Digital Opportunity Access Amendments

Why Closing Digital Participation Divide in Utah Matters?
H.B. 385 | Chief Sponsor: Rep. Dailey-Provost

Refugee entrepreneurs learning digital tools to improve their businesses through a partnership between the Salt Lake City Public Library and the International Rescue Committee in Salt Lake City | Photo by Jeri Gravlin

Key Points

• Decisive state leadership on the digital divide is needed to achieve greater social and economic opportunity for Utah families.
• Available computer trainings, lower prices, and better coverage are the primary factors for increasing broadband adoption.
• Closing the digital participation gap enables cost savings by improving digital government, telehealth, and STEM education.

What is the Problem?

Closing the digital participation divide is critical for improving economic opportunity and increasing quality of life for Utah residents. The National Digital Inclusion Alliance has defined Digital Equity as a "condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for *full participation* in our society, democracy and economy." Full participation as access to essential services, employment, lifelong learning, and civic and socio-cultural participation. With emerging technologies creating a more digital world, new digital divides continue arising even as other divides close. Without a plan to resolve existing divides and proactively address future divides, the opportunity gap in Utah will threaten economic growth across the state.

One in seven Utah households do not have internet. While many of these individuals without ICTs or internet subscription may have online access at work, school, cafes, libraries, or friends' or neighbors' houses, internet access at home, along with larger device screens and keyboards, facilitates a greater range of opportunities such as filling out forms, taking online tests, creating resumes, learning to code, utilizing accessibility aids, or accessing website services not formatted for mobile phones. Even after individuals have home internet and device access, there remain necessary last-mile efforts to ensure vulnerable residents know how to fully participate in an online world. This includes empowering parents to better support their children's education by learning how to access their child's grades as well as receiving online communication from the school or teacher. In addition, connecting rural residents in need of specialized medical facilities to access telehealth services, and assisting farmers to more effectively manage crops and access broader selling markets. Basic digital literacy skills are paramount for Utah residents to effectively participate and stay safe in a fast-paced digital society.

Why the Market Won't Address Adoption?

Utah is a national leader in broadband infrastructure through a collaborative effort between the private and public sector. Currently, the Utah Broadband Advisory Council, which was formed in 2011, continues to facilitate statewide broadband planning that informs millions of dollars in annual federal and state subsidies to qualifying telecommunication companies that serve high-cost-per-capita areas including rural and tribal communities. Like infrastructure, broadband adoption in Utah will be unsuccessful unless leadership from the public sector and the private sector support this endeavor. While libraries, nonprofits, schools, corporate social responsibility programs, and other public and private organizations are addressing broadband adoption in their respective spheres, there is no organization in the state government that has responsibility or resources to assume a greater scope of this issue statewide. Additionally, there is no state-level strategy and leadership to provide additional coordination, organizational capacity-building efforts, and research and assessment. The state can fulfill an essential role that the market has not fully addressed to improve digital participation. Doing so will ensure efficient coordination and greater economies of scale in achieving broadband adoption and effective use.

Who is Affected Most by the Digital Divide?

+ In Utah, 1 in 7 families do not have an internet subscription.

+ More than 13% or 120,000 households in Utah do not have a desktop or laptop.

+ Those most affected include the state's most vulnerable, including rural, tribal, senior, disability, and refugee communities.

Greater Digital Participation Brings Cost Savings

The State of Utah is a nationally recognized leader in digital government with over 1,340 online government services. State agencies are already utilizing digital transformation tools to improve operational excellence through reducing costs, decreasing wait times, increasing employee productivity, and improving the quality of service provided to constituents. The Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute at the University of Utah found that by transitioning just nine transactions performed by the State of Utah to an online platform, the savings would be nearly $46,000,000 over five years. Greater savings will be delayed if governments across Utah continue spending funds for services, processes, and staff capacity to serve these unconnected populations. It is far more efficient to develop a strategy that invests resources in supporting residents in becoming and remaining connected. A coordinated effort today and a more agile, proactive strategy for the future will ensure every constituent- including those working in government- has internet and device access along with the commensurate skills to participate in digital government. This would save hundreds of millions in taxpayer dollars over the next decade and beyond, not including additional cost savings beyond the public sector, which benefit residents, businesses, faith-based organizations, nonprofits, and educational institutions across Utah. Realizing greater economic returns on the state's investment in broadband infrastructure, technology services, telehealth, and STEM education requires empowering unconnected residents with skills training, ongoing support, and ICT resources to more fully participate in a digital democracy.

How does Increasing Digital Literacy Skills Improve Digital Safety?

Digital safety is an important factor in one's level of online participation, including utilizing e-commerce, online banking, social media, or information communication technologies (ICT) that can pose threats to one's privacy and safety. In 2018, fraudsters stole from 1.3 million more victims than the previous year, stealing $16.8 billion from U.S. consumers, with online shopping presenting the greatest risk for fraud. Information and education opportunities need to be widely available to residents — especially for minors and members of vulnerable communities — about staying safe on the internet, including how to use public computers safely, share personal information online, protect against identity theft, and recognize scams or other criminal activities. This information must become effectively integrated into basic digital literacy curricula to ensure users feel and remain safe when online. Improving such training and raising better digital citizens will help protect residents, especially children, from serious threats today such as cyberbullying and sexual harassment. Ultimately, balancing greater digital participation while ensuring adequate privacy and safety requires improving digital literacy skills and training across communities in Utah.

Recommendations

1| *Create the Utah Office of Digital Opportunity inside the Utah Department of Heritage and Arts.* UDHA has:
   a. Institutional knowledge on engaging with vulnerable communities and delivering innovative partnerships
   b. Divisions with aligned goals such as the STEM Action Center, Utah State Library Division, and Utah Division of Indian Affairs.

2 | *Develop statewide plan that focuses on:*
   a. Three-year strategic plan that includes for key activities of office and focus areas for strategic public-private and cross-agency partnerships
   b. Research for sustainable funding mechanisms that enable greater investment from the private sector

Digital Opportunity Roadmap

State of Utah

Objective →	Inputs →	Intermediate Outcomes →	Outcomes →	Impact
Improve information technology capacity for all residents to participate in an increasingly digital world. This includes: Rural Residents Refugees Tribal Nations Seniors People with Disabilities Low-Income Families	Strategic Leadership & Coordination Public-Private Partnerships Local Capacity Building & Grants Research & Assessment	**Digital** ▢ 1. Access to Internet & Devices 2. Attitudes 3. Usage Patterns 4. Skills & Self-Efficacy	**Economic** 💰 5. Education 6. Employment 7. Entrepreneurship 8. Organizational & Personal Cost Savings **Health & Social** 👥 10. Healthy Lifestyles 11. Access to Public Services 12. Online & Physical Safety 13. Civic Participation 14. Communication	Full participation in our society, democracy, and economy, which is necessary for self-reliance, lifelong learning, and civic and socio-cultural participation.