

NENEDD/SIMPCO Regional Digital Equity Plan

Northeast Nebraska Economic Development District & Siouxland Interstate Metropolitan Planning Council

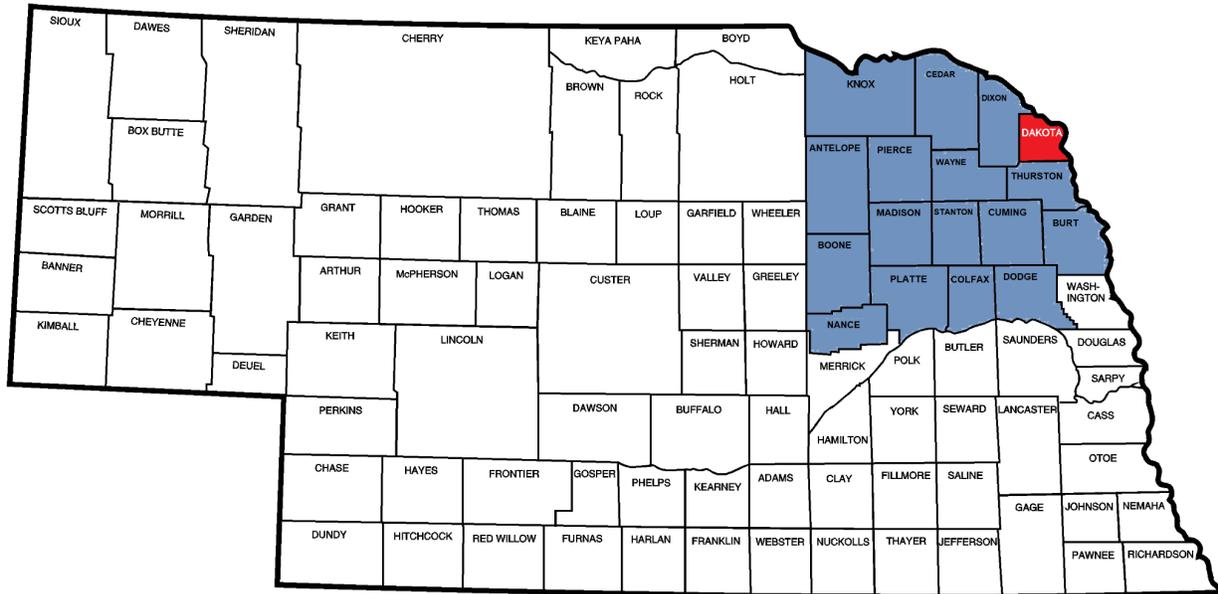


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Executive Summary

Overview

Digital access is an essential tool for residents as it assists communities in improving and expanding available resources while embracing technological advancements for the community. Economic development will prosper by building and sustaining community partnerships focused on growing digital equity and inclusion throughout the region as it reaches every aspect of life including education, healthcare, industry, and agriculture. Developing partnerships and advocating for all Nebraskans to have access to affordable, quality broadband, an appropriate device, and the skills to use technologies at home, school, the farm or ranch, businesses, healthcare, and government is essential to economic growth.

In January 2023, the Northeast Nebraska Digital Equity Planning Committee was created through a partnership with the Nebraska Information & Technology Commission, SIMPCO, and NENEDD. Regional stakeholders representing the populations of rural, aging, ethnic and racial minorities, language barriers, low to moderate income, veterans and disabilities were invited to discuss the needs of their represented communities. The participating stakeholders represent community organizations and industries, including educational institutions, healthcare and service providers, local governments, and economic development organizations. The NENEDD/SIMPCO Regional Digital Equity Plan was created with input and guidance from these stakeholders.

The purpose of the NENEDD/SIMPCO Regional Digital Equity Plan is to identify barriers to digital equity in the project area and implement strategies to remove these barriers. Included in the plan is an asset inventory, availability maps, cybersecurity planning guidelines and enrollment in the Affordable Connectivity Program by county.

Problem Statement

Services and access to broadband in larger cities have experienced growth across the region, but minimal growth is evidenced in broadband access to rural areas outside of city limits. The work to ensure each household has access to affordable, quality broadband has revealed new challenges that must be addressed to fully connect each resident. The primary concerns for the region after access include personal device access, digital literacy (specifically cybersecurity and online safety) and access to and knowledge of public resources to assist in the transition to a digital society. The NENEDD/SIMPCO Regional Digital Equity Plan provides an in-depth look at the challenges ahead for the region and strategies to address these concerns.

Regional Working Vision

The NENEDD/SIMPCO Region will see an increase in economic development through community partnerships focused on growing digital equity and inclusion throughout the region by ensuring that Northeast Nebraskans have access to affordable, quality broadband, an appropriate device, and the skills to use technologies at home, school, the farm or ranch, businesses, healthcare, and government.

Key Priorities

Through the pursuit of Digital Equity Capacity Grants and Digital Equity Competitive Grants, residents, governments and community anchor institutions (CAIs) can actively work to bridge the digital divide. Based on these key priorities, the NENEDD/SIMPCO Regional Digital Equity Planning Committee developed specific goals and strategies.

- 1) Rural access to digital literacy and technical support
- 2) Cybersecurity for all populations, promoted outside of work and school
- 3) Improve affordability of internet access, especially in rural areas
- 4) Digital literacy programs offered to an expanded number of cultures, languages, and abilities

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- 5) Increased public resources to provide and sustain digital services through
 - a) Sharing of resources among communities in the region
 - b) Increased accessibility to online trainings
 - 6) Increased promotion and awareness of public, digital resources
 - 7) Capitalize on existing partnerships for sustainable programming
 - 8) Identify an entity (or entities) to pursue available funding and address these issues while convening stakeholders to implement solutions

Conclusion

Future disbursement of Digital Equity Capacity Grants and Digital Equity Competitive Grants ensures the NENEDD/SIMPCO Regional communities and CAIs can be supported and work continued to bridge the digital divide. Based on these opportunities, this digital equity plan includes recommendations to achieve specific goals.

The NENEDD/SIMPCO Regional Digital Equity Plan outlines short-term and long-term strategies to address the challenges of the digital divide. In the short-term, by the end of 2026, the region must prioritize updates to current technology systems offered as public resources across various institutions. Ongoing strategizing with CAIs and local governments is necessary to maximize the use of funds available. Partnerships with community organizations and national nonprofits will increase the number of household devices available and provide navigation through digital literacy and cybersecurity training.

The long-term steps, with a goal date of 2030, include identification of permanent funding with support from community members to ensure stability in digital programming implemented in the region. The next steps prioritize maintaining growth in digital literacy, economic development, telehealth services, education, and government within each community.

Digital access is necessary to sustain and grow a community. Through implementation of the NENEDD/SIMPCO Regional Digital Equity Plan, the region will increase economic

development through established and new partnerships. With the assistance of federal and state funding, the region can ensure improvements in access to affordable broadband, devices compatible with the new economy, and the knowledge to use both to their fullest capability.

Regional Data and Covered Populations

Overview Data on Region and Covered Populations

SIMPCO

Established in 1965, the Siouxland Interstate Metropolitan Planning Council, or SIMPCO, is a council of governments serving a tri-state area including Nebraska, South Dakota, and Iowa. SIMPCO oversees the Economic Development District of Dakota County. As SIMPCO's sole Nebraska entity, Dakota County hosts a population of 21,582 as of the 2020 Decennial Census.¹ While Dakota County is included in the Sioux City, IA-NE-SD Metropolitan Statistical Area, only South Sioux City and Dakota City are located within the metropolitan area's urbanized boundary.² Rural communities in Dakota County include the villages of Emerson, Homer, Hubbard, and Jackson.

NENEDD

Designed initially as an economic development facilitator, Northeast Nebraska Economic Development District (NENEDD) started operations in 1977 to serve Northeast Nebraska. The NENEDD region included the counties of Antelope, Boone, Burt, Cedar, Colfax, Cuming, Dixon, Dodge, Knox, Madison, Nance, Pierce, Platte, Stanton, Thurston and Wayne. The total population of this region is 199,391 of which nearly 70,000 is concentrated in our three micropolitans Fremont, Columbus and Norfolk. Of the 117 communities in the NENEDD footprint, 110 have a population less than 2,500.

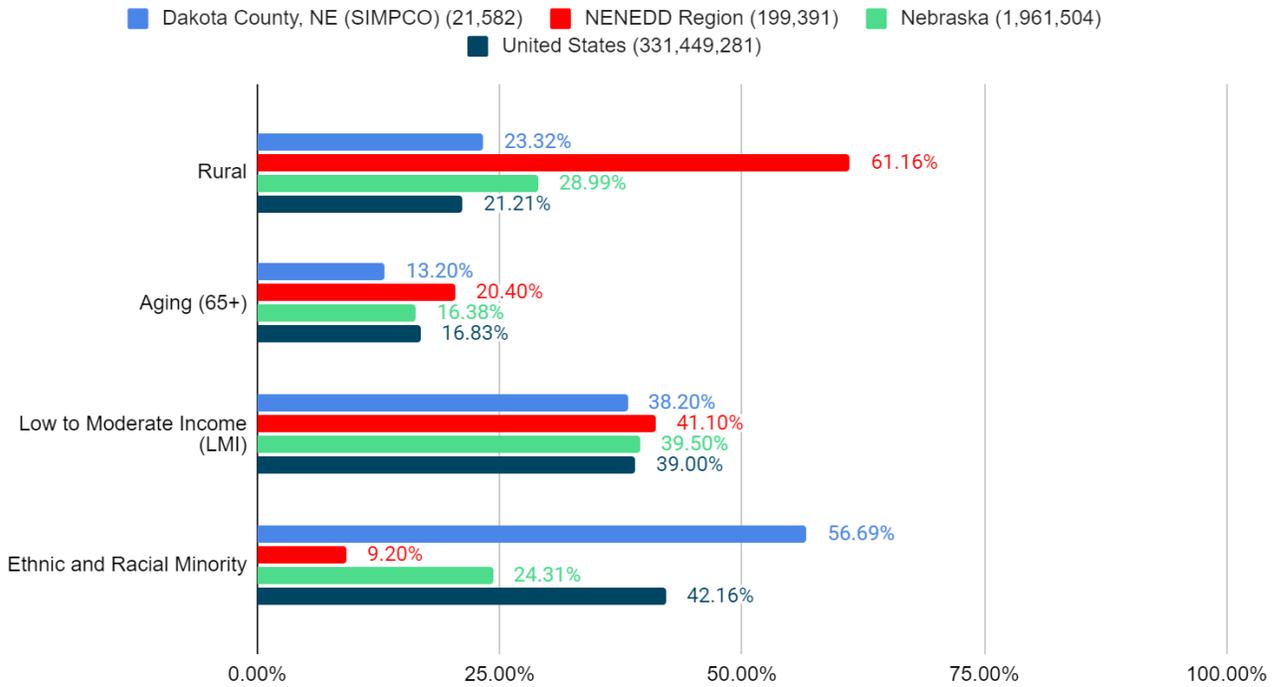
The following chart depicts a comparison of the prioritized population groups, by percentage, in Dakota County and the NENEDD region compared to the state of Nebraska and the United States. Per an article from the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City,

¹ Source for 2020 Decennial Census data retrieved from: <<https://data.census.gov>>

² Information retrieved from SIMPCO's website; <www.simpco.org>

households are classified as low-to-moderate income (LMI) for the Priority Populations chart if their reported family income was less than \$50,000, which approximates 80% of the District median income.³

Priority Populations



Key takeaways from the data comparison for Dakota County include the following:

- Of Dakota County's residents, 23.32% are classified as rural indicating residence outside the corporate limits of both South Sioux City and Dakota City. This figure is slightly higher than the national percentage (21.21%) but smaller than Nebraska's percentage (28.99%).
- Population aged 65 years or older is at 13.25%, showing below the rates in both Nebraska (16.38%) and the United States (16.83%).

³ Source for LMI calculations:

<<https://www.kansascityfed.org/surveys/low-and-moderate-income-economic-conditions/lmi-economic-conditions-in-the-tenth-district-fall-2021/>>

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- Low-to-Moderate Income (LMI) household percentages are nearly equal across all three jurisdictional levels ranging around 39%.
 - More than half of Dakota County's residents identify within an ethnic and/or racial minority (56.69%). Nebraska, in contrast, only has 24.31% of its population within the same category.

Key takeaways from the data comparison for the NENEDD Region include the following:

- 61.16% of the NENEDD Region residents are classified as rural, meaning that they reside outside of the micropolitans of Columbus, Fremont and Norfolk. This figure is much higher than both the national (21.21%) and Nebraska (28.99%) percentages.
- 20.41% of the region's population is aged 65 years or older, which is a higher portion of the population than Nebraska (16.38%) and the United States (16.83%).
- Low-to-Moderate Income (LMI) household percentages are nearly equal across all three political entities, with all three figures hovering around 39-41%.
- Less than 10% of the region's residents identify within an ethnic and/or racial minority (9.2%). Nebraska, in contrast, only has 24.31% of its population within the same category while the national percentage is 42.16.

Each population prioritized by the National Technology Information Administration (NTIA) is represented in the region, but the main issues for the majority of the population is the lack of available and potentially new resources for racial and ethnic minorities, as well as a financial barrier to access for low-to-moderate income households. Upon completing the asset inventory, the NENEDD/SIMPCO Digital Equity Planning Committee identified four populations most in need of resources through the Digital Equity Act:

- Rural Residents (significantly impactful for NENEDD's area of representation)
- Aging Individuals
- Low-to-Moderate Income
- Racial and Ethnic Minorities (significant for Dakota County)

Dakota County has a unique strength in its geographic location at the junction of three states (Nebraska, Iowa, and South Dakota). A significant portion of Dakota County's residents travel across the Missouri River to Sioux City to work, shop, and utilize services provided by out-of-state entities. Additionally, while distance is not as prevalent of an issue for rural residents in Dakota County, there is a pronounced lack of internet service provider (ISP) availability outside of South Sioux City's municipal boundary. Additionally, as Dakota County's population continues to diversify in welcoming residents of all backgrounds, the need for multilingual and culturally sensitive programs and services becomes increasingly important. Each county and region has unique strengths and challenges, but the combination of each of the four targeted populations presents additional challenges that require unique consideration.

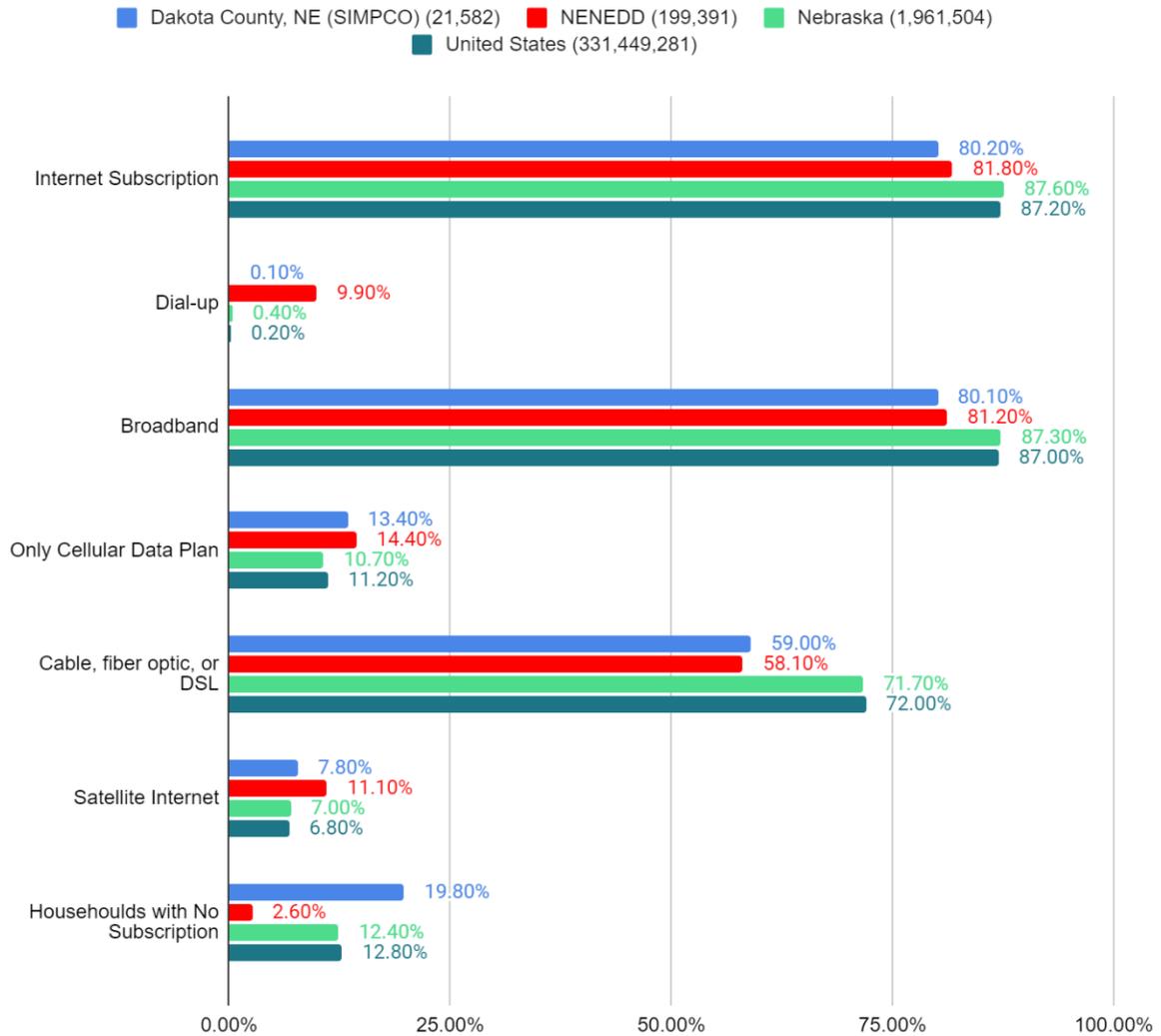
Broadband Availability and Overview

Limited access to reliable service is the main barrier to digital equity for rural residents in the NENEDD/SIMPCO Region. For many residents outside of South Sioux City, Dakota City, Columbus, Fremont and Norfolk the only options for broadband access are from mobile or satellite providers, both of which are more susceptible to service disruption during inclement weather. Additionally, Dakota County's terrain makes fiber optic installation more difficult and costly, which ultimately increases prices for rural consumers. The Committee gives preference to fiber optic deployment to ensure the region's transition to a digitally driven economy through the future-proof infrastructure of broadband fiber optic. The Committee, NENEDD, and SIMPCO support the process of hanging fiber optic cables from the existing electrical pole infrastructure, where possible, to expedite deployment and minimize costs of expansion.

The region is made up of all eight priority populations; yet the main barrier of digital equity for each population is the lack of affordability to access high speed internet. The current cost to build out broadband infrastructure is a heavy burden on the communities and

internet service providers in the region and yet a crucial task to ensure each person can fully participate in a modern society.

Types of Connections by Households



The ACS 2021 data shows concerning statistics in the SIMPCO Region , specifically relating to the percentage of households with internet subscriptions in the region in comparison to Nebraska and the United States. Dakota County has a higher than average percentage of households with no internet subscription (19.8%). Furthermore, among households that do have internet subscriptions, a larger than average percentage of households rely on having

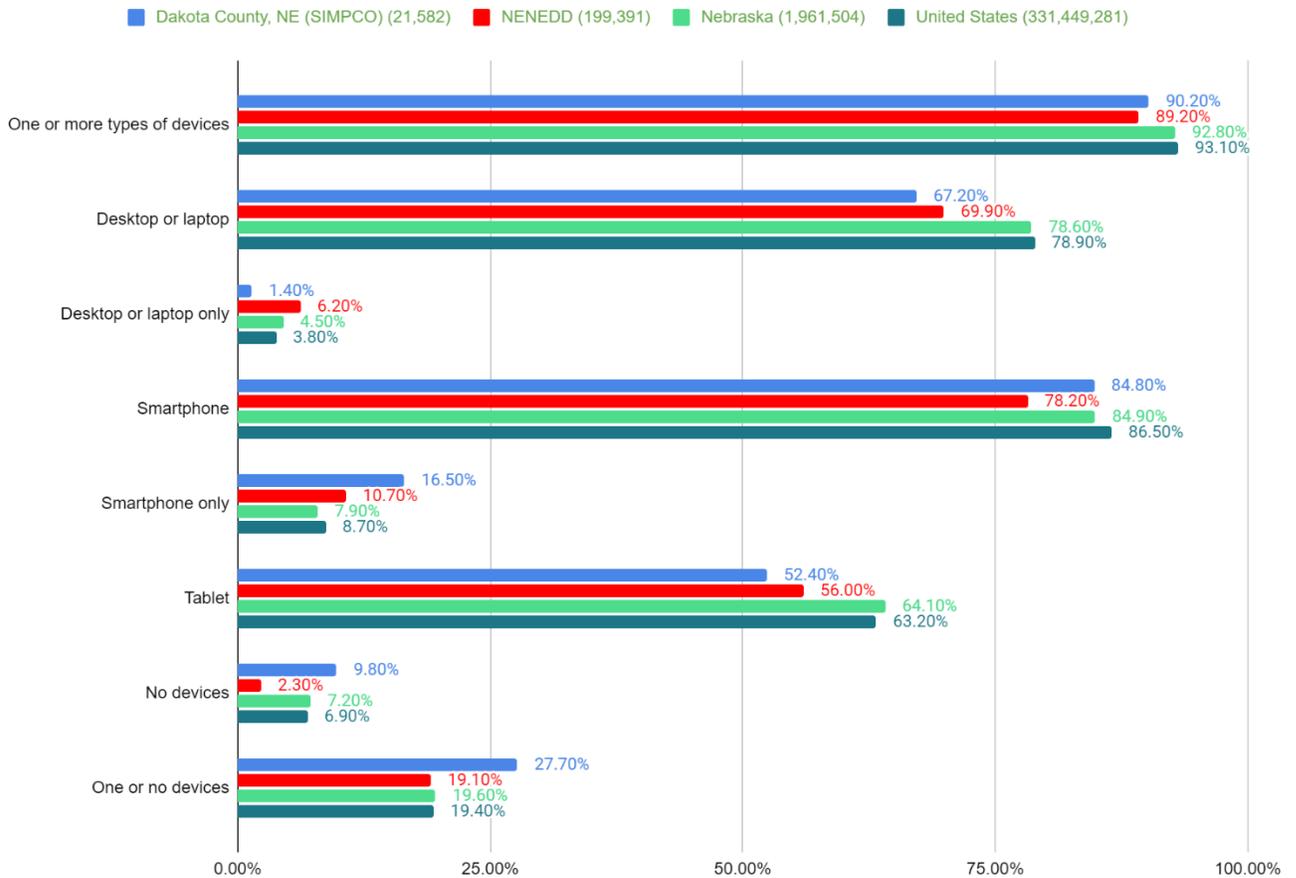
only cellular data plans to connect to the internet (13.4%). Broadband (80.1%) and cable, fiber optic, or DSL (59.0%) subscription rates are also significantly lower than the state and national averages.

The ACS 2021 data shows average statistics in the NENEDD Region when compared to Nebraska and the United States. The number of households in the NENEDD Region with cable, fiber optic or DSL is slightly lower (58.1%) than Nebraska and the United States, as is the number of households with no internet subscription (2.60%). As is the case in Dakota County, among households that do have internet subscriptions, a larger than average percentage of households rely on having only cellular data plans to connect to the internet (14.4%). Broadband (81.2%) and cable, fiber optic, or DSL (58.1%) subscription rates are also significantly lower than the state and national averages.

Device Availability and Affordability

Despite advancements in technology and device availability, both continue to be an ongoing challenge for Northeast Nebraskans. There are limited storefronts located in the region to purchase a device in-person. Residents outside of Columbus, Fremont, and Norfolk often have to drive outside of their respective regions (for most Dakota County residents out-of-state) to purchase devices. Additionally, for the 40 percent of Northeast Nebraskans who are part of low-to-moderate income households, the cost to purchase a brand new device may be insurmountable. While distance may not present as great of an issue for many residents to purchase new devices, there are still barriers to access for folks who may not have personal transportation, particularly among aging residents. The option of purchasing a device through a regional internet service provider is extremely limited for low-to-moderate income households, as there is a lack of data to identify whether any of the region's providers offer this option through the Affordable Connectivity Program.

Computer(s) in Household



The ACS 2021 data shows that Dakota County is comparable to Nebraska and the United States in having one or more types of computing device, as well as having a smartphone. However, there are significant differences in each of the other categories. The most extreme data variance is “smartphone only”, in which Dakota County (16.5%) has more than double the percentage of Nebraska households (7.9%) that only have a smartphone for computing purposes. Another alarming statistic is that 9.8% of Dakota County households do not have a computing device. Furthermore, nearly 18% of Dakota County households only have one device for computing purposes. The issue of device access and affordability becomes an even larger barrier for individuals with disabilities. This population may require

specialized technology to assist their disability; examples of this include light control, sound control, specialized keyboards and accessories, dictation or talk-to-text features, software to read text aloud, and other tools. The specialization of the device is often not available at standard retail store locations, and the potential cost for each modification makes the devices even more cost prohibitive.

The ACS 2021 data shows that the NENEDD Region is comparable to Nebraska and the United States in most categories. The percentage of the region with no device is extremely low (2.3%). Having one or more types of computing device, as well as having a smartphone was lower in the NENEDD Region than in Dakota County, Nebraska and the United States.

Digital Literacy

Limited access to resources and training materials prevent the region from achieving improved digital skills. For low-to-moderate income populations, multilingual populations, and rural populations, access to digital literacy courses is scarce. While educational institutions and many workplaces provide in-house training, these trainings are limited. The overall lack of resources has a high impact on the community.

Northeast Community College has four campuses (South Sioux City, Norfolk, O'Neill, West Point) in the NENEDD/SIMPCO planning area that provide post-secondary educational opportunities for the region's residents. Additionally, while there are many libraries in the NENEDD/SIMPCO regions, the rural libraries outside of South Sioux City, Columbus, Fremont and Norfolk face additional challenges related to staffing, lack of funding, lack of capacity, and a lack of specialized training for digital literacy. These challenges, in turn, stifle the ability to educate rural residents on digital literacy.

The typical hours of operation of rural libraries may not meet the needs of all community members. Providing additional resources to the organizations already established in the community to expand hours and availability of services would improve residents' access to furthering technology skills and workforce development potential. As communities attract

new residents and businesses, it is important that each community has resources in place to provide digital training and support. Having a digitally engaged community is also beneficial to potential businesses. For the counties with a predominantly low-to-moderate income population, the implementation of digital resources could result in the increase of investments from businesses and job growth. Addressing the current and growing representation of residents speaking languages other than English in the planning area, digital literacy training sessions will need to be adapted and provided in a variety of languages, removing the language barrier from the hiring process. While funding is available, communities should take advantage of the opportunity to build up digital resources that will be vital in the future. Implementing such tools sooner rather than later enables communities to have a process in place that can be expanded to accommodate languages not yet considered in translation services.

Privacy and Security

As Nebraskans begin to see an increase in broadband access and digital resources, it is critical to ensure the digital security and safety of Nebraskans. The local governments in the NENEDD/SIMPCO Region should update equipment and publicly available resources to reflect the standards for 2023. Updating public resources will assure community members that the government website is secure and a reliable source of information. These public resources would be protected from cybersecurity threats that could endanger community assets such as theft of sensitive information, disruption of services, and financial losses. Local governments can serve as a resource for internet safety by sharing resources and offering community wide training sessions to increase the knowledge of cyber safety. One unique method would be implementing alerts to cybercrimes through the local Emergency Messaging Services as applicable. Through sharing of information and resources, community anchor institutions (CAIs) and local governments can identify the best way to protect their information and their community members while ensuring the public is served without interruption.

Online Accessibility and Inclusivity

Creating a fully inclusive broadband network is more than connections, device distribution, and technical training. For those three pieces to work, the information about each must be accessible to all potential users. In terms of the NENEDD/SIMPCO planning area, this means multi-lingual as well as adaptive accommodations for various physical disabilities. With the expansion of quality and affordable internet access, more individuals will be given the opportunity to fully participate in the digital economy. The resources to assist individuals in learning techniques, skills, and security prevention methods are often not available to individuals with specific needs. The NENEDD/SIMPCO Region is seeing an increase of households that speak limited English or have a language barrier and individuals who have a disability that prevents them from fully participating online. According to U.S. Census data from 2021, 21.7% of the households in Dakota County and 7.9% of the households in the NENEDD Region spoke English less than “very well”. Multiple languages aside from English are spoken by residents in the NENEDD/SIMPCO regions residents, the most common of which is Spanish. Meanwhile, 10.9% of the NENEDD/SIMPCO Region population experience some type of disability that may prevent them from using the resources already established in their community or to fully engage online. The Disability Employment Center estimates 28%⁴ of the 110,000 individuals with disabilities in Nebraska are actively looking for work as of 2021. Updating information to be inclusive and accessible is crucial to creating a fully engaged state and local workforce.

⁴ <https://aoddisabilityemploymentcenter.com/state/Nebraska/>

Asset Inventory

Community Assets - *Refer to Appendix*

Libraries

Libraries are a necessary resource for the NENEDD/SIMPCO Region. The local library serves as a community anchor institution by providing entertainment, resources to expand education and learning, a shared community space, and so much more. However, for communities with populations of 5,000 or less, the local libraries have struggled to maintain capacity and funding in an ever-evolving digital world.

The SIMPCO Region has four libraries, serving four communities. Each has provided responses to the Nebraska Library Commission Technology Survey from 2021. Each library provides public internet access and public devices. The quality of these resources varies from each community:

- One library receives internet through a fiber optic connection
- The other three libraries rely on fixed wireless, cable, or DSL connections

The NENEDD Region has 57 libraries serving a multitude of communities in the area. All 57 of these libraries provided responses to the Nebraska Library Commission Technology Survey from 2021. Fifty-five of the libraries provide public internet access and public devices. The quality of these resources varies from each community:

- Twenty-two libraries receive internet through a fiber optic connection
- The other thirty-three libraries rely on fixed wireless, cable, or DSL connections

Libraries are also experiencing a lack of resources to hire extra staff for expanded hours and to provide resources regarding digital literacy and/or cybersecurity.

Senior Centers

Dakota County has one senior center, located in South Sioux City. This senior center, which operates under the name “Northeast Nebraska Senior Citizens Center”, recently reopened after an extended closure to renovate the building. In contrast, there are 43 senior centers throughout the 16 counties of the NENEDD Region. It is unclear whether the senior centers offer Wi-Fi, computers, or any digital-themed programming to attendees. These locations have the potential to be an ideal resource for digital equity if given guidance and the personnel resources on how best to prepare and/or assist their patrons with new technology.

Gap Analysis

Over the course of two months, NENEDD/SIMPCO facilitated the completion of the Northeast Region's Gap Analysis. The Committee reviewed each Community Need for each of the 4 respective populations:

- availability and affordability of fixed and wireless broadband,
- availability and affordability of consumer devices and technical support,
- digital literacy, awareness and use of online privacy and security, and
- accessibility and inclusivity of public resources.

Using the information from the completed Asset Inventory, each Need was given a score of Satisfactory, Needs Improvement, Unsatisfactory, or Not Present through small group discussion and consensus. NENEDD/SIMPCO staff then quantified these rankings to calculate average scores for each ranked category, using the following metric:

- Satisfactory rankings received a point value of 5
- Needs Improvement rankings received a point value of 3
- Unsatisfactory rankings received a point value of 1
- Not Present rankings received a point value of 0

The chart on the next page reflects the Committee's assessments.

	<u>Availability & Affordability of Fixed & Wireless Broadband</u>	<u>Availability & Affordability of Consumer Devices & Technical Support</u>	<u>Digital Literacy</u>	<u>Awareness & Use of Online Privacy & Security</u>	<u>Accessibility & Inclusivity of Public Resources</u>
Rural Residents - Mobile	3.29 (NI)	3.29 (NI)	2.71 (U/NI)	3.00 (NI)	3.00 (NI)
Rural Residents - Broadband	2.67 (U/NI)	3.33 (NI)	3.29 (NI)	2.43 (U/NI)	2.71 (U/NI)
Aging Citizens (60+) - Mobile	3.00 (NI)	2.67 (U/NI)	2.43 (U/NI)	2.43 (U/NI)	2.14 (U/NI)
Aging Citizens (60+) - Broadband	3.00 (NI)	2.00 (U)	2.43 (U/NI)	2.43 (U/NI)	2.43 (U/NI)
LMI Households - Mobile	4.00 (S)	3.33 (NI)	3.57 (NI)	3.29 (NI)	3.57 (NI)
LMI Households - Broadband	3.00 (NI)	3.33 (NI)	3.00 (NI)	2.71 (U/NI)	3.00 (NI)
Ethnic & Racial Minorities - Mobile	4.00 (S)	2.67 (U/NI)	3.00 (NI)	3.00 (NI)	2.67 (U/NI)
Ethnic & Racial Minorities - Broadband	4.00 (S)	2.67 (U/NI)	3.00 (NI)	2.71 (U/NI)	2.43 (U/NI)

Goals and Strategies

The Northeast Nebraska Digital Equity Planning Committee has identified the top four goals for the region. To ensure each goal can be supported with short-term and long-term funding, each goal has been matched with the appropriate funding source from both Federal and State entities.

Federal Funding Sources

Icon	Federal Program
	IIJA* – Broadband Equity Access and Deployment (BEAD): \$210M ⁵
	IIJA* - State Digital Equity Act (DE): \$21M
	IIJA*- Enabling Middle Mile (EMM): \$5M -100M
	USDA** - ReConnect: \$300M

* Infrastructure, Investment, and Jobs Act (IIJA) funding is managed by the National Telecommunication and Information Administration (NTIA)

** United States Department of Agriculture

State Funding Sources

Icon	State Program
	Nebraska Broadband Bridge Program (NBBP): \$5M
	Affordable Connectivity Program Outreach Grant: \$500K

⁵ ACA Connects, “BEAD Program: A Framework to Allocate Funding for Broadband Availability”, Feb. 2, 2023.

List of Region-wide Goals

Goal One

Goal One: Increase the number of households in the NENEDD/SIMPCO Region with affordable access to internet service speeds of 100 Mbps/100 Mbps by 9,000 households.

	 BEAD	 DE	 EMM	 ReConnect	 NBBP
Funding Source	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Timeframe	2025-2027	2023-2028	2024-2026	2024-2028	2024

Strategies 1.1: Increase the percent of households with access to affordable, quality broadband service available

Baseline: 11,060 (NENEDD) & 1,346 (SIMPCO) households without an internet connection⁶

Activities:

1. Define “affordable” as \$50 per month before the Affordable Connectivity Program
2. Prioritize broadband infrastructure for locations outside of municipalities
3. Facilitate workshops to assist public entities and private Internet Service Providers to create working agreements including match funding for grant applications, negotiate shared resources, and identify best practices
4. Capitalize on existing public-private partnerships to assist in broadband infrastructure build out
5. Connect county commissioners and county supervisors with appropriate stakeholders to identify areas with limited broadband access using Nebraska Broadband Mapping Project, Federal Communication Commission Map, and the USDA ReConnect map

⁶ ACS 5-year 2021 Table B28002

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6. Identify Broadband Investment Priority Areas (BIPAs) for the region in partnership with community leaders

Key Performance Indicators:

1. 11% decrease in the number of households without access to affordable, quality broadband service
2. Increase in the number of applications for broadband funding approved by the Nebraska Public Service Commission and/or Nebraska Broadband Office
3. Three regional stakeholder meetings to identify and address regional priorities by 2026

Strategy 1.2: Increase the percent of households in the NENEDD/SIMPCO Region with a broadband subscription to match the number of households with access to internet service

Baseline: 2,222 (NENEDD) & 85 (SIMCPO) households with access to internet, but with no subscription⁷

Activities:

1. Encourage the expansion of broadband infrastructure to provide quality internet connection to households currently designated as unserved or underserved
2. Showcase the importance of home internet through schools, libraries, senior centers, and workforce development for work from home, education, and quality of life opportunities

Key Performance Indicators:

1. 15% decrease in the number households with no broadband subscription by 2028

⁷ ACS 5-year 2021 Table B28002

Strategy 1.3: Increase the percent of eligible households enrolled in the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP)

Baseline: Dakota County (SIMPCO), 333 households enrolled⁸ and NENEDD 6,065 households enrolled

Activities:

1. Media campaigns to promote awareness of ACP
2. Collaboration with libraries and senior centers to host enrollment days for ACP
3. Digital Navigator trainings to provide assistance to eligible households in applying and enrolling in ACP

Key Performance Indicators:

1. 10% increase in the number of households enrolled in ACP by 2024 (current federal funding set to expire in 2024)

⁸ <https://www.usac.org/about/affordable-connectivity-program/acp-enrollment-and-claims-tracker/>, and ACS 5-year 2021 Table S1702 (number of families under 200% of poverty level)

Goal Two

Goal Two: Improve the technology skills of Northeast Nebraskans including furthering the development of the skilled workforce

	 BEAD	 DE	 EMM	 ReConnect	 NBBP
Funding Source		✓			
Timeframe	2025-2027	2023-2028	2024-2026	2024-2028	2024

Strategy 2.1: Increase the financial and technical support for local libraries to encourage the implementation of digital literacy courses and updated devices

Baseline: There are four libraries with organized digital literacy classes in the NENEDD regions and zero scheduled, library-based offerings in Dakota County (SIMPCO), all other libraries with resources provide informal digital literacy support⁹.

Activities:

1. Assist local libraries in identifying funding opportunities to pay for:
 - a. The yearly fee for North Star Digital Literacy Programs, or similar program, to track digital skills trainings
 - b. Computers and software, current within 4 years, for public use and ongoing maintenance and tech support
2. Encourage and support local libraries to translate public resources into languages spoken by at least 5% of the population of their community

Key Performance Indicators:

1. 100% of libraries participate in North Star Digital Literacy Programs, or similar program, including a score database
2. 75% of public libraries in region have updated computers and software

⁹ Asset Inventory

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3. Digital Literacy trainings offered in English, Spanish, and/or other language(s) proportional to the population of the county
 4. 75% of libraries have access to ongoing maintenance and tech support

Strategy 2.2: Increase public resources to allow for digital literacy certification testing such as North Star Digital Literacy Assessment

Baseline: 10 free digital literacy courses offered twice per year

Activities:

1. Encourage community organizations to subscribe to digital literacy training software
2. Encourage higher education facilities to provide more frequent, hands-on digital literacy courses to community members and students
3. Update devices at Community Anchor Institutions (CAIs) for public use

Key Performance Indicators:

1. Implement tracking of digital literacy skills outside of public education
2. Average of 50% passing rate using the standardized digital literacy courses
3. 75% of public libraries have computers and software that are no more than 4 years old

Strategy 2.3: Encourage and assist senior centers and community facilities to develop partnerships to provide device access and trainings in digital literacy and cybersecurity trainings, and device access

Baseline: No known digital literacy courses offered by the senior centers in the region

Activities:

-
1. Assist senior centers to identify funding opportunities to pay for:
 - a. Yearly fee for North Star Digital Literacy programs to track skill trainings
 - b. Computers and software, current within 4 years, for public use
 2. Facilitate collaboration with libraries and schools to encourage populations of 65+ to participate in digital literacy trainings

Key Performance Indicators:

1. 100% of senior centers participate in North Star Digital Literacy Programs including the tracking component
2. 100% of senior centers have at least 2 computers and software that are no more than 4 years old for public use
3. Increase in digital literacy trainings focused on older populations

Strategy 2.4: Encourage educational institutions to provide digital literacy classes and “take home” resources to expand digital skills and familiarity with devices in the household

Baseline: Several digital literacy courses offered annually by Northeast Community College in Norfolk, with some outreach to South Sioux City’s branch location.

Activities:

1. Encourage higher education facilities to provide more frequent, hands-on digital literacy courses to community members and students
2. Assist educational institutions to find funding and incorporate support for new after school programs that support digital literacy and technical skills
3. Encourage existing, technology education organizations to expand to the region and in rural communities

Key Performance Indicators:

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1. Four digital literacy classes offered annually in Dakota County, Columbus, Fremont, Norfolk
 2. Four school districts in the NENEDD/SIMPCO region adopts an after school digital literacy program for grades 5-12

Strategy 2.5: Decrease the percentage of households in NENEDD/SIMPCO Region with no internet connected devices

Baseline: 1,734 (NENEDD) & 707 (SIMPCO) households in the region have no internet connected device

Activities:

1. Capitalize on existing partnerships with CAIs to host device distribution drives
2. Encourage new partnerships between CAIs and national nonprofits focused on providing affordable devices
3. Work with private internet service providers to enroll in the ACP device stipend (currently \$100)
4. Encourage the development of new partnerships to increase the number of entities offering device trade-in and repair in rural areas

Key Performance Indicators:

1. 5% increase in ownership of internet connected devices by 2026
 - a. Note: 90.21% ownership rate as of 2021 ACS 5-year estimates
2. 5 device distribution drives across the region by 2026
3. 50% of ISPs in the region enrolled in the ACP stipend program by 2026
4. 3% increase in repair shops and/or mobile services by 2026

Strategy 2.6: Decrease the percent of households in the NENEDD/SIMPCO Region with a smartphone only

Baseline: 8,439 (NENEDD) & 1,192 (SIMPCO) households have only a smartphone as an internet connected device.¹⁰

Activities:

1. Capitalize on existing partnerships with CAIs to host device drives
2. Connect CAIs with national nonprofits focused on providing affordable devices
3. Work with private internet service providers to enroll in the ACP stipend for a device
4. Explore and advocate for more individuals, groups, or companies to offer device trade-ins and repairs in rural areas

Key Performance Indicators:

1. 5% decrease in number of households owning just a smartphone
2. 5 device distribution drives across the region by 2026
3. 50% of ISPs in the region enrolled in ACP stipend for a device by 2026
4. 3% increase in repair shops and/or mobile services by 2026

¹⁰ ACS 5-year 2021 Table B28001

Goal Three

Goal Three: Increase the knowledge of Northeast Nebraskans regarding cybersecurity and internet safety

	 BEAD	 DE	 EMM	 ReConnect	 NBBP
Funding Source	✓	✓		✓	
Timeframe	2025-2027	2022-2024	2024-2026	2024-2028	2024

Strategy 3.1: Develop public awareness initiatives on cybersecurity risks and common scams

Baseline: No known public awareness initiatives completed by local governments or CAIs

Activities:

1. Public media campaign notifying public of updated resources and information regarding protection against cybercrimes
2. Encourage CAIs, including schools, libraries, senior centers, etc., to share information about potential threats and ways to protect against cybercrimes on public computers
3. Encourage CAIs to develop curriculum specifically for cybersecurity and scam prevention

Key Performance Indicators:

1. Implementation of standardized notification system for cybercrimes
2. 5% decrease in cybercrimes across the region
3. Establishment of 5 cybersecurity trainings for community members with 1 hosted in a rural community

Goal Four

Goal Four: Improve online accessibility and inclusivity of public resources and services.

	 BEAD	 DE	 EMM	 ReConnect	 NBBP
Funding Source		✓			
Timeframe	2025-2027	2022-2024	2024-2026	2024-2028	2024

Strategy 4.1: Increase awareness of online public resources available through CAIs and county or local governments

Baseline: Promotion of online public resources primarily conducted by CAIs through social media resulting in limited promotion of available resources

Activities:

1. Media campaigns to promote resources currently available in libraries and community centers not limited to social media campaigns

Key Performance Indicators:

1. 5% increase in the number of attendees/users of resources per month

Strategy 4.2: Update resources in public libraries and local government to include multiple languages as reflected by proportion of population as outlined in the Nebraska Limited English Proficiency (LEP) policy

Baseline: Not all community websites provide resources online in languages other than English

Activities:

1. Identify up to 3 languages used within each county as reflected by proportion of population as outlined in Nebraska's LEP Policy

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2. Assist libraries and local government in identifying grant funding to translate resources and/or provide a translator for the top language aside from English

Key Performance Indicators:

1. Have all resources translated into languages proportional to the population for respective to county representation
2. Identification of translation support resource providers for the NENEDD/SIMPCO Region

Strategy 4.3: Update digital and technical resources to accommodate individuals with disabilities or special needs

Baseline: No known CAIs provide digital and technical information or resources for individuals with disabilities or special needs

Activities:

1. Assist CAIs in pursuit of funding to make public resources physically accessible
2. Assist libraries in pursuit of funding to provide devices to accommodate hard of hearing individuals, visually impaired individuals, individuals prone to seizures caused by bright lights and loud noises, and other disabilities and special needs identified by the library

Key Performance Indicators:

1. 100% of CAI buildings and digital resources physically accessible by 2030
2. 15% increase in digital and technical resources available to individuals with disabilities or special needs

Strategy 4.4: Update local government websites to be compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Guidelines

Baseline: Of the communities and counties that have websites, not all have accessibility tools available.

Activities:

1. Create a checklist to meet the requirements of the ADA guidelines
2. Identify and assist local government websites that need to be updated
3. Encourage county and local governments to establish a plan to maintain website ADA compliance

Key Performance Indicators:

1. 100% of communities have websites meeting the ADA guidelines by 2025

Funding Strategy Table

The purpose of the Funding Strategy Table is to align federal and/or state programs to proposed strategies. Aligning the goals, strategies, and activities with funding opportunities addresses challenges with adoption rates and affordability options while providing support through the implementation process. The following funding opportunities are subject to change as more information becomes available.

Northeast Nebraska Digital Equity Plan	
Programs	Strategy
	Strategy 1.1: Increase the percent of NENEDD/SIMPCO Region households with access to affordable, quality broadband service available
	Strategy 1.2: Increase the percent of households in the NENEDD/SIMPCO Region with a broadband subscription to match the number of households with access to internet service
	Strategy 1.3: Increase the percent of eligible households enrolled in the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP)
	Strategy 2.1: Increase the financial and technical support for local libraries to encourage the implementation of digital literacy courses and updated devices
	Strategy 2.2: Increase public resources to allow for digital literacy certification testing such as North Star Digital Literacy Assessment
	Strategy 2.3: Encourage and assist senior centers and community facilities to develop partnerships to provide digital literacy trainings, cybersecurity trainings, and device access
	Strategy 2.4: Encourage educational institutions to provide digital literacy classes and “take home” resources to expand digital skills and familiarity with devices in the household
	Strategy 2.5: Increase the use of telehealth services in rural communities

	Strategy 2.6: Decrease the percentage of households in Northeast Nebraska with no internet connected devices
	Strategy 2.7: Decrease the percentage of households in the NENEDD/SIMPCO Region with a smartphone only
	Strategy 3.1: Create or update county and local governments' cybersecurity plans
	Strategy 3.2: Update county and/or local government websites and print materials to include curriculum focused on cybersecurity, internet safety, and compliance with State/Federal regulations
	Strategy 3.3: Develop public awareness to security risks and common scams
	Strategy 4.1: Increase awareness of public resources currently available through CAIs and county or local governments
	Strategy 4.2: Update resources in public libraries and local government to include multiple languages reflected by proportion of population as outlines in the Nebraska Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Policy
	Strategy 4.3: Updates resources to include translations and methods of learning for individuals with disabilities
	Strategy 4.4: Update local government websites to be compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

Implementation Timeline

For this plan to be successful the key will be prioritizing and implementing the goals through a feasible and achievable timeline. Listed are various performance metrics paired with each goal to ensure each goal is completed. Completion date of short-term targets is anticipated by the end of 2026 and long-term targets by the end of 2030.

	Strategy	Short-term Targets	Long-Term Targets
Goal One	Increase the percent of NENEDD/SIMPCO Region households with access to affordable, quality broadband service available	5% increase in households with access to broadband service	11% increase in households with access to broadband service
	Increase the percent of households in the NENEDD/SIMPCO Region with a broadband subscription to match the number of households with access to internet service	10% increase in broadband subscriptions	15% increase in broadband subscriptions
	Increase the percent of eligible households enrolled in the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP)	10% increase in ACP enrollment	50% increase in ACP enrollment
Goal Two	Increase the financial and technical support for local libraries to encourage the implementation of digital literacy courses and updated devices	60% of public libraries have updated computers and software	100% of public libraries have revolving funding to support digital updates
	Increase public resources to allow for digital literacy certification testing such as North Star Digital Literacy Assessment	40% of libraries participating in digital literacy score tracker software	100% of libraries participating in digital literacy score tracker software

	Encourage and assist senior centers and community facilities to develop partnerships to provide device access and trainings in digital literacy and cybersecurity trainings, and device access	60% of senior centers or community centers have at least 2 computers and software for public use	100% of senior centers or community centers have at least 2 computers and software for public use
	Encourage educational institutions to provide digital literacy classes and “take home” resources to expand digital skills and familiarity with devices in the household	1 digital literacy class taught annually per county	1 after school program for grades 5-12 adopted by one school district per county
	Increase the use of telehealth services in rural communities	Establishment of 3 private rooms located in CAI for telehealth appointments	10% increase in telehealth appointments
	Decrease the percentage of households in NENEDD/SIMPCO Region with no internet connected devices	5% increase in device ownership	10% increase in device ownership
	Decrease the percent of households in the NENEDD/SIMPCO Region with a smartphone only	5% decrease in households owning only a smartphone	1% of households owning only a smartphone
Goal Three	Create or update county and local governments’ cybersecurity plans	5% decrease in cybercrimes	15% decrease in cybercrimes
	Update county and/or local government websites and print materials to include curriculum focused on cybersecurity, internet safety, and compliance with State/Federal regulations	5% decrease in cybercrimes	15% decrease in cybercrimes

	Develop public awareness initiatives on cybersecurity risks and common scams	5% decrease in cybercrimes	15% decrease in cybercrimes
Goal Four	Increase awareness of online public resources available through CAIs and county or local governments	15% increase in the number of attendees/users per month	20% increase in the number of attendees/users per month
	Update resources in public libraries and local government to include multiple languages as reflected by proportion of population as outlined in the Nebraska Limited English Proficiency (LEP) policy	10% increase of resources in languages other than English	15% increase of resources in languages other than English
	Update digital and technical resources to accommodate individuals with disabilities or special needs	15% increase in digital and technical resources to assist individuals with disabilities or special needs	20% increase in digital and technical resources to assist individuals with disabilities or special needs
	Update local government websites to be compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Guidelines	5% increase in use of local government websites	15% increase in use of local government websites

Collaboration & Stakeholder Engagement

The Northeast Nebraska Digital Equity Planning Committee was formed by 20 community stakeholders, in addition to SIMPCO and NENEDD staff. The Committee first met on March 8, 2023, to introduce the project, establish the timeline, and outline expectations. Committee members provided feedback to staff to guide the development of key priorities. The Committee's second meeting was held on April 19, 2023, and the committee worked with staff to review the committee list to identify additional partners and stakeholders. Additionally, staff presented the initial draft of the region's asset inventory to seek feedback and input from committee members. The Committee met for a third time on May 17, 2023, to review the final draft of the asset inventory, identify covered populations to guide staff's research, and begin the development of the needs assessment and gap analysis. The fourth Committee meeting was held on June 21, 2023, and staff continued facilitating discussion of the needs assessment and gap analysis. Additionally, the committee began to discuss and develop recommended strategies to include in the regional plan. With the support of the Committee, the Northeast/SIMPCO Region Digital Equity Plan was completed on August 2, 2023. A list of committee members can be found on the next page.

Committee and Stakeholder List

<u>Stakeholder</u>	<u>Organization</u>
JoAnn Gieselman	Growing Community Connections
Dr. Cyndi Hanson	Northeast Community College
Connie Cooper	Northeast NE Area Agency on Aging
Gregg Hanson	Madison County Veterans Affairs
Dan Spray	Precision IT
Bill Heimann	ESU 1
Ted Deturk	ESU 2
Bill Johnston	Dakota/Dixon County Veterans Service Office
Jerry Eisenhower	Norfolk Veterans' Home
Larianne Polk	ESU 7
Tami Clay	ESU 7
Dan Ellsworth	ESU 7
Corey Dahl	ESU 8
Judi Gaigaiashkibos	Nebraska Commission on Indian Affairs
Matt Andrews	City of South Sioux City
Cicely Douglas	City of South Sioux City
Brian Sterud	Faith Regional Health Services
Larry Loucks	Ponca Economic Development Corporation
Drew Ebert	Ponca Economic Development Corporation
Pat McElroy	NE Nebraska Telephone Company (NNTC)

Appendix

NENEDD-SIMPCO Digital Equity Asset Inventory:

- Broadband Access & Affordability - Provider by County
- Device Access
- Digital Skills & Technical Support
- Public Device & Internet Access

<https://nenedd.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/NENEDD-SIMPCO-Digital-Equity-Asset-Inventory.xlsx>