

Case Study: The Critical Role of Community Action Agencies in Closing the Digital Divide

Virginia Community Action Partnership

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Executive Summary

The Virginia Community Action Partnership (VACAP) conducted a case study on best practices through a newly created VACAP Broadband Peer Group focused on learning from each other as they conducted regional digital opportunity plans. VACAP held weekly peer group meetings over three months to gather information on what each region was reporting as gaps in digital opportunity and other issues related to broadband to craft recommendations for implementable projects for consideration and inclusion in the statewide digital opportunity plan. The meetings were also used for information sharing on broadband and digital opportunity best practices by community action agencies.

As a result of the peer group meetings, VACAP developed a list of recommendations for the Department to consider including in the state digital opportunity plan for the Commonwealth of Virginia. These recommendations are meant to help the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) as it prioritizes initiatives to help close the digital divide. The recommendations come from peer group meetings and outside research done by VACAP staff.

The Commonwealth is a geographically diverse state with varying broadband needs across the state. Digital opportunity needs vary from lack of access to a broadband connection to affording a device to connect to the internet and access to training for digital literacy skills. Digital tools, skills and technology are now considered necessities in an ever-connected world for all ages. Needs varied based on the region and population but overall, the Commonwealth will need to invest in digital opportunity initiatives to help its residents stay connected and armed with the skills to thrive in the 21st century. From the peer group meetings, it is recognized that only investing in broadband infrastructure will not be sufficient to help close the digital divide.

Digital Opportunity, according to the National Digital Inclusion Alliance, is a condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy, and economy. Digital opportunity is necessary for civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services.

VACAP Broadband Peer Group

VACAP held eight broadband peer group meetings from May to August 2023. The meetings were informal and designed to be an open forum to discuss concerns, questions, best practices and understand from each other how to conduct listening sessions and increase survey responses. This was a new peer group formed in light of several Community Action members who received a regional Digital Opportunity Planning grant from DHCD.

Many grantees had been in the digital opportunity initiatives space, some had their own computer labs for teaching digital literacy and taking on digital navigator roles. However, there were some members new to the space. The peer group was a chance for those interested in getting into the digital opportunity service area to in learn from those who already had investments and long term programs in place. The peer group also served as a support to all Community Action leads on regional digital opportunity plans. Many members sent notes or stated at the end of meetings that they gained more clarity about the broadband landscape in the Commonwealth or understand what was needed for their plans.

Support and technical assistance included serving as liaison between the peer group and DHCD, providing feedback to DHCD and making sure members got directed to the right person for technical assistance and clarity from DHCD or other partners on issues.

DHCD was invited to all of the peer group meetings and staff members would be available to answer questions and offer updates and further clarifications on the process. Community action members were able to have access to DHCD staff and hear answers in real time together.

VACAP staff would take feedback and questions from the peer group and research answers and recommendations for them to include in their regional digital opportunity plans. VACAP shared the list of recommendations with members that were developed by the VACAP Broadband Peer Group.

Why Community Action?

Virginia Community Action Partnership (VACAP) is the statewide membership association for Virginia's thirty-one non-profit private and public community action agencies. VACAP's mission is to build the capacity and competencies of Virginia's community action agencies to achieve their mission of creating economic opportunities and facilitating mobility from poverty for the people of Virginia. At VACAP, we are committed to a future in which all of Virginia's community action agencies are high impact and people and places across Virginia are thriving.

Community Action is an important component as the agencies offer localized services to low-income residents and understand their communities. Community Action Agencies have years of experience in identifying and providing client with wrap around services, coaching with the goal of self-sufficiency and alleviating poverty. Digital Opportunity is now an essential component for workforce participation, education and access to benefits and other resources. Community Action Agencies are uniquely positioned to add digital opportunity initiatives to the number of services they provide to ensure families have the tools they need to succeed in self-sufficiency.

All agencies have experience working with low-income residents including covered populations in the Digital Equity Act and ensuring their voices are heard. Community action wants to be in the center of this new digital opportunity initiative as they are uniquely positioned to bring digital opportunity programs into the community. Community Action agencies are well connected with other nonprofits, local governments and other organizations and have served as convenors in other spaces such as early education, whole family coaching, housing, food access and more. Community Action can bring in new partners into the digital opportunity space to create coalitions to help address the needs of low-income Virginians in the regions.

The regional digital opportunity plans are the first steps in establishing Community Action as the center of digital opportunity coalitions in the state. Peer group members were encouraged to consider their regional plans as living documents that can be utilized for implementation when funding from the state and federal level becomes available. The peer group learning is critical to making the regional plans stronger. VACAP is committed to pursuing additional state funds to keep the regional plans living documents that can be used as actionable plans and that position Virginia to be first in class in securing and deploying digital opportunity related resources in an

effective manner. VACAP has secured some funding in one region of the Commonwealth to continue updating and refining that region's digital opportunity plan. VACAP is committed to securing more resources and funding sources to keep Community Action leading in pursuing funding for their communities.

Successes and Barriers for Surveys: Best Practices for the Future

The VACAP Broadband Peer Group discussed and shared best practices for increasing survey numbers in their regions for DHCD's Digital Opportunity survey.

Paper surveys worked for getting responses for one of the covered populations-those incarcerated in jails and in the prison system. Paper surveys also worked well at food pantries and housing authorities. This demonstrates that Community Action Agencies can meet people where they are in order to help increase survey numbers and are trusted organizations in the community. DHCD gave out digital and paper copies of the survey to utilize, which decreased barriers for survey participation. DHCD was also open to translation of the survey into different languages to increase survey participation. Other successful methods to increase survey participation included walking seniors through a survey at a senior center and bringing paper copies of the survey to community centers.

In short, offering the survey in different languages and different media forms (paper and digital) allowed for Community Action agencies to increase participation and tailor their efforts, based on the covered population. More direct discussions with covered populations will continue to strengthen future plans.

Current Programs Working in the Commonwealth

The VACAP Broadband peer group discussed many initiatives that were currently operating and having an impact in the Community. Below are a few examples of successful programs. Appendix C has a detailed list of recommendations that were developed as a result of the discussions from the peer group meetings.

Fairfax County has been piloting some digital opportunity initiatives and is getting ready to expand upon them with some new funding from the County. Fairfax County has a free device program in partnership with their libraries and IT assistance is free and available to area residents 60 or older and those 18 and over with a disability. In late 2022, paid for by an Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF) grant, the county expanded their circulating fleet to 75 kits containing Chromebooks and Wi-Fi hotspots, which are now available at 22 branches. The County utilizes their IT department to help maintain loaner devices. Those who receive a device receive training.

In Fairfax County public schools, students can get access to the internet and devices by being able to check out a hotspot and every student receives a hot spot. Fairfax County started circulating Chromebooks to the public in 2021 at 5 branches. They have been popular across the system, with very high demands at a few branches. Many peer group members noted that all public schools in their regions do offer a device to all students during the school year for completing assignments at home.

Fairfax County is providing funding for free public outdoor WiFi at 20 of their 23 library branches which is available 16 hours per day (6AM to 10PM), seven days a week, even when the branches are not open. According to Fairfax County, approximately 20,000 unique devices use this Wi-Fi each month, or 240,000 unique devices per year. Users download an average of 700 GB of data per day or 21,000 GB of data per month, demonstrating the need for free public WiFi in outdoor spaces that constituents can access.

VACAP also spoke with the Library of Virginia. Many libraries across the Commonwealth have been offering digital literacy training and access to the internet for residents in their region. The libraries are seeking additional funding for technology resource centers to create spaces for private conversations, now that many services can be conducted online such as telehealth appointments. Investment will be needed to ensure community action agencies, libraries and other key anchor institutions are equipped to handle the change in services offered online.

Many peer group members agreed that schools were helpful in getting devices to youth to help them complete their assignments away from the schools. The group was wary of putting more mandates on the schools but agreed a type of digital literacy training should coincide with giving the devices to students at the beginning of the school year.

For refurbishing devices, many peer group attendees expressed that there were not enough resources for devices that break, if the devices are not in the school system. If the state were to incentivize getting devices into the hands of low-income Virginians, there would need to be an IT servicing component, such as the Fairfax model. Many peer group members heard feedback that organizations and citizens were wary of free device programs without having proper maintenance and IT support.

In all, many peer group members agreed that investment in broadband infrastructure needs to be coupled with digital opportunity initiatives to increase internet access opportunities for low-income Virginians.

Closing

The VACAP Broadband peer group is a critical for information sharing, clarifying information from DHCD's Broadband Office and developing implementable recommendations for the state Digital Opportunity Plan. VACAP plans to continue pursuing funds to keep the peer group going in subsequent months and help the Community Action agencies refine their regional digital opportunity plans and keep them livable documents with concrete, sustainable and fundable recommendations to help close the digital divide.

Moving forward the key to closing the digital divide is to continue to work through organizations closest to covered populations with impediments to digital opportunity. Community action agencies are central to this effort through their federally and state established structure of leadership through local governments, low-income populations and community needs assessment and strategic planning. Additional funding for the VACAP Broadband Peer group will help further the training and technical assistant available to organizations and local governments working in this digital opportunity space. Flexible grants to community action agencies and

similar partners that allow each community and region to apply for their most pressing digital opportunity needs will ensure innovative proposals come from those organizations closest to the covered populations lacking access.

Appendix A:

VACAP Broadband Peer Group Meetings and Other Meetings Attended for Case Study

May 23, 2023: First VACAP Peer Group Meeting

June 8, 2023: VACAP Meeting with Library of Virginia & VACAP Broadband Peer Group Meeting

June 16, 2023: DHCD Broadband Meeting with Community Action Agencies #1

June 22, 2023: VACAP Broadband Peer Group Meeting

June 29, 2023: VACAP Broadband Peer Group Meeting

July 6, 2023: VACAP Broadband Peer Group Meeting & DHCD Broadband Working Meeting with Community Action Agencies #2

July 12, 2023: VACAP Broadband Peer Group Meeting

July 19, 2023: VACAP Broadband Peer Group Meeting

July 28, 2023: DHCD Broadband Meeting with Community Action Agencies #3

August 2, 2023: VACAP Broadband Peer Group Meeting

August 9, 2023: VACAP Broadband Peer Group Meeting

Appendix B: VACAP Broadband Peer Group Members

Member CAA	POC	POC email
APP CAA	Lisa Barton	lbarton@appcaa.org
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Appendix C: List of Recommendations from VACAP Broadband Peer Group

- I. The Commonwealth should consider a grants program for strengthening partnerships through Community Anchor Institutions such as Community Action Agencies, local government or other community partners to fund digital navigators and digital opportunity coalitions.
 - Need to ensure a language component to reach all populations
 - Grants can be used to establish a broadband and digital opportunity task force or digital inclusion coalition and digital navigators
 - Need further input from specific covered population groups to get more feedback from immigrants, non-English speakers, returning citizens, Head Start families, seniors, etc.
- II. Local governments should consider designating a point person for digital inclusion initiatives, a central contact.
- III. Funding for device refurbishing programs to get devices in the hands of low-income Virginians. CAAs and libraries and local governments are examples of organizations that can oversee loaner device programs and offer tech support
 - STAR program as example of refurbishing program:
<https://www.wps.k12.va.us/Page/10217>
 - Students refurbish computers from state entities or other sources and technology gets donated to families in need
 - Grants to organizations for free computers coupled with digital literacy training
 - Participants can receive up to one year of technical assistance after attending five classes and receiving a laptop
- IV. The state should invest more funding into the Line Extension Customer Program (LECAP) for areas where there is current broadband infrastructure and cost prohibitive for families to sign up for broadband in their community
- V. The Commonwealth should consider investing in more technology resources centers through libraries:
 - Ensure libraries have funding for:
 - Open access to high-speed internet, devices for connectivity and virtual meetings (such as individual pods)
 - Renovation funds to create privacy pods or support electrical infrastructure
 - Digital skills training in partnership with other community partners
 - Funding for staffing/capacity building
- VI. The Commonwealth should invest in a statewide Asset inventory map
 - Central depository and map showing where affordable internet and devices are (so WiFi spots, device loaner locations, libraries, private and public entities, etc)
- VII. The Commonwealth should consider a grant program for Wifi/free internet (outdoor or indoor) for
 - Existing and future affordable housing/infrastructure
 - Community Centers
 - Senior Centers
 - After-school programs in underserved areas

- VIII. The Commonwealth should consider dedicated funding at DHCD to keep the state digital opportunity plan a living document and continuously updated
- This to continue and fine tune outreach to covered populations to identify needs and gaps in digital opportunity
 - Ensures statewide digital opportunity plan to be fluid and meet needs of the regions on a yearly basis
 - The Department can conduct yearly or biyearly survey with longer timeline to garner feedback and identify programs for future funding
 - Dedicated funding for DHCD staff member to coordinate Digital Opportunity Plan in the State.
 - Dedicated funding to each region to make digital opportunity plans fluid and updated
- IX. The Commonwealth should consider funding reentry programs through the VA CARES network and ways to fund Project Discovery first generation college access program
- X. The Virginia General Assembly should consider directing DHCD to develop a digital opportunity dashboard. Show investments in digital opportunity and a clearinghouse of resources for low-income Virginians.