



## New York State Budget Hearing on Human Services

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on behalf of New Yorkers who continue to be excluded from our increasingly digital economy—and, as a result, from essential human services.

Digital equity is not a technology issue alone; it is a human services access issue. Today, access to a device, reliable internet, and basic digital skills determines whether a person can obtain employment, apply for public benefits, schedule healthcare, secure housing, enroll in education or workforce training, and communicate with service providers.

In practice, digital skills and devices are the gateway to:

- Applying for and maintaining employment
- Accessing unemployment insurance, SNAP, HEAP, Medicaid, and other benefits
- Scheduling medical appointments and using telehealth
- Applying for housing and rental assistance
- Participating in workforce development and training programs
- Accessing education, childcare information, and community services

When individuals lack a computer, internet access, or the skills to navigate online systems, they are effectively locked out of the human services ecosystem. As more services move online—often eliminating paper-based options—digital exclusion becomes service exclusion. For low-income households, older adults, immigrants and refugees, people with disabilities, and rural residents, this creates compounding barriers that deepen poverty and isolation.

For these reasons, digital equity must be treated as foundational human services infrastructure, just as critical as housing stability, transportation, or access to healthcare.

The New York State Digital Equity Plan is now three years old. It was developed to ensure that all New Yorkers—particularly low-income households, older adults, veterans, immigrants, refugees, rural residents, and individuals with lower educational attainment—have access to the devices, connectivity, and digital skills required to participate fully in modern life and access essential services.

Yet, three years after the plan's publication, not a single dollar has reached communities to support direct, community-based digital equity programs.

During this same period, New York State has invested significant resources in hiring consultants to develop plans, strategies, and frameworks. Meanwhile, the organizations that actually deliver digital access, training, and workforce skills on the ground have received little to no funding to implement those plans.

At the same time, millions—and in some cases billions—of dollars continue to flow annually through Empire State Development to support economic development initiatives. Despite this scale of investment, not a single Empire State Development dollar has been directed toward programs that directly support our most underestimated and economically disadvantaged community members with devices, connectivity, or digital skills.

This is not a capacity problem.

It is not a lack-of-evidence problem.

We believe the program has not lived up to the expectation and was not prioritized properly.

Organizations working on the front lines of digital inclusion across New York State are aligned on what is needed to move from planning to action. The New York State Digital Equity Network (NYSDEN)—a coalition of organizations from every corner of the state—has formally

called for \$25 million annually to implement New York's Digital Equity Plan at scale.

This funding level reflects the true cost of delivering devices, connectivity, digital skills training, language access, and workforce-aligned programs to the communities the plan was designed to serve. It is a practical, field-informed request grounded in lived experience and proven models—not theoretical projections.

Community-based organizations across New York State—including CanCode Communities—have demonstrated, at scale, how to:

- Deliver laptops directly into homes
- Provide affordable and reliable internet access
- Teach foundational digital skills tied to employment and service access
- Produce measurable economic mobility and stability outcomes

These programs are data-driven, cost-effective, and immediately deployable. They directly support the goals of human services agencies by reducing administrative burden, increasing successful benefits enrollment, improving employment outcomes, and strengthening community resilience.

Instead of investing in these proven models, the State has continued to delay implementation—while the digital divide has hardened into a structural barrier for millions of New Yorkers who rely most on public services.

The consequences of this inaction are predictable and preventable:

- Individuals cannot apply for jobs or workforce programs
- Families struggle to access benefits and housing assistance
- Workers cannot reskill for available employment
- Older adults experience increased isolation and health risks
- Immigrants and refugees are cut off from essential resources
- Human services providers face increased strain and inefficiency

All of this occurs while the State continues to invest heavily in top-down economic development initiatives that presume a digitally capable population—without making the foundational investments required to create one.

If New York is serious about equity, economic mobility, and effective human services delivery, the Digital Equity Plan cannot remain a document on a shelf.

It must be funded, implemented, and held accountable.

I respectfully urge the Legislature to:

- Require transparent reporting on the status and deployment of Digital Equity Plan funding
- Shift resources from planning and consulting to implementation
- Invest directly in community-based organizations with proven outcomes
- Fund the Digital Equity Plan at the \$25 million annual level requested by NYSDEN
- Ensure that Empire State Development investments support not only infrastructure and innovation, but people

Three years is long enough.

New Yorkers cannot afford another budget cycle in which plans are written, revised, and delayed while communities fall further behind. The digital economy—and the digital delivery of human services—is already here. Inaction today compounds inequality tomorrow.

The question before the State is not whether it can afford to invest in digital equity.

It is whether it can afford not to.

Thank you for your consideration and leadership.

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