

## Executive Summary

The Improvement Association region for the Digital Opportunity Plan Survey includes City of Emporia, Greenville, Dinwiddie, Sussex, Surry, City of Petersburg, and Prince George. While the digital divide was present and pervasive throughout Virginia prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the stay-at-home orders that pushed more activities online than ever which quickly exposed to the world what many of us knew already – the internet and cellular service in our homes and its benefits are not accessible to all Virginians. While the pandemic has impacted us all, those without internet, a computer, and the skills to use them have been disproportionately impacted during this time. As such, closing the digital divide is more imperative now than ever. Digital Equity, in which all individuals and communities must have, including information technology, is greatly needed to fully participate in our society, democracy, and economy.

As the world has learned since the beginning of 2020, digital equity is necessary for civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services. Digital Inclusion activities are necessary to ensure that all individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, have access to and use of Information and Communication Technologies. Fifty-nine percent (59%) of respondents have both a home internet subscription and a wireless cellular plan. In this region, forty-seven percent connect to the internet using their cellular data plan and thirty-four percent use a cable modem. Of the people who cannot access the internet, sixty-seven percent do not because it is not available in their area. Eighty-six percent of survey participants use a smart phone to access the internet and seventy-three percent use a laptop. Survey participants feel comfortable using their devices to do most tasks, but less so for virtual doctor appointments. Seventy-four percent have not applied to a program for internet accessibility, and less than twenty-four percent are not aware of these programs. Fifty-two percent of respondents reside in a rural area and one fourth is aging and or members of a racial or ethnic minority group. Fifty-nine percent of survey participants have both a home internet subscription and a wireless cellular plan. Forty-seven percent access the internet using their cellular data plan and roughly thirty-four percent use a cable modem. Verizon wireless is the provider for forty-seven percent of survey participants and about half use Xfinity for home internet. Forty-seven percent of participants spend an upwards of fifty to one hundred dollars on internet service not as a part of their cellular plan. Of all the surveys submitted almost one-third of all participants stated that they would be willing to pay more for better internet services with one-fourth stating that they were unsure if they would be willing to pay more. Participants are generally satisfied with customer service and internet reliability and speed, but less satisfied with the value. Sixty-three percent of participants do not have a cap on their monthly internet usage. Almost half of the participants somewhat or frequently experience disruptions in download or upload speeds.

The most common problems among respondents are lack of access to technology or their subscribed speed not being achievable. In this region, broadband availability is almost non-existent to most of the region due to existing broadband companies overpricing their services. Eighty-six percent use the internet to pay bills and eighty-four (84) percent use the internet to make purchases. Most participants use the internet at home more than any other venue. Participants in this area are most interested in low-cost or free internet services and digital devices. Eighty-one percent of participants have not reduced or canceled their internet service. Most respondents have not applied to a program for internet

accessibility and less than ¼ are not even aware that these programs exist. The key points of the plan are to bridge the digital divide by having one hundred percent coverage and offer residents the ability to be able to afford internet and have reliable services. Residents also need to be able to have computer affordability or loaner programs available to them. As stated previously, there are numerous people in this region that have not been given the opportunity to obtain internet services or stable cellular service at their home.

### **Introduction and Vision for Digital Opportunity**

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. The Regions' vision for digital opportunity and a priority would be one-hundred percent broadband and cellular coverage for the entire region. The use of computer loaner programs, as well as finance based affordable broadband programs, and state regulations where broadband companies could not price gouge. Consequently, it is believed that Internet companies may offer services for a low price to get customers to start with their service and then after an introductory period, the price doubles and even triples in some cases.

Partnerships should be created with community colleges, churches, nursing homes, community organizations and schools to make sure that everyone has access to a computer and knows how to use it. These partnerships may offer programs that residents can participate in to learn how to use a computer and they may retain access to the computer in which they learned on upon leaving the program. Additionally, these partnerships may create programs whereas old computers can be turned in and refurbished for use by participants in the programs. Examples of how this can be achieved would be for the counties and cities to form broadband committees. The function of this committee would be to report areas that do not have broadband or cellular services. Also, in areas where they currently have broadband and cellular services, it is slow and inconsistent. This committee would also be responsible for keeping the community informed of programs, classes, and new regulations from the state and federal levels. Also, funding for schools, churches, community organizations and nonprofits to open resource centers for families to learn how to use a computer or apply for programs suitable for their current needs, may be the responsibility of the broadband committee. The installation of more towers in rural areas for better cellular and internet connections for residents is imperative.

### **Current State of Digital Opportunity: Barriers and Assets**

#### **Requirement 1:**

The list below is just a small list of places in our region that currently have computer centers that are open for public use. By starting a Broadband Committee or Broadband Office, this could ensure the development of a more inclusive list of available locations that are currently available. In the covered target populations, there is no surplus money in local budgets to support these types of programs or services. Local officials have been more than clear that they need services but cannot afford another state mandated expense with no state and/or federal funding to support such initiatives. These fiscal constraints in communities in our region often get overlooked and are contributing factors why these

communities are not current when it comes to certain areas of community programming and development.

### **Computer Centers locations:**

#### **\*Public Libraries:**

Dinwiddie Library - Appomattox Regional Library System  
Petersburg Public Library  
Richardson Public Library  
Blackwater Regional Library – Serves Sussex & Surry  
Prince George Library – Appomattox Regional Library System  
Richardson Memorial Library – Serves Emporia & Greensville County

\*Royal Baptist Church 106 West Atlantic Street, Emporia, VA has a computer lab

\*Matchpointe Internet Café 301 Market Drive, Emporia, VA

\*Southside Community College teaches computer classes

\*Tabernacle Church 418 Halifax Street, Petersburg, VA 23803

\*Good Sheperd Baptist Church, 2223 S. Crater RD, Petersburg, VA 23805

\*Dinwiddie Community Room 14010 Boydton Plank Rd, Dinwiddie, VA 23841

\*Starbucks 105 East Clover Drive, Emporia, VA 23847

#### **School Districts**

Greensville County Public Schools  
Dinwiddie County Public Schools  
Sussex County Public Schools  
Prince George Public Schools  
Surry County Public Schools  
Hopewell Public School  
Petersburg Public Schools  
Brunswick County Public Schools

#### **Requirement 2:**

The residents in parts of this region are the poorest in the state of Virginia. Sixty-seven percent of residents in this region do not have access to broadband and in some areas, there is no access to cellular service as well. There are also areas that have access to broadband, however the signals are not strong, therefore, they experience buffering and lag times in connection. In all areas it was identified that there was a large population of elderly who do not own computers, nor do they know how to use computers. It was also stated that many low income families do not own computers. Also, many residents in these areas do not have the transportation needed to visit locations to use computers, nor do they have cellular service in their homes.

#### **Requirement 3:**

Of the participants that participated in the surveys, seventy-four percent were females, eighteen percent were males and nine percent preferred not to answer. Eighty-nine percent were not of Hispanic origin and one percent were of Mexican, Mexican American, or Chicano descent, one percent were of Puerto Rican descent, one percent were of another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin and eight percent preferred not to answer. Thirty-two percent were white, fifty-nine percent were Black or African

American, one percent American Indian or Alaska Native, one percent Asian, one percent Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and ten percent preferred not to answer.

The surveyed participants' ages range and income data revealed that three-percent were between the ages of 18-24, eleven percent age 25-34, fourteen percent age 35-44, twenty-five percent age 45-54, twenty-one percent age 55-64, nineteen percent 65 and over and six percent preferred not to answer. Of the survey participants, fifty-eight percent of them work 40 or more hours a week, nine percent work 1-39 hours, one percent are not working but are looking for work and 1% are not working nor are they looking for employment. Three percent were students, nineteen percent are retired, six percent are disabled and not able to work, and four percent preferred not to answer. The income data collected from surveys showed that eleven percent of participants earn less than \$25,000 per year. Twenty percent earned \$25,000-\$49,999 a year, twenty-seven percent earn \$50,000 –\$99,999, sixteen percent earn \$100,000-\$149,000 a year, six percent earn \$150,000 or more a year, and twenty percent preferred not to answer. Three percent of survey participants have less than a high school education, sixteen percent have a high school diploma or GED, eighteen percent have some college education, eleven percent have earned an associate's degree, twenty-eight percent have earned a bachelor's degree, seventeen percent have earned a master's degree, three percent have earned a professional degree beyond a master's degree, and six percent preferred not to answer. The biggest barrier this region faces is no access to broadband or cellular service in a majority of the region.

## **Collaboration and Stakeholder Engagement**

### **Requirement 1:**

The Improvement Association is a Community Action Agency that services Emporia, Greenville, Sussex, Surry, Brunswick, and Dinwiddie. We began by distributing surveys to each office to distribute to the families that they serve daily. This included Head Start parents, Century 21 parents, Workforce Development Initiative families, Project Discovery families, CSBG/VHSP Block grant families, and Parents as Teachers program. In the areas that are not currently served by the Improvement Association surveys were sent to County Administrators, City Managers, Board of Supervisors Members, City Council Members, School Superintendents, Public Libraries, Churches, and Social Services Departments. We also participated in the National Night Out event to reach more of the covered population.

### **Requirement 2:**

The Improvement Association coordinated and hosted focus groups with the following organizations. Emporia Rotary Club, Crater District Agency on Aging Royal Baptist Church location, Guiding Light Family Services, and Petersburg Public Library (August 23).

### **Requirement 3:**

- Interview 1 Greenville County: This community member lives in an area that does not have internet services at all. During the pandemic, this community member states that she had to take her children in the afternoons, when she got off work, to the parking lot at the school so that her kids could access the internet to complete their schoolwork. She also states that she does have internet on her phone, however, it is not reliable due to unreliable phone services because she lives so far in the country.
- Interview 2 Sussex County: This community member states that they have internet services in their home, but it is unreliable and buffers a lot. They have tried to get another service but were told that no other service is available.

- Interview 3 city of Petersburg: This community member does not have internet service at all because they are on a fixed income and cannot afford the service. They proceeded to say even if they had the service they were incarcerated when they were younger and never learned how to use a computer.
- Interview 4 Surry County: This community member was an elderly gentleman who has never owned a computer and does not have internet services. He stated he is not interested because of his lack of knowledge on how to use or operate a computer or log on the internet.
- Interview 5 Dinwiddie County: This community member stated that she had internet service but that her cell service was bad.
- Interview 6 City of Emporia: This community member has internet service and does not have any issues using the computer. She states that she has internet in her home as well as on her phone and she uses them both with no problems. The only complaint that she made was that she wished she could find an internet service provider that was not so expensive.
- Interview 7 Prince George: This community member has internet service and states that her only issue is when a lot of people are on the internet it runs slow. When the internet begins to run slowly it also knocks her off the internet or it buffers for a long time. Her job has a work from home feature but because her internet is so unreliable and runs slowly, she cannot take advantage of this opportunity. During COVID she still had to go to work because of slow or unreliable internet.

## **Implementation**

### **Requirement 1:**

Implementation strategies will include the formation of a Broadband Committee or a Broadband office. One of the main functions of this committee or office would be regular advertisements in local papers, radio, social media, community organizations, local Social Services Departments, schools, and churches to inform community about current broadband locations, affordability programs, device programs, and classes. One of the key obstacles in broadband affordability as well as computer loaner programs was that people did not even know that those types of programs were available or how to access them. Therefore, the Committee will work with local community colleges, schools, workforce development centers and local agencies for the aging to offer free computer classes monthly for the elderly populations. Additionally, this would be effective in working with schools to offer parent workrooms that could be open year around where a staff member could be available to assist parents with learning basic computer skills. Parents would also complete any forms needed for their students electronically while they were there. Parents could also be taught how to access the schools parent portals to check student attendance and grades. In order to regularly evaluate and update these mechanisms committees could be created to evaluate how often these serves were being utilized. There is still a large number of residents who still do not have broadband or cellular signals in the communities in which they live.

**Requirement 2:**

The implementation strategies mentioned above will help to bridge the communication gap that currently exists. By using the local papers, radio, social media, community organizations, Social Services departments, schools, and churches, etc., we can reach a large demographic of people in a short period of time. In reaching many residents, word of mouth is one of the best avenues of communication. In addition to bridging the communication gap in working with our local community colleges, workforce development centers, schools, and local agencies for the aging we can continue to bridge the gap in helping community members that do not own or know how to work on a computer the resources they need to learn by hosting classes on a monthly or biweekly schedule. Residents who do not have access to broadband or cellular signals will work closely with local government in keeping them notified of when they can expect to have broadband access. A partnership may be developed with Verizon in identifying the areas that do not have cellular service and work on plans to install new cellular towers for better service; also, requiring broadband companies to roll out infrastructure on a timelier basis. Del. Tyler sponsored a bill to study using existing power lines to deploy broadband. We should take advantage of existing lines to reach more community members in rural areas.

**Requirement 3:**

The appointment or hiring of a broadband committee or office in the region, funded with federal and state dollars, will help bridge the gap between the community and local and state legislators. With this office or committee, it will help streamline communication. In streamlining communication, it will help us to be more effective in communication and reaching out to community partners. It will also give your community partners such as labor organizations, community-based organizations, workforce agencies, institutions of higher learning, and training providers more accurate information for quicker and more efficient services to communities.

**Requirement 4:**

This region would like to see one hundred percent coverage of broadband and cellular services within the first year and to develop a broadband committee or office that could be a direct link between the community, local and state legislators within the first six months. This committee or office would immediately start to identify organizations, businesses, churches, community-based organizations that are already providing services to the community. This committee would also after approximately three months of research, begin to share information with the local papers, radio, social media, community organizations, Social Services Departments, schools, and churches. There could be a monthly newsletter to share information and give contact information for community members to ask questions as needed. In the first year of implementation, develop relationships with schools and work on plans to implement parent rooms. Also, contact state and federal legislators to begin the implementation of funding in year two for state and federal funding. After year two, establish parent rooms and staff them within a year to help parents to have access to computers as well as aid those who do not know how to use a computer. The office or committee on broadband will implement curriculum and/or funding for organizations to provide community spaces so elderly and community members can learn to use a computer; Also, we may use that same curriculum to work with centers for the aging and our veterans on how to use a computer or helping them to obtain a computer and pay for internet services.

**Timeline:**

**January 1, 2024 – Open Regional Broadband office.** The Regional Broadband office would be the main hub between the state and local cities and counties.

**January 15, 2024-** begin to improve communication in newspapers, the radio and flyers advertising computer affordability programs as well as broadband affordability programs making the public aware of what is available to them.

**February 1, 2024 – Open local Broadband offices in each county and city to include:**

**Brunswick County  
City of Emporia  
City of Hopewell  
City of Petersburg  
Dinwiddie County  
Greensville County  
Prince George County  
Surry County  
Sussex County**

In these local offices they would be responsible for collecting local data to include but not limited to public locations that currently exist for internet access. They would also be responsible for letting the regional office know areas that continue not to have coverage. Work with the Regional Office to help to notify the public on when they can expect to have internet access or answer any questions that they may have. The local offices can also offer classes to teach organizations on how to administer classes at their own locations. This is also an area where people could apply for Broadband affordability programs and receive tablets through the Affordable Connectivity Tablet and phone program. This would also be the hub so that the community will know where they can go to use the internet, use the internet, or be aware of state and federal broadband initiatives.

**March 1, 2024 – Begin to work on partnerships with local schools, public libraries, community colleges.**

**April 1, 2024 – Identify all existing locations that offer public access to the internet. Also, identify churches, community organizations and non-profit organizations who would like to set up computer labs or teach computer classes at their locations.**

**June 1, 2024 – began to roll out community computer labs, internet cafés, and classes.**

**Requirement 5:**

The region plans to start the Broadband Committee or Broadband office to help with collaboration with key stakeholders in the region. With this office open and operating this will bridge the gap between regions and key stakeholders.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion we have learned that having good, reliable, and affordable broadband and cellular service are imperative to daily living. There is not an aspect in life now that does not depend on reliable broadband and cellular services to succeed. Every day we are learning that we need these basic services to fill our prescriptions, visit our doctors, attend school, and so many other basic things in life. During the pandemic, in this region, there were many families who did not have what they needed to conduct basic business for their families. Having a region that is one hundred percent covered with broadband

and cellular services are now a basic life necessity. Digital equity and equality must be looked at individually by region and not as an entire state. Rural localities often become overlooked when it comes to necessities in life. The large tax base is not there to sustain and support many programs and the formulas in which the state distributes funds are outdated per the most recent J Lark study. Having a region that consists of reliable internet and phone services will empower that region to be more competitive in Economic Development and Education. We must have better communication with our state offices so that information is received by all and not just some jurisdictions.