-Based Technology Access: Local schools provide students with Chromebooks and iPads, though home internet access remains a challenge.
- Church-Based Digital Literacy Efforts: Some faith organizations, including Mt. Olive Missionary Baptist Church, have begun offering digital skills training and internet access to congregants.
- The Bertie County Hive House Virtual Learning Center: Local nonprofit that aims to provide diverse and just-in-time support for community members including workforce development.
- Bertie County Libraries: While not mentioned during the listening session, public libraries provide access to digital skills help and classes, public computers, and public WiFi.

Additional resources can be found on the NC Tech Resource Finder, and searchable database of technology resources available across North Carolina (e.g., digital skills help and classes, finding a computer or device, finding public computers and WiFi)

While there are some resources available to residents, awareness and accessibility of these programs continue to be a challenge. Significant gaps remain in digital literacy training, broadband expansion, and device affordability. Participants stressed the importance of securing additional funding and collaboration among government agencies, schools, businesses, and faith-based organizations to address these issues effectively.

Moving Forward

Participants highlighted the need for collaboration among businesses, churches, and government agencies to improve digital access in rural areas. Suggestions included:

- Increasing funding for broadband infrastructure expansion.
- Establishing public Wi-Fi hotspots in community centers and churches.
- Implementing digital skills training tailored to different age groups.
- Encouraging partnerships between local organizations and internet providers to create affordable service plans. During the listening session, several participants indicated that Fybe, a local fiber optic internet provider, was uplifted as a provider that offers affordable rates.

> *"We need someone to teach a basic digital skills class—just how to use a computer, how to apply for jobs online."*
>
> -Bertie County resident

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to Mt. Olive Missionary Baptist Church for hosting the listening session and providing a platform for community members to share their experiences. We also extend our appreciation to the residents of Bertie County who actively participated in the discussion. Their willingness to share their insights and collaborate on solutions was invaluable in the pursuit of digital opportunities in Bertie County. Special appreciation goes to local churches and organizations that have taken the initiative to provide digital skills training and internet access. We also acknowledge the efforts of educators and community leaders who continue to advocate for digital opportunities in the county.

Sources

North Carolina Department of Information Technology: Center for Geographic Information and Analysis. (2023). (rep.). *Bertie County Broadband Profile*. Retrieved from file:///C:/Users/missd/Downloads/NC_BroadbandProfile_2023v3_BERTIE.pdf

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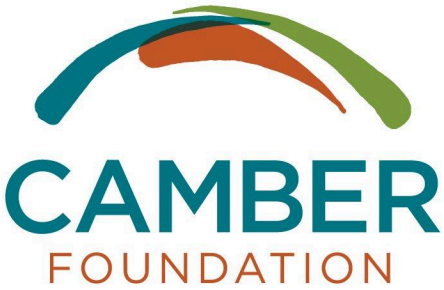
Bertie County Listening Session (February 8, 2025)

This project received support from the Camber Foundation



College of Education
Friday Institute for Educational Innovation

The mission of the William & Ida Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at NC State's College of Education is to advance education through innovation in teaching, learning, and leadership. Bringing together educational professionals, researchers, policy-makers, and other community members, the Friday Institute is a center for fostering collaborations to improve education. We conduct research, develop educational resources, provide professional development programs for educators, advocate to improve teaching and learning, and help inform policy-making.

Hertford County

Community voices on digital opportunities.

Introduction

North Carolina has set a goal to become a national leader in high-speed internet adoption. To gain a better understanding of the community's needs regarding digital opportunities, researchers from the William and Ida Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at NC State University visited Hertford County, NC, on March 15, 2025. The purpose of this visit was to gather insights and perspectives from local community members. Kylie Foley at The Institute for Emerging Issues and Jamie Heath, Planner for the Mid East Council of Government, also joined the visit to address any questions or concerns raised by the community. The listening session was hosted by the Kingdom Building Healing and Deliverance for All People Church in Ahoskie, NC, and all participants were members of the Black/African American community who live in rural communities. Among the group were also aging individuals (60+), individuals with disabilities, and veterans. This report aims to highlight the voices and viewpoints of those who participated in the listening session as they expressed their willingness to collaborate as partners in the pursuit of digital opportunities.

County Context

Hertford County, located in northeastern North Carolina along the Virginia border, is a predominantly rural area with a strong agricultural heritage, a growing manufacturing sector, and a deep sense of community. It is home to approximately 19,400 residents, over half of whom identify as Black/African American and a high percentage of aging individuals. While the community maintains strong ties through local schools, churches, and social services, it faces significant challenges related to digital access, digital literacy, and economic development. Neighboring Northampton County is an internet desert, and Hertford County faces similar concerns with limited service provider options and rural gaps where residents must rely on satellite options to get internet access. Though residents have historically supported each other, with many recalling times when they leaned on family or fellow church members for help, they also recognize the importance of self-reliance and the need for increased community resources. Despite ongoing efforts to improve broadband infrastructure, many residents continue to experience unreliable internet service, affordability concerns, and a lack of digital literacy opportunities.

Overview of Hertford County

1. **Total Population:** 21,552
2. **Land Area:** 353.2 mi²
3. **Employment:** 48.8%*
4. **Median Household Income:** $47,472
5. **Bachelor's Degree or Higher:** 16.7%
6. **Unserved**:** 14%
7. **Underserved***:** 0%
8. **Broadband subscription:** 55.4%
9. **No internet access:** 22.48%
10. **No internet devices:** 14.97%

***Employment** is defined as full and part-time employees, including salaried officers and executives of corporations, who were on the payroll in the pay period. Included are employees on sick leave, holidays, and vacations; not included are proprietors and partners of unincorporated businesses.
****Unserved** is defined as no service 25mb/s download and 3mb/s upload or greater.
*****Underserved** is defined as no service 100mb/s download and 20mb/s upload or greater.

Highlights

Many households struggle with **internet access,** with issues related to **affordability** and **reliability.**

The **community values collaboration** and is eager to create more opportunities for **digital skills training**, especially for aging individuals, as more essential services transition to online-only systems.

There is a need for **greater communication and coordination** between residents, local business, infrastructure projects, and service providers

Key Findings

Hertford County faces significant challenges with internet access. Limited internet service providers (e.g., Spectrum, Brightspeed, Century Link, and Roanoke Cooperative) have created monopoly-like conditions resulting in costly and often unreliable service. Rural areas in particular struggle with getting access to the internet, especially fiber connections, with many relying on satellite options like HughesNet instead.

Digital literacy barriers compound these infrastructure challenges, with many residents struggling with basic device operations and lacking access to technical support. The impact on daily life is considerable, affecting education, employment opportunities, and access to essential services. Participants expressed specific concerns about the digital literacy needs of aging individuals, the dangers of not having access to reliable internet in the event of an emergency, and the arising complications of the transition to online-only systems for government resources like social security and everything at the courthouse. While some community resources exist, participants emphasized the need for comprehensive solutions that address both infrastructure and skills gaps.

Access to Reliable and Affordable Internet

Community members reported limited service provider options, creating monopoly-like conditions with high costs and unreliable service. Residents experience frequent outages, particularly with Spectrum and Century Link, and reported paying between $69-300 monthly for often substandard connections. Rural areas face additional challenges, as many cannot access fiber connections and must rely on satellite options like HughesNet, often at premium prices. Participants shared that the host organization, Kingdom Building Healing and Deliverance for All People Church, cannot access fiber or Brightspeed services yet, highlighting how even community anchor institutions face connectivity challenges. Recent infrastructure construction has exacerbated these issues, with some residents experiencing three-week service outages on multiple occasions. These challenges have forced some residents to visit relatives or fast food establishments to access reliable internet.

> ***"The only changes we're noticing is the prices. The quality is decreasing."***
>
> **-Hertford County resident**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools distributed hotspots to students, but many families struggled with returning or maintaining these devices. Library systems attempted to fill gaps by providing hotspots, but their limited availability and durability proved insufficient for sustained community needs. The situation is particularly challenging for residents on fixed incomes, who must stretch their budgets to afford unreliable service that fails to meet basic needs.

Digital Literacy and Technical Support Gaps

Many residents struggle with basic device operations and lack the skills needed to navigate digital environments safely. As one participant expressed, "Need help with my smartphone sometimes, not used to doing a whole lot with my phone," highlighting challenges with fundamental tasks like reading emails or managing digital forms. Technical support options are limited locally, forcing residents to travel to Greenville or Virginia for device repair services. When technology issues arise, many must rely on family members, saying "I go to my two nephews" or "We call our friend who works at the church because she works in IT."

The increasing transition to digital-only systems has created anxiety among vulnerable populations. Participants specifically mentioned the Social Security Administration's move toward online-only services and the NC Judicial system's imminent transition to paperless operations within six weeks, noting "people aren't ready" and expressing frustration with self-service kiosks. Cybersecurity concerns are prevalent, with many residents unaware of free security software through providers like Brightspeed or how to identify potential scams. The financial burden of purchasing security software like Norton creates additional barriers to safe internet use.

While some community resources exist, such as basic computer classes at the community college and devices at the Ahoskie Library, they remain underutilized or inaccessible due to transportation challenges and insufficient outreach. Participants emphasized the need for tiered training programs offered at convenient, trusted locations like churches and senior centers, with practical instruction tailored to different skill levels. As one participant summarized the stakes: "This is a life-changing opportunity" that impacts not just convenience but safety, noting that technological literacy in emergencies can be lifesaving.

> ***"People need to learn. The computer can be your friend. Your cell phone can be your friend."***
>
> **-Hertford County resident**

Existing Resources

Hertford County has access to several digital and technical resources, but further expansion is needed to reach all residents. Some of the existing initiatives include:

- School-Based Technology Access: Local schools provide students with Chromebooks and iPads, though home internet access remains a challenge.
- Cooperative Extension Digital Skills Classes: A Digital Skills Agent from neighboring Bertie County also supports digital opportunities in Hertford County to provide a wide variety of courses to individuals of all age groups.
- Community College-Based Digital Literacy Efforts: Roanoke-Chowan Community College (RCCC) offers computer skills classes as does the nearby College of the Albemarle
- Hertford County Libraries: Public libraries provide access to digital skills help and classes, public computers, and public WiFi. They also lent out devices and hotspots during the pandemic.
- Hertford County Office of Aging: Senior centers offer digital skills classes, and, moving forward, there will be a Principal Digital Navigator who will offer device support.

Additional resources can be found on the NC Tech Resource Finder, and searchable database of technology resources available across North Carolina (e.g., digital skills help and classes, finding a computer or device, finding public computers and WiFi)

While there are some resources available to residents, awareness and accessibility of these programs continue to be a challenge. Significant gaps remain in digital literacy training, broadband expansion, and device affordability. Participants stressed the importance of securing additional funding and collaboration among government agencies, schools, businesses, and faith-based organizations to address these issues effectively.

Moving Forward

Participants highlighted the need for collaboration among businesses, churches, and government agencies to facilitate increased digital literacy and improve digital access in rural areas. Suggestions included:

- Implementing digital skills training tailored to different ability levels
- Incorporate digital training into existing community gatherings
- Focus training on key skills:
    - Basic device operations and internet navigation
    - Cybersecurity and scam prevention
    - Accessing essential services (online forms, healthcare portals, government services)
    - Emergency preparedness (e.g., charging phones during power outages)
- Strategic outreach utilizing trusted community networks (e.g., churches, pastors, sororities/fraternities) and traditional advertising (e.g., radio, flyers, newspapers)
- Offer incentives to encourage participation (e.g., food, continuing education credits)
- More affordable, reliable service options
- Expanded fiber access to rural areas
- Better coordination between infrastructure projects and service providers

> ***"We're going to look at it [the internet] as an information highway that's driving a lot of things. Our congregations need to understand how to properly embrace it, how to use it, how to not use it, what to avoid."***

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to Kingdom Building Healing and Deliverance for All People Church for hosting the listening session and providing a platform for community members to share their experiences. We also extend our appreciation to the residents of Hertford County who actively participated in the discussion. Their willingness to share their insights and collaborate on solutions was invaluable in the pursuit of digital opportunities in Hertford County. Special appreciation goes to local churches and organizations that have taken the initiative to provide digital skills training and internet access. We also acknowledge the efforts of educators and community leaders who continue to advocate for digital opportunities in the county.

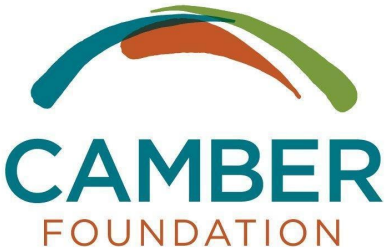
Sources

North Carolina Department of Information Technology: Center for Geographic Information and Analysis. (2023). (rep.). *Hertford County Broadband Profile*. Retrieved from file:///C:/Users/missd/Downloads/NC_BroadbandProfile_HERTFORD.pdf

United States Census Bureau. (2021). Hertford County, North Carolina. https://data.census.gov/profile/Hertford_County,_North_Carolina?g=050XX00US37091

Hertford County Listening Session (March 15, 2025)

This project received support from the Camber Foundation



NC STATE UNIVERSITY

College of Education
Friday Institute for Educational Innovation

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Appendix D: Weighted Scoring Results

Participants in the Public Open House events and Steering Committee members voted on projects. There was an in person option and a virtual option. Voting was conducted by participants placing marks or stickers on the posters to vote for their favorite projects. Participants were instructed to place 1, 2 and 3 marks to prioritize projects with the #1 sticker being their top project. (Note: Some implementation resources category projects were not included for voting due to being internal Steering Committee projects.)

Weighted scoring was completed. Since the lowest number was the favorite project, a weighted average was calculated based on score. The highest scores represent the most popular projects. This method corrects for opposite scoring (1 being highest weight) and for a no score of a project. Essentially, the method is to tally up the number of votes per score, multiply by its weight and sum the total. Votes were scored with #1 being worth 0.425 points, #2 being worth 0.325 points, and #3 being worth 0.25 points. Projects were categorized as high priority (4+ points), medium priority (1 – 3.9 points), and low priority (less than 1 point).

Weighted scoring results are as follows, listed in order from highest priority to lowest priority:

- **Broadband Infrastructure Expansion = 8.7 points (High Priority)**
  - #1: 17 votes x 0.425 points = 7.225
  - #2: 3 votes x 0.325 points = 0.975
  - #3: 2 votes x 0.25 points = 0.5
- **Cell Tower Infrastructure Expansion = 6.0 points (High Priority)**
  - #1: 2 votes x 0.425 = 0.85
  - #2: 12 votes x 0.325 = 3.9
  - #3: 5 votes x 0.25 = 1.25
- **Digital Skills Training = 5.35 points (High Priority)**
  - #1: 5 votes x 0.425 = 2.125
  - #2: 3 votes x 0.325 = 0.975
  - #3: 9 votes x 0.25 = 2.25
- **Device Access Program = 4.8 points (High Priority)**
  - #1: 4 votes x 0.425 = 1.7
  - #2: 8 votes x 0.325 = 2.6
  - #3: 2 votes x 0.25 = 0.5
- **Internet Subsidy Program = 3.7 points (Medium Priority)**
  - #1: 0 votes = 0
  - #2: 6 votes x 0.325 = 1.95

    - #3: 7 votes = 1.75
- **Improve the Quality of Broadband Networks = 2.625 points (Medium Priority)**
    - #1: 5 votes x 0.425 = 2.125
    - #2: 0 votes = 0
    - #3: 2 votes x 0.25 = 0.5
- **Workforce Development Program Integration = 2.425 points (Medium Priority)**
    - #1: 3 votes x 0.425 = 1.275
    - #2: 2 votes x 0.325 = 0.65
    - #3: 2 votes x 0.25 = 0.5
- **Device Repair and Technical Support Program = 2.4 points (Medium Priority)**
    - #1: 1 vote x 0.425 = 0.425
    - #2: 3 votes x 0.325 = 0.975
    - #3: 4 votes x 0.25 = 1.0
- **Resiliency Back-Up Networks = 2.275 points (Medium Priority)**
    - #1: 3 votes x 0.425 = 1.275
    - #2: 0 votes = 0
    - #3: 4 votes = 1.0
- **Public Access Locations = 1.825 points (Medium Priority)**
    - #1: 1 vote x 0.425 = 0.425
    - #2: 2 votes x 0.325 = 0.65
    - #3: 3 votes x 0.25 = 0.75
- **Public Informational Portal = 0.575 points (Low Priority)**
    - #1: 0 votes = 0
    - #2: 1 vote x 0.325 = 0.325
    - #3: 1 vote x 0.25 = 0.25

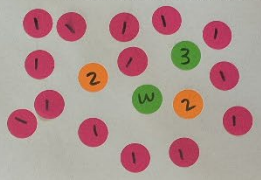
DRAFT PROJECTS

MID-EAST REGION DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN

Broadband Infrastructure Expansion

Extend high speed broadband internet infrastructure to rural areas until all households, businesses, and organizations in the region are served.

Place dots 1, 2, and 3 on your top preferred projects. #1 = your top project



Cell Tower Infrastructure Expansion

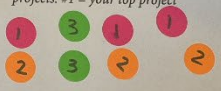
Extend cell towers with 5G infrastructure to rural areas until all households, businesses, and organizations in the region are served.

Place dots 1, 2, and 3 on your top preferred projects. #1 = your top project

Device Access Program

Develop a regional device access program with local distribution of devices (e.g., desktop computers, hot spots, laptop computers, tablets, smartphones) through community based organizations.

Place dots 1, 2, and 3 on your top preferred projects. #1 = your top project



DRAFT PROJECTS

MID-EAST REGION DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN

Broadband Infrastructure Expansion

Extend high speed broadband internet infrastructure to rural areas until all households, businesses, and organizations in the region are served.

Place dots 1, 2, and 3 on your top preferred projects. #1 = your top project

1 2 1 1

Cell Tower Infrastructure Expansion

Extend cell towers with 5G infrastructure to rural areas until all households, businesses, and organizations in the region are served.

Place dots 1, 2, and 3 on your top preferred projects. #1 = your top project

3 3

Device Access Program

Develop a regional device access program with local distribution of devices (e.g., desktop computers, hot spots, laptop computers, tablets, smartphones) through community based organizations.

Place dots 1, 2, and 3 on your top preferred projects. #1 = your top project

2 1 2 2 2 2

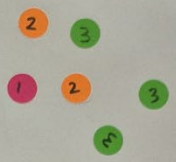
DRAFT PROJECTS

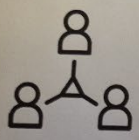
MID-EAST REGION DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN

Device Repair & Technical Support Program

Develop a regional program to assist citizens who need repairs for their devices and/or technical support for device maintenance.

Place dots 1, 2, and 3 on your top preferred projects. #1 = your top project





Digital Skills Training

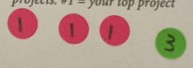
Provide digital skills training that targets specific community needs (basic computer use, basic smart phone use, communication, education, healthcare access, economic participation, democratic participation, and beyond). Expand current programs and develop additional programs until all communities in the region are adequately served.

Place dots 1, 2, and 3 on your top preferred projects. #1 = your top project

Improve the Quality of Broadband Networks

Identify problem areas and improve the reliability and speed of existing broadband networks.

Place dots 1, 2, and 3 on your top preferred projects. #1 = your top project



DRAFT PROJECTS

MID-EAST REGION DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN

Device Repair & Technical Support Program

Place dots 1, 2, and 3 on your top preferred projects. #1 = your top project

Develop a regional program to assist citizens who need repairs for their devices and/or technical support for device maintenance.

2

3

Digital Skills Training

Place dots 1, 2, and 3 on your top preferred projects. #1 = your top project

Provide digital skills training that targets specific community needs (basic computer use, basic smart phone use, communication, education, healthcare access, economic participation, democratic participation, and beyond). Expand current programs and develo additional programs until all communities in the region are adequately served.

3

3

3

1

Improve the Quality of Broadband Networks

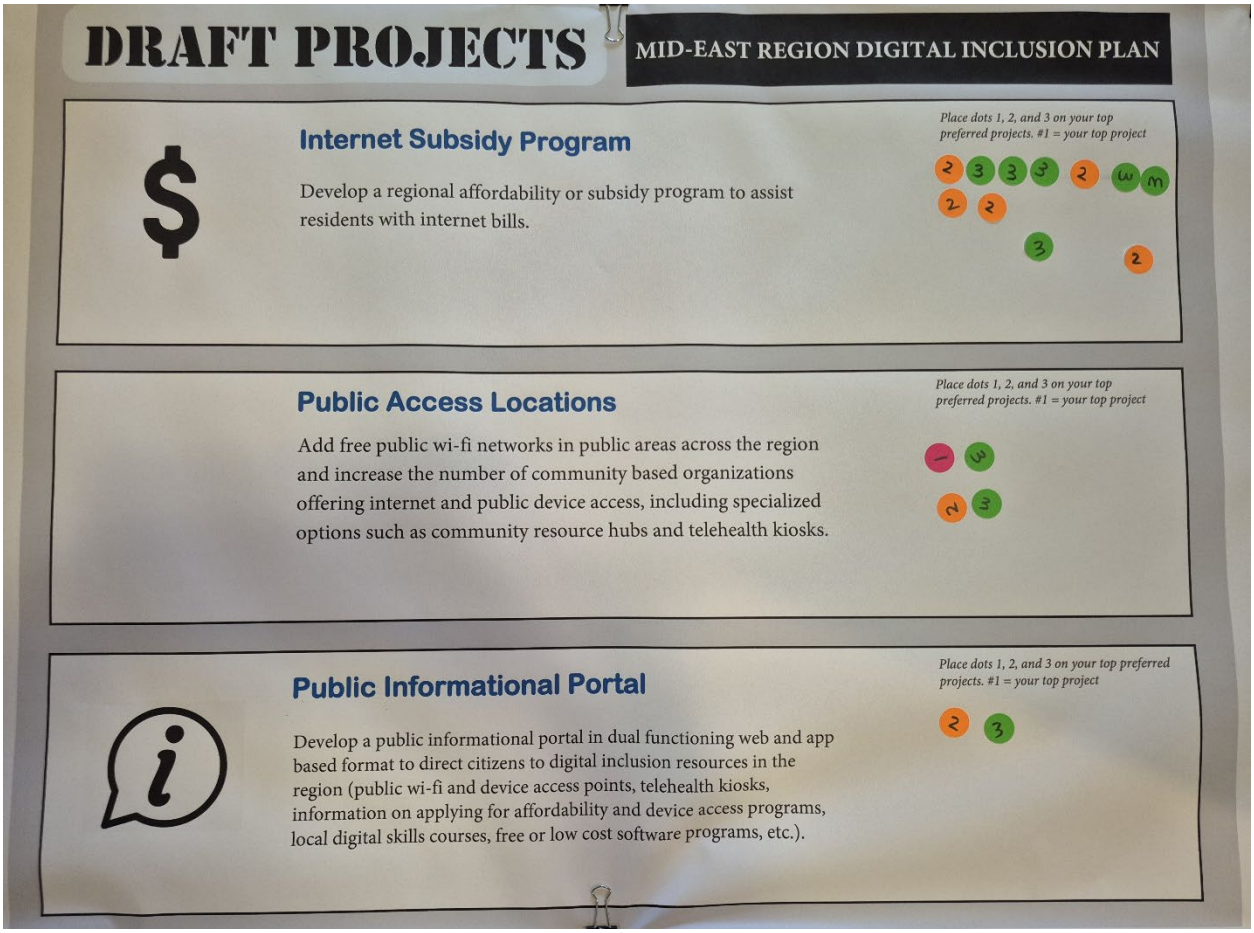
Place dots 1, 2, and 3 on your top preferred projects. #1 = your top project

Identify problem areas and improve the reliability and speed of existing broadband networks.

1

1

3


DRAFT PROJECTS
MID-EAST REGION DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN
Internet Subsidy Program
Develop a regional affordability or subsidy program to assist residents with internet bills.
Place dots 1, 2, and 3 on your top preferred projects. #1 = your top project
Public Access Locations
Add free public wi-fi networks in public areas across the region and increase the number of community based organizations offering internet and public device access, including specialized options such as community resource hubs and telehealth kiosks.
Place dots 1, 2, and 3 on your top preferred projects. #1 = your top project
Public Informational Portal
Develop a public informational portal in dual functioning web and app based format to direct citizens to digital inclusion resources in the region (public wi-fi and device access points, telehealth kiosks, information on applying for affordability and device access programs, local digital skills courses, free or low cost software programs, etc.).
Place dots 1, 2, and 3 on your top preferred projects. #1 = your top project

DRAFT PROJECTS

MID-EAST REGION DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN

Internet Subsidy Program

Place dots 1, 2, and 3 on your top preferred projects. #1 = your top project

Develop a regional affordability or subsidy program to assist residents with internet bills.

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Public Access Locations

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3

Public Informational Portal

Place dots 1, 2, and 3 on your top preferred projects. #1 = your top project

Develop a public informational portal in dual functioning web and app based format to direct citizens to digital inclusion resources in the region (public wi-fi and device access points, telehealth kiosks, information on applying for affordability and device access programs, local digital skills courses, free or low cost software programs, etc.).

DRAFT PROJECTS

MID-EAST REGION DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN

Resiliency Back-Up Networks

Develop satellite-based public wi-fi networks as back-up networks which can provide internet service in the event that broadband infrastructure is destroyed by a disaster.

Place dots 1, 2, and 3 on your top preferred projects. #1 = your top project

3 1 4 1

Workforce Development Program Integration

Incorporate digital skills training into existing workforce development programs. Where feasible, appoint a person to be trained to be the digital skills trainer for that business.

Place dots 1, 2, and 3 on your top preferred projects. #1 = your top project

N 3 3

Other: Write in Your Project Ideas!

- Subsidized high speed (Fiber or Hybrid) broadband for health clinics / FQHCs / Health Depts / Rural Health Clinics
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DRAFT PROJECTS

MID-EAST REGION DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN

Resiliency Back-Up Networks

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3

Workforce Development Program Integration

1

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1

2

1

Other: Write in Your Project Ideas!