

VETERANS and DIGITAL EQUITY: PLANNING for SUCCESS

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Broadband Delivers Opportunities
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act was signed into law on November 15, 2021, to ensure universal access to affordable, reliable, high-speed internet service across the United States. The law identifies Veterans as one of eight “covered populations” and encourages states to research and address the barriers to their access to, adoption of, and benefits from digital technology. Working with the Office of Connected Care in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society examined how states understand and address the needs of Veterans.

Through an analysis of digital equity plans from the 50 states, federal district, and territories, we identify five key strategies adopted by states that have thoughtfully addressed Veterans in their digital equity plans:

- Link needs assessments to their implementation strategies,
- Leverage other state and federal agencies,
- Identify specific standout partners,
- Design a workforce strategy for Veterans, and
- Prioritize access to health care.

The report offers examples of these strategies in action and makes recommendations to help state broadband offices and digital equity practitioners working on Veteran issues.

UNDERSTANDING VETERANS' NEEDS

In 2019, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) found significant disparities between Veterans of the United States Armed Forces and the rest of the population in terms of access to and adoption of broadband internet service.¹ Factors cited include a lack of interest or need, subscription cost, access to devices, and limited rural broadband infrastructure.

Multiple sources and studies cite unique challenges faced by the existing Veteran population in the United States. These include:

- Veterans are more likely than non-Veteran peers to live in rural areas. A quarter of Veterans nationwide live in rural areas, resulting in many of them lacking access to high-quality broadband infrastructure.²
- Veterans are more likely than non-Veterans to cite lack of a computer (or an inadequate computer) as the primary barrier to subscribing to an internet service.
- Affordability is a considerable barrier for all low-income households, but particularly low-income Veteran households. Veterans with the lowest incomes are most likely to go without a broadband subscription at home.
- Of the total Veteran population, a majority is over the age of 65. Veterans who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars are less likely to be digitally skilled.³ As a result, the lack of digital navigation resources available to these older Veterans (e.g., digital skills training and mentorship programs) has hindered their knowledge of technology and digital capabilities.

The implications of the above challenges are particularly pronounced for Veteran populations.

- Veterans are a population of greater medical comorbidity than their non-Veteran peers. Telehealth has been critical to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) ability to provide care for Veterans, including those who live in rural areas. VA has identified access to technology and broadband internet as notable barriers to Veterans engaging in telehealth. As Veterans age, their health care needs become more complex. The next generation of Veterans currently entering VA also face multiple medical and combat-related issues. It is imperative that Veterans receive the quality services they need in a timely manner, wherever they are.
- Despite their valuable skills and experience, many Veterans experience challenges finding meaningful employment after leaving the military. Veterans are increasingly reliant on access to a device and internet connectivity for employment opportunities. The deficiencies in their digital connections adversely affect their employment prospects.
- Older Veterans may struggle with physical challenges (e.g., poor vision, hearing impairments, limited dexterity) that make it more difficult to use technology. In 2022, nearly 30 percent of all Veterans had a service-connected disability. The digital divide is more pronounced among individuals with disabilities.

Figure 1: UNDERSTANDING VETERANS and DIGITAL EQUITY



The Digital Equity Act, part of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, provides \$2.75 billion in grant programs to ensure that all people and communities have the skills, technology, and capacity needed to reap the full benefits of our digital economy. The Digital Equity Act identifies Veterans as one of eight covered populations, including:

1. Individuals who live in Covered Households (defined as households with income from the most recently completed year of not more than 150% of the poverty level);
2. Aging individuals;
3. Incarcerated individuals, other than individuals who are incarcerated in a Federal correctional facility;
4. Veterans;
5. Individuals with disabilities;
6. Individuals with a language barrier, including English learners and those with low levels of literacy;
7. Individuals who are members of a racial or ethnic minority group; and
8. Individuals who primarily reside in a rural area.

Recognizing their particular and persistent needs, Congress has enacted other legislation aimed at broadband and telehealth expansion for Veterans. The Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act ([Hannon Act](#)) expands mental health care and suicide prevention programs for Veterans. Under this law, VA has established a strategic plan for connecting Veterans to VA health care within one year of discharge from military service. The law requires VA to award grants to entities for the expansion of telehealth capabilities and provision of telehealth services to Veterans. An entity seeking to establish a telehealth access point for Veterans such as VA's [ATLAS](#) (Accessing Telehealth through Local Area Stations) without grant funding is authorized to enter into an agreement with VA to establish this health care access point.

The Joseph Maxwell Cleland and Robert Joseph Dole Memorial Veterans Benefits and Health Care Improvement Act of 2022 ([Cleland-Dole Act](#)) addresses multiple priorities for Veterans, including home security, telehealth, and long-term care. One of the key parameters of the law is access to health care for Veterans in rural areas. The Cleland-Dole Act aims to increase Veteran access to rural transportation, as well as telehealth services. Ensuring that rural Veterans have affordable and reliable broadband access is a crucial component to the growth of VA telemedicine. The legislation requires VA to develop a detailed plan collaborating with other federal agencies to enhance connectivity in [rural, highly rural](#), and medically underserved areas to better reach all Veterans.

PROMISING PRACTICES to ADDRESS VETERANS' DIGITAL EQUITY

Congress set aside funding for states to expand broadband adoption, further identify needs of covered populations that are unique to states, and address these needs through the development of detailed plans written and executed by state-level broadband offices.

States' digital equity plans offer a range of custom and common approaches to addressing the digital equity needs of Veterans. Although Veterans are identified as a distinct group of individuals, they overlap with other covered populations as well.

- Veterans have [lower overall poverty rates](#) than non-Veterans; however, Veteran poverty rates are rising.
- In 2022, over 30 percent of all Veterans reported at least one disability. Veterans are [nearly twice](#) as affected by disabilities than the general public.
- [Over 50 percent](#) of Veterans are age 60 and older and often face difficulties, including mobility and health complications, which makes it essential that elderly people have access to convenient solutions such as digital health and telemedicine.

States' digital equity plans acknowledge the common challenges facing Veterans and other covered populations while also developing strategies to address the unique needs of Veterans. Some states have revamped existing programs (e.g., adapting an existing digital literacy program to improve the means of outreach and potential partnership with Veteran organizations), while other states have highlighted the need for new expertise (e.g., cybersecurity skills training) and brought attention to particularly underserved cohorts (e.g., rural communities and those of lower income). Many states—including Colorado, Minnesota, Nebraska, Oregon, Virginia, and West Virginia—reference leveraging existing assets and programs such as VA's [Digital Divide Consult](#) and [Tech for Troops](#) as options for Veterans to access connected devices and digital skills training.

Table 1: STATE APPROACHES

<p>ALASKA</p>	<p>Alaska identifies unique digital equity needs for Veterans. Isolation from friends and family who live in the contiguous United States creates a need for connectivity for social cohesion and for telehealth and telemental health resources.</p>
<p>CONNECTICUT</p>	<p>Connecticut excels around workforce considerations for Veterans and conducted a comprehensive assessment of their needs. The plan identifies that many Veterans are likely to have received some form of digital training during their service, making them great candidates for civilian careers that require digital skills.</p>
<p>KANSAS</p>	<p>Kansas concisely highlights the top needs for its Veteran population and then connects those needs to the state’s top partners that serve Veterans (e.g., VA, Galvanize, and KANSASWORKS).</p>
<p>MINNESOTA</p>	<p>Minnesota’s careful approach to its Veterans needs assessment focuses on “Veterans as Veterans rather than Veterans as a subset of older adults.” This approach gives more weight to the findings and more specificity in the implementation strategies.</p>
<p>NEW MEXICO</p>	<p>New Mexico’s plan dives deep into the connection between broadband access and health and social outcomes. These correlations drive New Mexico’s partnerships with the New Mexico Department of Veterans Services, United Ways of New Mexico, and the University of New Mexico’s Upward Bound program.</p>
<p>NEW YORK</p>	<p>New York’s plan showcases a thorough needs assessment of Veterans, citing common issues in the realms of cybersecurity, online privacy, affordability of devices, and provision of assistive technology for Veterans with disabilities. These findings are all addressed in the state’s implementation strategy.</p>
<p>UTAH</p>	<p>Utah understands the intersectionality of covered populations, especially Veterans. The Utah Department of Workforce Services has created a plan specifically to address workforce issues for Veterans.</p>
<p>VIRGINIA</p>	<p>Virginia’s plan recognizes the importance of key organizations and government agencies serving Veterans, repeatedly noting a willingness to support the VA in their efforts to promote digital opportunities for Veterans through programs like the Digital Divide Consult Program, Tech for Troops, and the Virginia Gold Standard Digital Hub.</p>

In our review of the digital equity plans, some common strategies emerged. These strategies demonstrate thoughtful and tactical approaches that could potentially yield valuable outcomes. State digital equity plans that are smart and savvy about Veterans' issues are ones that do several things well. They:

- Link needs assessments to their implementation strategies,
- Leverage other state and federal agencies,
- Identify specific standout partners,
- Design a workforce strategy for Veterans, and
- Prioritize access to health care.

States are using these strategies effectively for Veterans' needs. These strategies can be instructive to digital equity leaders in other states working not just on Veterans issues, but for many other covered populations as well.

LINK NEEDS ASSESSMENT to IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

States' digital equity plans include a needs assessment of the population and propose an implementation plan to address these needs. These plans are most effective when the specific needs of populations are linked to specific strategies to meet those needs. Appropriate solutions for Veterans may or may not be the same as for other covered populations. Obtaining direct feedback from Veterans (e.g., through surveys and listening sessions) and taking stock of Veteran-focused organizations in a state's asset inventory enables Veteran-specific issues to be met with Veteran-specific solutions.

UTAH

Utah recognizes the intersectionality of covered populations and that overlapping identities compound barriers, making a one-size-fits-all solution ineffective. [Utah's Digital Access Plan](#) is careful in its treatment of Veterans as a distinct population, with a major focus on workforce development. The Digital Access Plan identifies "comprehensive support for career transitions" as the foremost need for Veterans. Utah's Department of Workforce Services created its own plan for Veterans' workforce needs, which is referenced and leveraged in the

state’s Digital Access Plan. Utah also lists Veterans’ specific needs such as telehealth training and mental health resources and addresses these needs in the implementation strategy by specifying target metrics about the use of online government services and telehealth.

NEW YORK

In New York’s [Digital Equity Plan](#), Veterans’ needs are recorded thoroughly:

- Veterans are 24 percent less likely to use the internet for work;
- 12 percent are less likely to use the Internet for education; and
- In every measure of digital literacy, New York’s Veterans are at least 5 percent less likely to feel completely confident in their capabilities.

These findings are backed up by several highlighted focus group statements and public comment submissions.

In New York’s implementation strategy, every identified need is connected to measurable objectives, covered populations that will be impacted, and the key activities that will lead to meeting the identified need. For example, the plan’s needs assessment identifies that Veterans are a common target for online scammers; in response, New York outlines an “Asset-Based Approach” to fund programs to protect members of each covered population who are disproportionately vulnerable to online scams and privacy threats.

LEVERAGE OTHER STATE and FEDERAL AGENCIES

The unprecedented federal investment in broadband infrastructure and digital equity has empowered many state governments to grow rapidly in new fields. While having experts on broadband deployment and digital equity at the state level is important, new broadband offices and positions within state governments must recognize and coordinate with other state and federal agencies that have the resources to meet the goals of advancing digital equity nationwide.

This coordination is especially important in regard to Veterans. In addition to federal Veterans Affairs officers in every state—either in a VA office or as field officers—many states have their

own departments dedicated to serving Veterans. Digital equity practitioners within state broadband offices can and should cooperate with federal and state employees who focus on working with Veterans, an opportunity that doesn't exist for many of the other covered populations. For instance, the Kansas Office of Veterans Services assists Veterans and their families with filing claims for education, medical, or other benefits, and supporting them in securing deserved medals and military awards. Additionally, VA and state departments of Veterans services are not the only government agencies that digital equity officers in state broadband offices should be utilizing. Agencies focused on workforce development, health departments, and housing departments are also frequently engaging with Veterans.

VA's Digital Divide Consult program is a resource for connecting eligible Veterans to internet and technology assistance programs. States' awareness of this program has resulted from a cohesive implementation strategy of digital equity initiatives. For under-resourced Veterans, finding programs, determining eligibility requirements, and applying for programs is often difficult. The Digital Divide Consult was crucial for qualifying Veterans to apply for the FCC's Affordable Connectivity Program and continues to be for the FCC's Lifeline program.

VIRGINIA

Virginia is home to large active-duty and Veteran populations. As active-duty service members leave the military, Virginia's Veteran population will only continue to grow, especially with the defense contracting industry's presence in the state. This presence of both active-duty and Veteran populations has led to a robust ecosystem of Veteran-serving agencies in the state.

The Virginia Digital Opportunity Plan highlights the work that both the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the Virginia Department of Veterans Services have accomplished in advancing broadband access, device access, and digital skills for Veterans.

“Virginia does not have to go it alone. The significant presence of service members, Veterans, and national defense agencies in the Commonwealth creates a unique opportunity to work directly with a federal agency that is already seeking to actively address the digital divide facing Veterans.”

In addition to calling attention to the importance of working with VA in Virginia, the plan lists the Department of Veterans Services' Virginia Gold Standard Digital Hub as a key asset for Veterans. The digital hub is an online resource that lists categories of services to which Veterans in Virginia are entitled. Each category redirects to the corresponding intake form or information to aid Veterans with their specific needs.

IDENTIFY STANDOUT PARTNERS

Veteran-serving organizations are crucial to deploying a successful digital equity plan for Veterans. There is an intricate ecosystem of organizations—both governmental and private—providing services across the country. Other organizations might serve Veterans, but only certain sectors of the population (e.g., Veterans with disabilities or older Veterans). Beyond VA activities, states should perform and report on a thorough asset inventory and provide it to all organizations in their state that serve Veterans. Local Veteran-serving organizations have knowledge of their communities, amplifying the impact of digital equity initiatives supported by the state.

Many state broadband offices—such as Connecticut’s, Hawaii’s, Montana’s, and Virginia’s—made an intentional effort to conduct outreach directly via channels historically preferred and trusted by Veterans. Examples include engaging veteran service organizations (VSOs), local Departments of Veterans Affairs, and VA Medical Centers, as well as hosting community outreach events and listening sessions. These channels provided valuable insights from Veterans regarding internet availability, barriers, digital skills needs, and perspectives on broadband access.

A few states—including Montana, New Mexico, and Wisconsin—describe collaborative efforts with VSOs to increase awareness regarding digital resources and programs. The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) [Online Auxiliary Academy](#), [Disabled American Veterans Auxiliary programs](#), and the Wounded Warrior Project’s [Warrior Care Network](#) are examples of VSOs making active strides toward bridging the digital divide for Veterans. For example, VFW’s Digital Academy provides online and in-person digital skills courses, tutorials, employment workshops, and seminars.

NON-GOVERNMENTAL PARTNERS HIGHLIGHTED in STATE PLANS

Tech for Troops: Virginia’s digital opportunity plan highlights Tech for Troops as an asset to serve the Veteran population’s need for affordable device access and digital literacy and skills development. Tech for Troops is a nonprofit based in Richmond, Virginia, focused on “providing sustainable lifelong digital skills backed through training, education, and technology.” The organization provides refurbished devices to under-resourced Veterans for free or at a highly discounted cost. Tech for Troops also provides digital skills training to Veterans, ranging from basic-level skills to more advanced job training skills.

Comcast NBCUniversal: Comcast operating nationwide in 40 states and the District of Columbia. States have leveraged Comcast as an asset in digital inclusion plans. Comcast plans to commit \$1 billion over the next ten years through the Project UP initiative, which focuses on connectivity and adoption, skills and creativity, and entrepreneurship. Comcast has partnered with nonprofit organizations and city leaders to create **Lift Zones**, safe spaces with free internet access for students and families to learn. Currently there are more than 1,240 Comcast Lift Zones nationwide. The Wi-Fi hubs connect citizens to technical support resources such as [digital navigators](#). Comcast Xfinity's military benefits provide service members exclusive rewards and discounts. In the state of Washington alone, Comcast donated \$20,000 and 100 laptops to Operation Military Family. Comcast has hired more than 21,000 Veterans and spouses, and more than 9,000 employees serve in the company's community service organization, the Veterans Network.

NPower: A nonprofit organization whose mission is to create pathways to economic prosperity by launching digital careers for military Veterans and young adults from underserved communities operates in California, Maryland, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, and Texas. NPower offers free and low-cost training in subject areas such as IT support, cybersecurity, and cloud computing.

Galvanize: In Kansas's plan, Galvanize is identified as an asset for Veterans to access workforce training. Galvanize was formed in 2012 to develop resources for technology education. In 2015, Galvanize launched Telegraph Track to provide a set of tech-industry-related resources for underrepresented groups, including Veterans, in tech careers. This focus continued in 2019 with the creation of Operation Level Up, the first software-development career-skills program for transitioning service members. Galvanize has worked directly with the U.S. Department of Defense on contracts to develop workforce training for Veterans and service members.

KANSASWORKS: The Kansas Department of Labor works closely with KANSASWORKS, which has workforce centers throughout the state. The Kansas Digital Equity Strategic Plan specifically spotlights the Southeast region workforce centers that have dedicated staff to provide one-on-one support to Veteran job seekers.

Alaska Warrior Partnership: This community-led organization focuses on providing help to Veterans in need of assistance in the areas of telehealth, VA benefits, workforce development, and more. The organization was consulted heavily in developing the digital equity plan for the state.

DESIGN A WORKFORCE STRATEGY for VETERANS

In its 2019 report on promoting broadband access to Veterans, the FCC highlights the efforts of the U.S. Department of Labor and American Job Centers to increase broadband access for Veterans who are seeking employment. This focus on workforce development has now been addressed in many state digital equity plans. Some states, like Connecticut, identify recently retired service members as a resource for the expanding cybersecurity field, which is expected to grow by [ten percent](#) from 2022 to 2032. In other cases, Veterans return to civilian life without access to broadband and lacking the digital skills required to fill out job applications online, even when their service experience makes them highly qualified members of the workforce.

Several states have prioritized integrating Veteran-specific digital skills training into their digital equity plans. States have leveraged community organizations or provided funding for the development of programs to incorporate military knowledge, skills, and abilities to offer a familiar context to Veterans as they learn digital concepts.

- Colorado's [Veterans Upward Bound Colorado Program](#) assesses Veterans' digital needs and offers free academic programs and devices.
- Florida has [established a Veteran success center](#) at the Miami Dade College campus as a pathway program toward education and employment in the broadband sector.
- Utah's Department of Workforce Services developed a Veterans State Grants and [Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program](#) that provides specialized assessments, career counseling, training, and referrals for Veterans.
- Kansas's plan highlights [VA's Veteran Readiness and Employment Program \(VR&E\)](#) as a resource for Veterans to improve their digital skills to advance their careers.

Although many Veterans may be aware of the role and importance of cybersecurity, there is generally less awareness surrounding the application of cybersecurity practices to civilian life. Training activities targeting this topic recognize and bridge the common gaps of knowledge for Veterans. Examples of programs providing cybersecurity and basic computer skills training include North Carolina's [CyberVetsUSA](#), Oregon's [CyberLynx](#) computer literacy program, and Iowa's [Veterans Tech Support](#).

MINNESOTA

Minnesota’s digital opportunity plan takes a nuanced approach to addressing workforce development challenges and opportunities for Veterans. In an analysis of Minnesota’s job listings, it was determined that 91 percent of postings require at least one digital skill. Veterans are well positioned to receive job training to enter tech careers due to expanded benefits in the [Minnesota GI Bill](#). Minnesota’s plan also acknowledges that to fully seize the opportunity provided by the GI Bill—which can be used to gain certifications—for on-the-job training programs or for apprenticeship programs, significant outreach is needed.

CONNECTICUT

Connecticut weaves workforce development considerations throughout its plan by referencing the state’s workforce development boards and strategies. In 2020, Connecticut released the [Governor’s Workforce Council’s Strategic Plan](#), noting the growing need for increased digital skills for Veterans reentering the workforce. The state digital equity plan will support programs run through trusted local partners to meet the digital skills needs of covered populations, providing them with the training they need for professional development or new career opportunities that require those skills. In addition, Connecticut has found that younger Veterans are an asset to the digital workforce, as they are likely to have received technical training during their service.

UTAH

Utah’s Department of Workforce Services’ plan addresses workforce development needs. The [Digital Connectivity Plan](#) uses the workforce services’ plan as a springboard to address more specific digital equity needs for each covered population. The Digital Connectivity Plan notes that “Veterans in Utah require comprehensive support for career transitions [and] combating societal stigmas.” This assertion builds upon the workforce development plan specifically for digital equity efforts.

PRIORITIZE ACCESS to HEALTH CARE

Multiple states have included Veterans’ access to telehealth in their Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) and digital equity plans, recognizing the critical need for this medically complex population. States are working to support telehealth care delivery to enhance accessibility for Veterans with mobility issues and Veterans living in rural areas

with long distances to travel for care. States—including Alaska, New Mexico, Texas, and Utah—specifically collaborate with local VSOs, VA Medical Centers, and state Departments of Veterans Affairs to deliver telehealth services to Veterans.

For example, Texas leverages existing resources to deliver telehealth services. The Health Task Force and the Texas State Library and Archives Commission (TSLAC) have created telehubs. The Pottsboro Library serves as a “telehub” in rural Grayson County and is furnished with both technical and medical equipment to successfully complete telehealth appointments. Texas is also able to provide health care to 108 counties via the state’s newly established Texas Tech University Institute of Telehealth and Digital Innovation.

NEW MEXICO

New Mexico’s [plan](#) excels in its attention to Veterans’ needs around health outcomes and digital equity. Veterans often have more complex health care needs than other covered populations. New Mexico’s Veteran population is 1.4 percent higher than the national average of 5.5 percent. Challenges in obtaining in-person health care are exacerbated by New Mexico’s high number of rural areas. New Mexico’s plan identifies the New Mexico Department of Veterans Services (NMDVS) and the New Mexico Department of Health as key partners in meeting Veterans’ needs. NMDVS has 16 offices throughout the state that help Veterans access health services online. In cases where Veterans are unable to access the internet, including tribal Veterans, NMDVS provides transportation services to provide access to care and/or benefits.

ALASKA

Alaska has the highest rate of Veterans per capita in the nation, due in no small part to the large military installments in the state. Alaska’s Veterans face unique challenges compared to Veterans in the contiguous United States. Mental health is a primary concern for Alaska’s Veterans in the state’s [digital equity plan](#): Alaska’s Veterans often experience isolation and loneliness due to an inability to connect with loved ones via the internet. Alaska’s goal is to “increase mental health outcomes of Veterans through the use of digital options.” The plan highlights the impact of the Army’s Mission 100, which boosts mental health counseling for service members, work by the Alaska Warrior Partnership, and the Department of Veterans Affairs local and national services as all integral to the efforts to meet Veterans’ telehealth and digital equity needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To best support digital equity efforts for Veterans, states can leverage key strategies, policy recommendations, and opportunities for future research and collaboration. Key strategies for optimal inclusion of Veteran-specific needs in state digital equity plans consist of the following:

CONDUCT A COMPREHENSIVE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

- States should periodically perform a thorough needs assessment to ensure that the digital barriers specific to Veterans are consistently identified.
- To assess Veterans' needs and ensure that data is retrieved from diverse sources, engage trusted channels such as VSOs, VA Medical Centers, and other Veteran-specific networks.

DEVELOP TAILORED DIGITAL SKILLS PROGRAMS and A WORKFORCE STRATEGY

- Establish customized digital literacy training for Veterans, invoking familiar military concepts.
- Incorporate tangible cybersecurity knowledge to overcome the lack of awareness of perceived cyber threats.
- Provide specialized assessments, career counseling, training, and referrals for Veterans.

PARTNER with STATE and FEDERAL AGENCIES and COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

- State broadband offices should continue to collaborate with federal agencies (e.g., VA, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), National Telecommunications & Information Administration (NTIA), FCC), universities, VSOs, and other organizations to develop and provide programs to maximize digital equity for Veterans and all covered populations.

- Engage trusted sources (e.g., VSOs, VA, and Veteran community centers) to increase awareness of programs and resources and assist Veterans with digital navigation and education.
- Integrate and align digital equity efforts with other Veteran-supporting services such as employment, health and wellness, and housing.

INVEST in UNDERSERVED AREAS

- Fund broadband projects that target the infrastructure development in rural, under-resourced, and low-connectivity locations.
- Ensure ongoing, affordable digital technology access for members of this population, including Veterans.
- Prioritize telehealth care delivery to enhance accessibility for Veterans with mobility issues and Veterans living in rural areas with long distances to travel for care.

EVALUATING THE IMPACT of DIGITAL EQUITY STRATEGIES

Understanding the impact of states' strategies will be crucial to informing ongoing outreach and will offer a measurable baseline upon which the value of broadband and digital equity expansion can be evaluated in the years to come. Robust national and state-based evaluation will ensure that the significant investments made by Congress—expansion of broadband infrastructure and digital navigation to include the nation's most vulnerable populations—is fully realized.

CONCLUSION

Veterans must be equipped with the tools, skills, and knowledge necessary to access essential services and opportunities through digital platforms. Bridging the digital divide for Veterans may ease their transition from military to civilian life, streamline access to employment and educational opportunities, and facilitate social interconnectedness. Development and implementation of digital equity initiatives require the collaboration of a multitude of stakeholders, including state broadband offices, federal agencies, private-sector entities, Veterans, and Veteran advocate groups, as well as the Department of Veterans Affairs and other federal agencies and community organizations. With inclusive engagement through trusted channels and programs tailored to address their unique needs, Veterans will thrive in our increasingly digital society with the honor and respect deserved for our nation's heroes.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

U.S. DEPARTMENT of VETERANS AFFAIRS RESOURCES

The Office of Connected Care and VA Telehealth

Expands Veterans' access to care through telehealth technologies and coordinates the following digital inclusion initiatives:

- Digital Divide Consult—The Digital Divide Consult process helps Veterans determine if they are eligible for programs that can help them get internet service or technology needed for telehealth.
- Accessing Telehealth through Local Area Stations (ATLAS)—Located in rural and underserved communities, ATLAS locations offer a private appointment space equipped for telehealth for Veterans with long travel times or limited internet access.
- Virtual Health Resource Centers (VHRCs)—Located in VA facilities, these centers offer in-person or remote support to Veterans, family members, and caregivers who need help using virtual care tools.

Veteran Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC): VET TEC matches veterans to a leading training provider to help develop high-tech skills in areas like computer software, programming, and media applications. Administering Entities (AEs) may consider reaching out to Veteran Service Officers 9 for inclusion in planning efforts, whether through stakeholder engagement or planning for future partnerships to raise awareness of digital inclusion programs that could benefit Veterans.

Military/Veterans—Easter Seals Greater Houston: Easter Seals supports Veterans' digital equity through various programs offering tailored digital skills training to Veterans with disabilities. It offers in-person and virtual options based on need and has 70 affiliate locations in 48 states. Texas Easter Seals, in particular, has done a great job connecting and reaching out to Veterans in its area.

Tech for Troops: Tech for Troops empowers the under-resourced Veterans and their families by providing sustainable lifelong digital skills backed through training, education, and technology.

Department of Defense SkillBridge: SkillBridge is a program under the Department of Defense for transitioning service members. The program offers employment training, internships, and apprenticeship opportunities at more than 1,000 public and private organizations across the country to ease the transition back to civilian life.

National Initiative for Cybersecurity Education Veterans Resources: The National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST)'s National Initiative for Cybersecurity Education (NICE) has a guide for Veterans looking for cybersecurity jobs and training.

CyberSkills2Work: CyberSkills2Work is a national cybersecurity workforce development program funded by the National Security Agency's NCAE-C to transition military personnel, veterans, first responders, and others pursuing the cybersecurity field.

Virginia Values Veterans (V3) Transition Program: The Virginia Department of Veterans Services facilitates the V3 Transition Program, in which transitioning service members and their spouses are provided peer-to-peer support in seeking employment, education, and entrepreneurship.

Washington State—Digital Navigator Program: The Washington Department of Veterans Affairs helps Veterans and their families connect to earned benefits, health care, and other supportive services. The program focuses on communities such as Veterans in underserved rural areas, elderly Veterans, and Veterans of Color.

ENDNOTES

- 1 [“Report on Promoting Internet Access Service for Veterans | Federal Communications Commission,”](#) May 1, 2019.
- 2 [“VA Health Care: Office of Rural Health Efforts and Recommendations for Improvement | U.S. GAO.”](#) January 11, 2024.
- 3 Luger, Tana M., Timothy P. Hogan, Lorilei M. Richardson, Lisa Cioffari-Bailiff, Kimberly Harvey, and Thomas K. Houston. [“Older Veteran Digital Disparities: Examining the Potential for Solutions Within Social Networks.”](#); Journal of Medical Internet Research 18, no. 11 (November 23, 2016): e296.

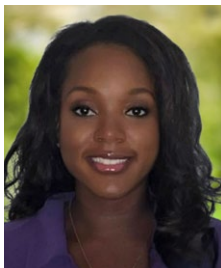
AUTHORS



Dr. Leonie Heyworth is the deputy director for clinical services, Telehealth Services, at the Veterans Health Administration. In this role, she combines her clinical and research experience to help expand telehealth services to the 6 million Veterans who rely

on the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs for health care. Heyworth is an expert on national telehealth programs and is passionate about her work in leading initiatives and developing policies to help front-line VA staff deliver high-quality, accessible care to Veterans. She practices primary care at the Jennifer Moreno VA Medical Center in San Diego, California.

Dr. Heyworth earned her doctorate in medicine at Harvard Medical School and completed her residency training at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, Massachusetts. She is board-certified in internal medicine and is an associate professor at the University of California, San Diego.



DeAsia Nichols is a dedicated program analyst with the Department of Veteran Affairs in the Office of Connected Care: Digital Health Office. Her work to support VA's efforts to enhance digital connectivity for Veterans has included extensive research into state broadband

and digital equity plans.

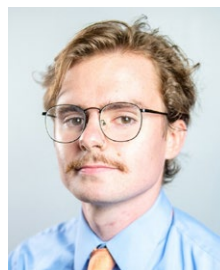
As a Technical Sergeant in the Air Force Reserve, DeAsia previously served as Noncommissioned Officer in Charge of Dental Services for the 413th Aeromedical Staging Squadron. DeAsia began her civil service career as a Veteran Service Representative with the Department of Veteran Affairs. Previously, DeAsia supported our nation's war fighters in logistics with the Air Force Sustainment and Life Cycle Management Centers. DeAsia holds an Executive MBA from Wesleyan College and a Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies from Valdosta State University.



As Program Manager for Accessing Telehealth through Local Area Stations (ATLAS), **Lesly Roose, RN, BSN, MS**, combines her clinical experience with her dedication to telehealth to provide services for over nine million Veterans who rely on VA for health care. Ms. Roose has

been instrumental in developing the ATLAS program to bridge the digital divide by overcoming social, economic, and geographic barriers by working with public and private entities to establish private locations within Veterans' home communities where they can receive VA care via telehealth.

Previously, she served in various roles within VA telehealth program as the VISN Telehealth Coordinator, Facility Telehealth Coordinator, and Home Telehealth Coordinator. In these careers, she supported the expansion of telehealth and connected care programs. Ms. Roose has more than 15 years of Telehealth experience. She has also worked in Critical Care, Emergency Room, and Primary Care settings. Ms. Roose has over 20 years of nursing experience with considerable expertise in patient care management and leading health care teams.



Reid Sharkey is a Community Broadband Specialist & Research Associate for the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society. Prior to Benton, he served as an AmeriCorps fellow in the Tennessee State Broadband Office. Reid received a Master of Public Policy from

George Mason University in 2022.



Broadband Delivers Opportunities
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