

Bill Summary: Digital Equity Act of 2021

The purpose of the [Digital Equity Act of 2021](#) is to address the digital divide in U.S. communities, including immigrant communities that disproportionately have lower levels of [digital proficiency](#).

The Digital Equity Act requires measuring broadband availability and cost, and then expanding access to digital devices and digital training to underserved communities. This legislation, which was included in the [Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act](#) that was signed into law on November 15, 2021, will allocate \$2.75 billion in federal grant funding for digital equity over a five year period. Digital equity as defined in the Act is “the condition in which individuals and communities have the information technology capacity that is needed for full participation in the society and economy of the United States.”

In order to expand access to digital devices and training, the [Digital Equity Act](#) would require the Assistant Secretary for Communications and Information, who leads the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) at the Department of Commerce, to establish two new programs:

- 1) a State Digital Equity Capacity Grant Program that will provide for state planning and implementation grants to bolster digital equity throughout all fifty States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, and
- 2) a Digital Equity Competitive Grant Program that will allow the Assistant Secretary for Communications and Information to award grants to entities other than states to fund projects that are trying to achieve digital equity.

Background

The Digital Equity Act was originally introduced by Senator Patty Murray (D – Washington) in April of 2019, and was then reintroduced on June 10, 2021 by Senators Rob Portman (R-Ohio), and Angus King (I–Maine). In the House, Representative Jerry McNerney (D–California-09) introduced it on March 11, 2021. The Act in the House had two cosponsors, Representatives Yvette Clarke (D–New York-09) and Ritchie Torres (D–New York-15).

In a statement supporting the bill, Senator [Portman](#) said, “Too many Americans—especially in overlooked and underserved communities—lack access to broadband internet, negatively impacting the way they live and work. This bill aims to address these access gaps by encouraging the creation and implementation of comprehensive digital equity plans in all 50 states, DC, and Puerto Rico and supporting digital inclusion projects undertaken by groups, coalitions, and/or communities of interest.”

The Digital Equity Act of 2021 would:

- **Establish a State Digital Equity Capacity Grant Program**, which will bolster digital equity within the States, District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Under the Act, every State Digital Equity Plan is required to:
 - Identify all the digital equity related issues that the state population accesses; and
 - Outline the objectives that will ultimately be used to reach accessible broadband technology and internet, inclusivity of public resources, digital literacy, knowledge of online privacy and cybersecurity, and the accessibility of technological devices and IT support for those devices.

Additionally, the Digital Equity Act provides that each state governor selects one entity, or partnership between eligible entities, in the state to receive State Digital Equity Capacity Grant Program funding, create and execute the State Digital Equity Plan in the state, and allocate sub-grants to other entities supporting the plan, or any projects that bolster digital equity. Eligible administering [entities](#) [Sec. 4 (2) (A)-(H)] for a State include, but are not limited to, states themselves, state agencies, tribal entities, [community anchor institutions](#) other than schools, foundations, corporations, and [local educational agencies](#).

- **Establish a Digital Equity Competitive Grant Program**, which would support other entities' projects to achieve digital equity. The Act:
 - Requires that the Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Communications and Information consults with states in order to identify and receive recommendations for [groups](#) [Sec. 5 (2) (b) (1)-(8)], such as workforce development entities, not-for-profit foundations, corporations, non-school institutions, and tribal entities that would qualify for the grant.
 - Outlines the application process for groups to qualify for funding, including addressing the following:
 - An explanation of how the entity will use the funding to meet the overall objectives of the Act;
 - The timeframe in which the entity will use the funds awarded;
 - An explanation of why the group needs the funds requested; and
 - Justifications or evidence that would assure the Assistant Secretary that the group is capable of carrying out the entirety of the project.

Impact

For over 25 years, digital literacy has become an essential workforce development and employment skill in many industries. Many employers use the internet as the only option for job application and training. Digital literacy as defined in the [Digital Equity Act](#) itself is “the skills associated with using technology to enable users to find, evaluate, organize, create, and communicate information.”

Covid-19 has highlighted the importance of digital literacy, in that many organizations turned to remote meetings, conferences, and interpersonal communications platforms to conduct their business. Covid-19 has also highlighted the inequity of digital literacy among certain populations, with groups such as those with lower education levels, low-incomes, and certain immigrant populations falling further behind. Given our growing reliance on digital skills for job applications, online ordering, video teleconferencing, access to healthcare, and virtual workplaces, digital skills are now as fundamental as other basic job skills. This is true for workers in a wide range of occupations from hospitality to retail to high tech to healthcare and more.

The Digital Equity Act of 2021 will help address the digital gaps among certain population groups, including immigrant groups, allowing them to better contribute, and help level the playing field for everyone.

**Special thanks to Policy and Advocacy Intern Venoos Vahid for her work on this bill summary.*