



SOUTHEASTERN INDIANA REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION



REGIONAL DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN

March 2022



TABLE OF CONTENTS



02

Background

04

Current Conditions
Summary

08

SIRPC's Roadmap Towards
Digital Inclusion

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BACKGROUND

The Economic Development Administration (EDA) provided additional funding to University Centers across the country thanks to the CARES Act passed in March 2020. The objective was to leverage these university-based assets to help regions recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of this effort, the Purdue Center for Regional Development (PCRD) partnered with the Southeast Indiana Regional Planning Commission (SIRPC) to develop what may perhaps be the first regional digital inclusion plan in the state.

Digital exclusion is the number one threat to regional community and economic development. The economy and society continue to digitize at a rapid pace affecting workforce and economic development, community development, and quality of place. Therefore, the post-COVID world is more than likely to be even more digital compared to the pre-COVID world. For these reasons, regions that chart a course and are proactive as they work toward becoming digitally inclusive will have a competitive advantage over those that do not.

“

Digital Exclusion 

is the **#1 THREAT** to

Regional Community & Economic Development

”

While digital inclusion is many times framed around an equity and social justice issue, it can and should also be framed as an economic development issue. For this reason and for purposes of this effort, digital inclusion was defined as “ensuring everyone (children, seniors, minorities, small businesses, and workers to name a few) has access to affordable and adequate internet connectivity, reliable devices, sufficient digital skills and literacy, and customized support to prosper in the digital age.” In this definition, “everyone” is not only minorities and less advantaged groups, but also entrepreneurs, workers, residents, small businesses as well as nonprofits and local governments, among others, all attempting to adopt and use the technology in meaningful ways.

In addition, the National Digital Inclusion Alliance identifies three main digital inclusion components that are critical for any community to be digital inclusive:

- 1. Reliable and affordable connectivity**
- 2. Adequate devices**
- 3. Digital skills**

Note that while broadband connectivity comes to mind when talking about digital exclusion, the latter components are typically overlooked. This process ensured all three components were considered and included.

PCRD & SIRPC worked closely to draft a regional digital inclusion plan supported by a regional digital advisory team, or RDAT. The RDAT is composed of multiple regional stakeholders including economic developers, nonprofits, planning organizations and others. This group was officially launched in January 2021, has met frequently to draft this plan, and will provide support to the County Digital Ambassadors as it is implemented.

The RDAT, in partnership with PCRD, gathered and reviewed data related to digital inclusion in the region (including leveraging an older state of broadband report as well as an innovative individual digital readiness survey) over three “data” sessions. Next, the RDAT drafted a mission, goals, and strategies (including identifying champions, partners, and resources) in six “planning” sessions. Lastly, the RDAT fine-tuned the document through “live” feedback and gathering public input by leveraging digital platforms, finalized the document, and unveiled it. This process took a little more than a year.

“ In Dearborn County, we’re fortunate to have most of our households with some option for broadband internet service. But as I’ve gotten to learn about the concept of digital inclusion, it quickly became clear that there is more work to do around adequate devices, digital skills, and digital literacy. This plan will help position more of our citizens to thrive in the dawning information age.”

Mike Perleberg,
OneDearborn Executive Director



CURRENT CONDITIONS SUMMARY

This section discusses a summary of the current regional digital inclusion conditions. This summary utilized multiple data sources including the Federal Communication Commission (FCC), the U.S. Census Bureau, the Bureau of Economic Analysis, and an innovative individual digital readiness survey, among others. It also built on a previous state of broadband report conducted a couple of years ago.

Overall and according to the FCC, roughly 70% of housing units in the region had access to advertised 100/20 Mbps speeds as of December 2019. However, as shown in **Figure 1** on page 5 some counties are least served (orange areas) compared to others in the region. For example, roughly 95% of housing units in Dearborn County had access to 100/20 Mbps while less than 2% had access to this same speed in Ohio and Switzerland Counties.

<2% of housing units in
 Ohio &
 Switzerland
Counties
— have access to —
100/20 Mbps 
Internet Speeds

According to Microsoft and considering internet use at a minimum of 25 Mbps download, close to three-quarters of people in the region did not use the internet at this speed. Again, differences within the region emerge where 95% of Switzerland County's population did not use the internet at this speed compared to 63% of those in Dearborn County. In the end, however, actual speeds paint a different and contrasting picture compared to advertised availability.

Figure 2 (right) shows the share of children with a computer but no internet access in the region according to the Census Bureau at the Census tract level. Overall, 8.8% of children in the region had a computer but no internet access, with the percentage of children varying from 13.7% in Decatur County to 4.1% in Ohio County.

The share of digital economy jobs in the region decreased slightly between 2010 and 2019 from 13.9% to 13.7%. The state's share also decreased slightly from 15.7% to 15.5%. Jennings County had the highest share of digital economy jobs in the region with 18.4% as of 2019 compared to Ohio County with 8.7%. On the other hand, of all jobs whose digital skill levels were identified the region experienced a net increase between 2010 and 2019 of almost 8,300. Of these, 45% required low digital skills. In other words, more than half of new jobs in the region whose digital skills were identified over the past decade required middle to high digital skills.

Lastly and on average, there were 3.42 ventures or websites per 100 residents in the region compared to 2.31 in the state. Franklin County had the highest ventures in the region with 15.25 followed by Switzerland County. Ripley County on the other hand, had the lowest ventures in the region with 0.30. In addition to ventures, there are also highly active ventures (defined as better-built websites which include more links and traffic). On average,

Figure 1 Housing Units with no access to 100/20 Mbps
 Source: ACS 2015 - 2019; Form 477 December 2019v1

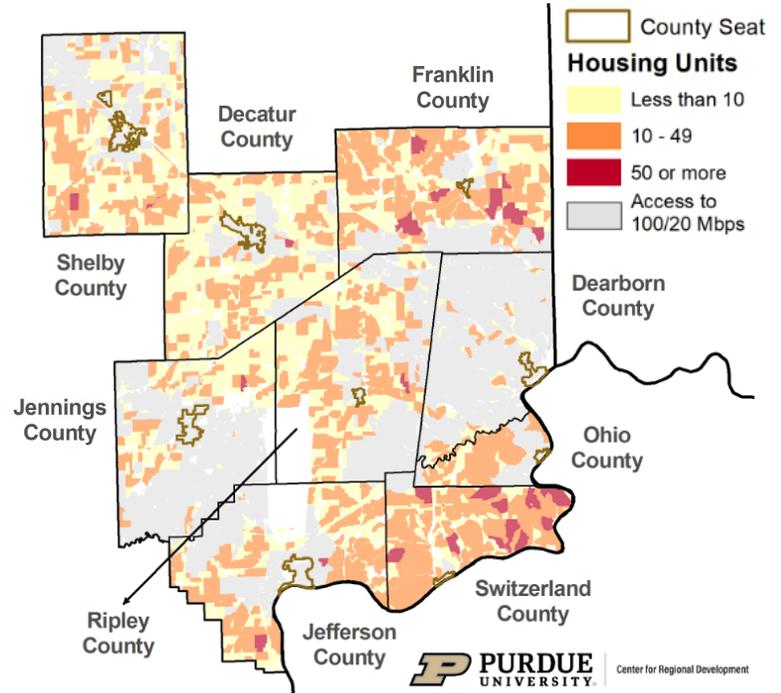
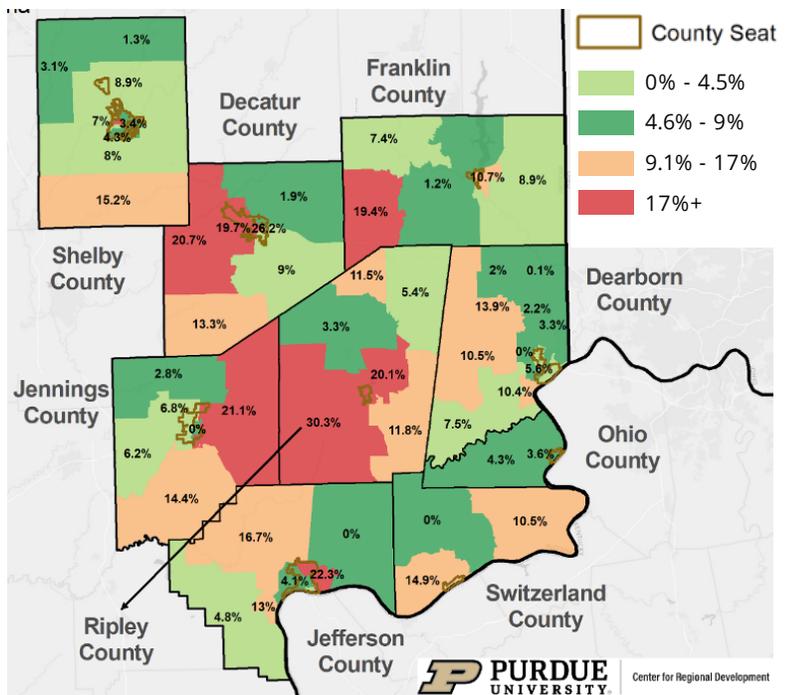


Figure 2 Under 18 Computer No Internet Access
 Source: ACS 2015 - 2019; Form 477 December 2019v1



there were 0.59 highly active ventures in the region compared to the state's 0.58. More websites per 100 residents correlate strongly with economic benefits.

To gather more detailed information, an innovative individual digital capital survey was conducted in the region as part of this regional planning process. A total of 1,636 valid responses were recorded. Results show that close to 85% of respondents subscribed to internet at home. The highest share of home internet technology was cable with 22.4% followed by 20.9% using DSL. A higher share of less educated and older residents subscribed to DSL, which in turn was the most unreliable technology (measured by downtime in days).

More than 90% of survey respondents owned a smartphone. Of these, less than 5% had access to mobile devices only (no desktops or laptops). However, close to three-quarters of these mobile-only users had a high school degree or less compared to less than 7% with a bachelor's degree or higher. On average, only one-quarter of respondents interacted online daily, weekly,

85% of 1,636 respondents 
SUBSCRIBED
to Home Internet

or monthly with more than half of community organizations listed (refer to survey report for more information). Those less educated or older interacted less frequently and with a smaller number of organizations. Lastly, close to 60% of respondents felt they were more productive due to internet and device use. Despite this, close to one-fifth needed help with new devices and one-quarter found it difficult to know whether online information was trustworthy.

“ This is monumental for Ohio County community and residents. We know how being left behind looks and feels. We missed the railway system and the highway system. We cannot possibly miss being part of the Broadband & Digital Inclusion. This is basically a life or death situation for our economic stability and our community as we know it.”

Amy King,
Ohio County Public Library

In conclusion, the region suffers from digital exclusion in multiple ways. First, there is a great contrast between the share of housing units with access to specific advertised speeds (100/20 Mbps) and the share of people in the region using the internet at the current minimum download broadband speed (25 Mbps). This is not unique to the region, but it does require additional efforts to validate availability throughout the region.

Second, levels of digital exclusion vary depending on variables and location. For example, the homework gap is greater in Decatur County compared to Ohio County. At the same time, however, Decatur County is more digitally inclusive compared to Ohio County in other measures.

Third, in addition to location, there are differences between regional groups that undermine digital

inclusion. Less educated and older residents experience and benefit from the internet differently compared to younger, more educated residents. In addition, many homes rely on inadequate technologies (e.g., DSL) that undermine the technology's benefits.

These digital inequalities affect businesses, organizations, residents, and workers alike and if not addressed, may place the region at a competitive disadvantage. The next section outlines a roadmap for the region to begin addressing these issues. To review the state of broadband report, the state of digital inclusion report, and/or the results from the survey please visit: <https://www.sirpc.org/digital-inclusion-plan>



I am honored to have worked directly with people in Dearborn and Ohio Counties since 1999 to increase digital literacy in our community. It is an amazing experience to teach an individual to use a mouse and empower them as they gain the confidence and skills to access digital resources that change their lives. Expanding and scaling up these individualized experiences is vital to achieving digital inclusion. To operationalize this plan and achieve the proposed goals requires increased community consciousness of the importance of inclusion, a detailed roadmap for transitioning individuals into digital life, and concrete methods of creating systemic changes to sustain these initiatives. Measuring digital inclusion success will need to look at individualized accomplishments as well as tangible changes manifested in our community.”

Dr. Angela E. Arndt,
Tech Literacy Services



SIRPC'S ROADMAP TOWARDS DIGITAL INCLUSION

This Regional Digital Advisory Team (RDAT) established a mission, goals, and strategies to begin addressing the digital inequalities identified while leveraging existing advantages discussed in the current conditions' summary section. Please note that while goals and strategies do not include a "due date," the plan was drafted to be implemented during the next five years.

While this plan operates at a regional level, the RDAT recognizes that accomplishing the goals and strategies will require local champions. Therefore, the implementation of this plan will be led by a coordinator who operates at the regional level alongside a digital inclusion fellow from the SIRPC. Each county in the region will be responsible for appointing a digital ambassador. These County Digital Ambassadors are the "boots on the ground" and serve as liaisons between communities in their counties and the regional entity. They will also be involved in establishing priorities, identifying funding, identifying and mobilizing local resources, conducting outreach/advocacy, and communicating constantly with the SIRPC.

Public input was gathered through an online form and informal discussions with community leaders, spearheaded by the county digital ambassadors. This feedback was analyzed, summarized, and incorporated into the plan. Finally, a coordinated online campaign was designed and implemented to release the plan.

Accomplishing
these **GOALS**
will require 
LOCAL CHAMPIONS

To create a regional environment where all southeast Indiana citizens and businesses thrive through connectivity and digital inclusion.

REGIONAL GOALS & STRATEGIES

GOAL #1

Build and upgrade affordable, scalable, and future proof broadband throughout the community and improve adoption.

- a. Work with providers to register for the Affordable Connectivity Program. On a continuing basis, monitor and encourage provider participation in new programs.
- b. Encourage and coordinate residents and businesses to apply for the Indiana Connectivity Program (ICP). This program bundles and puts out for bid eligible addresses for providers to extend service.
- c. Designate a regional broadband coordinator or task force under a regional entity to:
 - Streamline permitting throughout the region so that providers crossing county lines do not have to start from scratch
 - Monitor funding sources and eligibility criteria
 - Work closely with state Broadband Office
 - Obtain broadband ready designations for all counties in the region
 - Make communities aware of skin in the game requirements
 - Build trust and relationships with providers
 - Coordinate with digital fellows in the region
- d. Through multiple data sources, including word of mouth, identify broadband investment priority areas (BIPAs) in the region
- e. Release request for proposals for providers to invest in the BIPAs. RFPs and potential incentives to attract broadband investment need to be standardized across the region to avoid pitting one county against another
- f. Increase awareness and education among residents about technologies and subsidies
- g. Participate in statewide speed test crowdsourcing using the Farm Bureau platform

GOAL #2

Ensure all residents have reasonable access to quality, affordable, and reliable devices as well as a trusted technical support to maintain, upgrade, and use these devices.

- a. Identify businesses and organizations both within and outside the region that may be willing to donate functional and formatted devices including desktops, laptops, and tablets.
- b. Work with local schools and other nonprofits to launch a tech savvy volunteer corps (TSVC) made up of high-school students and adults in the region that can:
 - Reformat donated devices
 - Provide technical assistance
 - Help launch and/or coordinate peer support groups, especially among seniors
 - Provide digital literacy workshops

Regional TSVC should have county-level “chapters.” If possible, pair with community service requirements for high school students.

- c. Establish a device ownership program in partnership with community nonprofits. Device program should be administered by a local organization (e.g., library) and coordinated with donating businesses and organizations as well as the TSVC. Device can be given as a “prize” for completing specific digital literacy workshops. See PCs for People model.
- d. Partner with local nonprofits and senior-focused organizations (e.g., nursing homes) involved in the delivery of social programs to potentially identify community residents in need of devices and/or digital literacy workshops. Likewise, work closely with schools to identify families in need of devices as well.
- e. Launch an effort to attract tech retailers to the region.
- f. Research and secure grants and other sponsors to offer incentives to volunteers and help support the device program in the region.

GOAL #3

Provide a perpetual digital literacy ecosystem—multi-faceted across multiple technologies—offering support and equitable access to people of all ages and abilities for the region’s digital activities.

- a. Conduct a scan of the digital literacy/skills landscape in the region to learn who is doing what and identify gaps, areas to leverage.
- b. Augment existing state curricula and academic standards, or work directly with local school corporations, to enhance digital citizenship and media literacy in K-12 students; expand to include adults.
- c. Inventory community anchor institutions and other relevant organizations (e.g., libraries, bookstores, community colleges, churches, etc.) with access to fast internet and devices that are conducive to host digital literacy workshops and/or provide public access to devices and internet.
- d. Leverage TSVC to offer digital literacy workshops that augment existing programs (see strategy 2b).
- e. Develop digital literacy resources and/or programs for residents of all ages, ethnicities, and abilities and partner with organizations in the region to recruit, promote, and/or provide relevant workshops.
- f. Ensure digital literacy resources and programs are available online during working hours as well as in face-to-face locations.
- g. One-stop digital literacy website (phone number) for employers and residents.
- h. Secure funding to develop and implement digital literacy programming in the region.
- i. Digital fellow coordinating digital literacy/skills resources and programs throughout the region.

GOAL #4

Include connectivity, devices, and digital skills into local and regional community and economic development strategies through public private partnerships, coordination, and assessments resulting in a sustainable digital equity ecosystem.

- a. Regional digital-focused business incubator(s).
- b. Communicate with people why this is important; raise awareness and build support among government and businesses.
- c. Measure/identify metrics to determine effectiveness of this plan's strategies and inform use of time and resources; couple/pair with (d).
- d. Gather data from small businesses, entrepreneurs, and farmers around IT, digital workforce, reskilling, and digital transformation needs through local and regional business attraction, expansion, and retainment initiatives.
- e. Create regional catalog of gig workers; portfolio of employers in the region allowing or having remote workers.
- f. Work from home needs aside from connectivity: coworking space; lease office space to meet clients; good working from home environment.



It will be a lot of work with many moving parts, but I think that the plan is something that can, at the very least, produce good traction in the next 5 years.”

Judi Terpening,
Jefferson County Public Library Director



Office of the Purdue Center for Regional Development in West Lafayette



Center for Regional Development



PCRD seeks to pioneer new ideas and strategies that contribute to regional collaboration, innovation and prosperity. Founded in 2005, the Center partners with public, private, nonprofit and philanthropic organizations to identify and enhance the key drivers of innovation in regions across Indiana, the U.S. and beyond. These drivers include a vibrant and inclusive civic leadership, a commitment to collaboration, and the application of advanced data support systems to promote sound decision-making and the pursuit of economic development investments that build on the competitive assets of regions.



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