VANCE COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN

Submitted by the Vance County Digital Inclusion Alliance 2022-2023
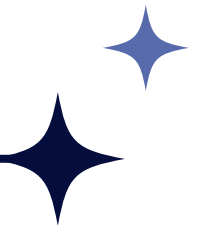
CONNECT VANCE

"Innovate, Collaborate, Transform."

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OVERVIEW

The Vance County Digital Inclusion Alliance is a collaborative initiative that brings together various stakeholders from the community to address digital inequities and promote digital inclusion. Comprising local government entities, educational institutions, nonprofit organizations, businesses, and community members, the alliance works collectively to bridge the digital divide and ensure that all residents of Vance County have equal access to digital resources and opportunities.

The alliance's primary goal is to promote digital inclusion for all residents of Vance County. By recognizing the importance of connectivity and by addressing barriers to affordable internet access, the alliance aims to create an environment where every individual can enjoy the benefits of being online.

Another key focus of the alliance is to ensure that residents have access to devices that meet their needs. This is achieved through collaboration with organizations and businesses to facilitate affordable device acquisition programs, device recycling initiatives, and donations. By making a range of devices available, the alliance ensures that residents can access the digital world through reliable and suitable tools.

Recognizing the importance of digital skills in today's society, the alliance will collaborate with educational institutions, community centers, and nonprofit organizations to offer training programs and workshops that enhance residents' digital literacy. These initiatives cover various aspects, including internet navigation, online safety, basic computer skills, and effective use of digital tools. By promoting digital literacy, the alliance empowers Vance County residents to confidently and competently engage in the digital world.

Furthermore, the alliance prioritizes the provision of quality technical support to assist residents with their digital needs. The alliance aims to help residents access reliable and knowledgeable technical assistance by partnering with local businesses and service providers. This support helps individuals overcome any technological challenges they may encounter, enhancing their digital experiences and enabling them to make the most of their connectivity.

The Vance County Digital Inclusion Alliance also encourages the development of user-friendly online content. By advocating for intuitive design, accessibility features, and user-centered approaches, the alliance supports efforts to ensure that digital resources are easily accessible and navigable for all residents. This approach contributes to residents' self-sufficiency and enhances their overall digital experience.

Through the collaborative efforts of its members, the Vance County Digital Inclusion Alliance strives to create a more inclusive and equitable digital landscape for all residents. By addressing barriers to internet access, providing devices and training, offering technical support, and promoting user-friendly digital resources, the alliance is actively working towards bridging the digital divide and empowering the community to thrive in the digital age.

Our Mission

The mission of the Vance County Digital Inclusion Alliance is to provide the residents of Vance Co with the resources to minimize the digital divide through digital literacy training, access to affordable broadband, and access to devices that allow the residents to participate in the digital world.

Our Vision

The Vance County Digital Inclusion Alliance will empower the residents of Vance Co, NC to improve their quality of life by minimizing the digital divide and ensuring they have access to the digital resources necessary to participate in the evolving digital world.

Our Values

Innovation

We value exploring new ideas and pushing boundaries to find creative solutions.

Collaboration

We value working together and leveraging diverse perspectives to achieve common goals.

Transformation

We value making a meaningful difference in the world and improving the lives of others.

Definitions Used in Planning

Digital Inclusion

The activities necessary to ensure that all individuals and communities have access to and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).

Digital Divide

The gap between those who have access to ICTs and those who do not.

Broadband Access

Having the wires, WiFi, and connectability available to you.

Broadband Adoption

Actually subscribing, creating an account, or logging on to the broadband that is available.

Homework Gap

The divide between students who have access to technology and those who do not; A prominent indicator of student success or failure in school.

Digital Inclusion Ecosystem

A combination of programs and policies that meet a geographic community's unique and diverse needs.

Digital Literacy

The ability to use digital technology, communication tools, and networks to locate, evaluate, use, create, and share information.

OUR COMMUNITY

Vance County is a diverse community of more than 45,000 people with a unique demographic profile. The county encompasses a range of income levels, with some residents enjoying financial stability while others face economic challenges. The median household income in Vance County is $34,722, reflecting the need for focused efforts to uplift the community economically. Because the majority of the county is rural, getting broadband fiber or even wireless broadband has proven challenging. The average household is 2.6 people, which only exacerbates the need for connectivity. The two largest age groups are children up to 19 and seniors over 65. Both of these groups have been found to have significant gaps in the digital divide.

OUR HISTORY

Established in 1881, Vance County is home to a thriving economic community and a rich tourism industry. It was named in honor of Zebulon B. Vance, who was NC governor from 1862-1865 and 1877-1879. The original courthouse for Vance County was constructed in 1884 and is still standing and in use today. Henderson, the county seat, benefits from its location near the intersection of Interstate 85 and US 1. Vance County borders the state of Virginia.

Vance County is home to Kerr Lake, the largest man-made lake east of the Mississippi River. The Henderson Institute Historical Museum, originally the only secondary school open to African Americans in Vance County, is also located here.
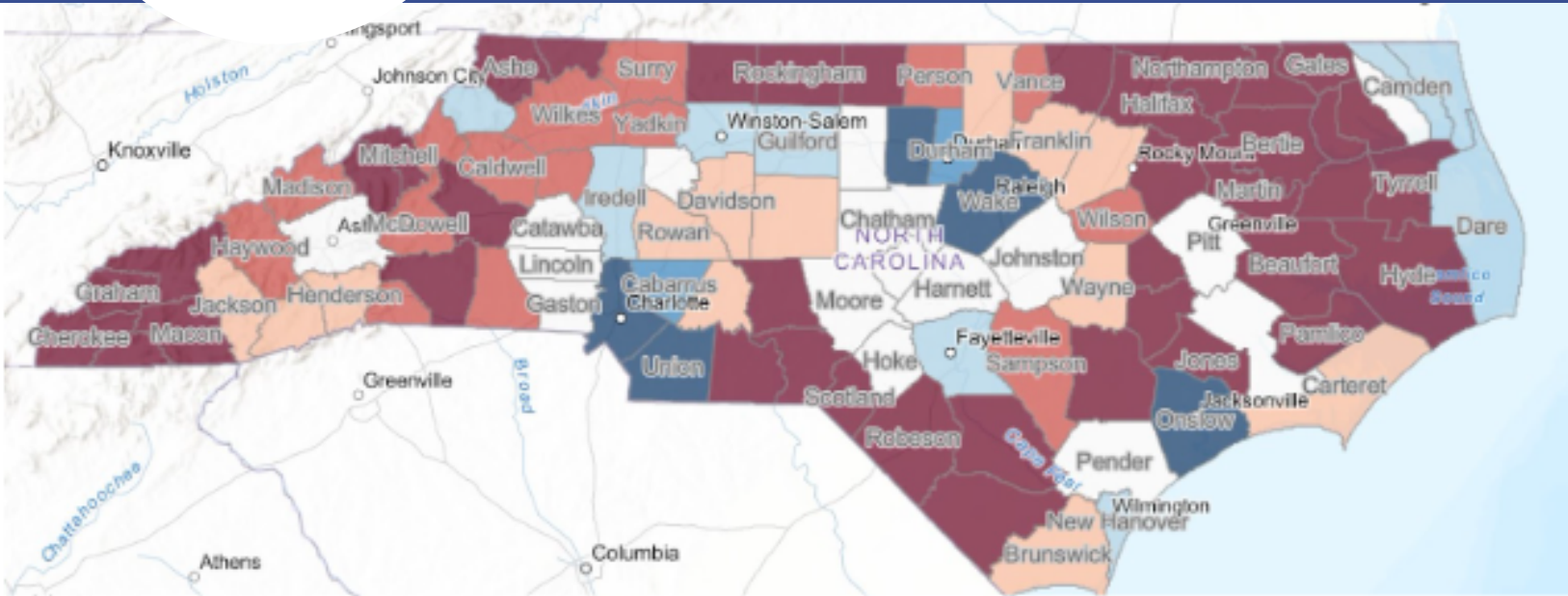
Vance County in North Carolina exhibits a diverse demographic landscape with varying income levels and challenges. While broadband access has improved, there is a need to focus on broadband adoption to ensure that all residents can benefit from connectivity. Efforts to enhance digital literacy, provide public computer access points, and offer affordable computer options contribute to bridging the digital divide and fostering digital inclusion in this beautiful and diverse community.
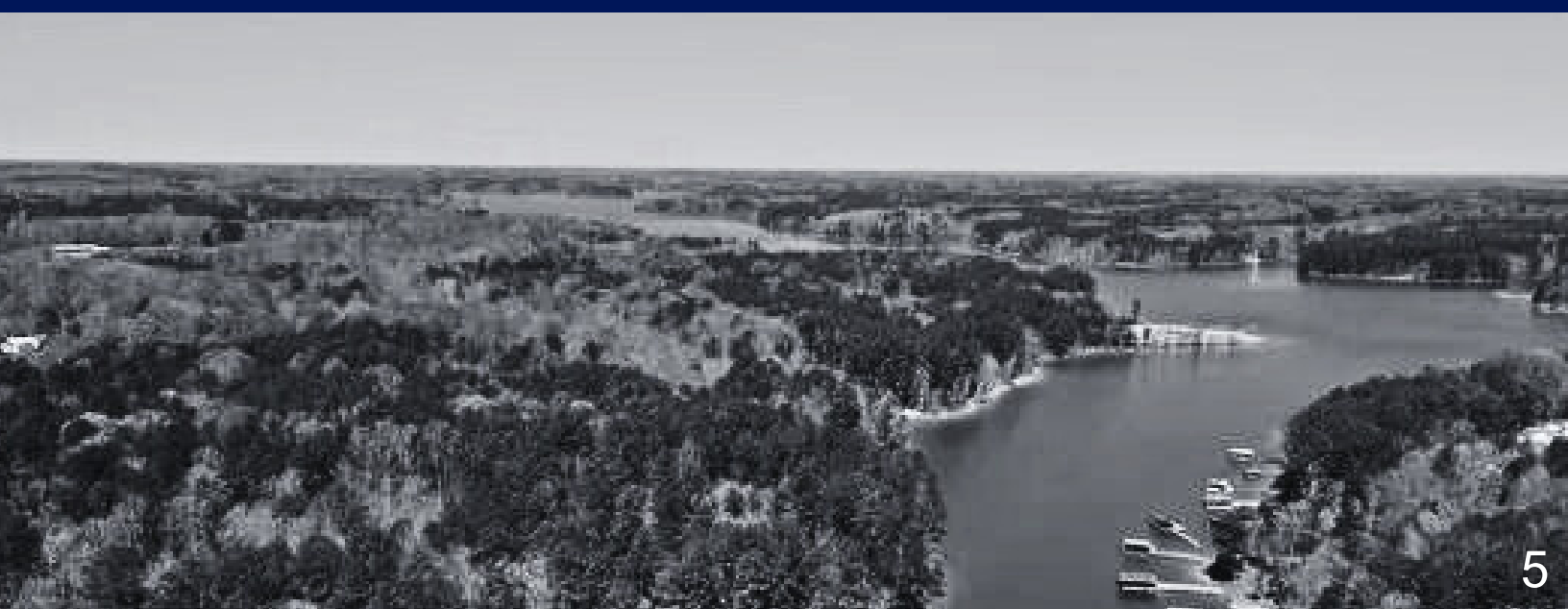
VANCE COUNTY 2021

64% of Vance County households have a broadband subscription. This means that over a third of Vance County households do not have broadband.

The North Carolina Broadband Map that shows available broadband, as well as broadband adoption, can be found here.

These are the elements of digital inclusion, according to the National Digital Inclusion Alliance:

ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE, ROBUST HIGH-SPEED INTERNET

DEVICES THAT MEET THE USER'S NEEDS

ACCESS TO DIGITAL LITERACY SKILLS TRAINING

QUALITY TECHNICAL SUPPORT

APPS AND ONLINE CONTENT DESIGNED FOR SELF-SUFFICIENCY, PARTICIPATION AND COLLABORATION

DIGITAL INCLUSION IN VANCE COUNTY

DEVICES THAT MEET THE USER'S NEEDS

Alongside affordable internet access, providing devices that meet the users' needs is crucial. Recognizing the diversity of the community, efforts have been made to ensure a range of devices are available to accommodate different preferences and requirements.

WHAT WE CURRENTLY HAVE:

- HTI donates refurbished laptops to eligible individuals and nonprofits
- Data Forge sells refurbished laptops and computers.
- For those seeking low-cost options, Walmart, flea markets, and pawn shops may offer affordable computer choices.
- In the K-12 education sector, VCPS ensures that students have access to computers and devices to support their learning needs.

AFFORDABLE, ROBUST HIGH-SPEED INTERNET

Ensuring equitable access to affordable high-speed internet is a priority for fostering digital inclusion. Recognizing the importance of internet connectivity in today's world, efforts are being made to expand broadband infrastructure and reduce costs, allowing residents to connect to the digital realm with ease.

WHAT WE CURRENTLY HAVE:

- For mobile broadband, users can choose from Verizon, T-Mobile/Sprint, AT&T, US Cellular, Boost, Open Broadband, and various third-party providers like Tracfone.
- Fixed broadband services are offered by Spectrum and Centurylink.
- Public Wi-Fi access points can be found at Perry Memorial Library, VCPS schools, and numerous businesses. Additionally, there are outdoor Wi-Fi networks available in Henderson, located between City Hall and McGregor Hall, and along Main Street, as well as in Kittrell, between the Post Office and the Shell Station along US 1.
- For those in need of Wi-Fi on the go, VCPS offers a Kajeet lending program for students and families, and there is potential to establish partnerships with other providers to offer discounted or free Wi-Fi mobile hotspot lending programs.
- There are discount and low-cost offer programs available through the FCC's Accessible Communications for Everyone and Lifeline Consumers initiatives https://www.fcc.gov/acp.
- A new business called Desk 360 may offer computer setups for short-term rental or leasing, providing another option for public computer access.

ACCESS TO DIGITAL LITERACY SKILLS TRAINING

Access to digital literacy skills training plays a significant role in bridging the digital divide. Recognizing the importance of digital literacy in today's society, various organizations and programs have been established to provide training to individuals of all ages. These initiatives aim to equip residents with the necessary knowledge and skills to utilize digital tools, navigate online platforms, and engage in critical thinking in the digital world.

What we currently have:
- HTI is currently developing a digital literacy skills program for Vance County that will be open to the public.
- Other organizations involved in digital literacy include Vance County 4-H, Spoken Existence Ministries, Westcare NC, ReBuild Communities, and the Creating Success Mobile Learning Lab operated by Turning Point CDC.
- Workshops for digital literacy have been offered by the library and the Senior Center.
- Vance-Granville Community College (VGCC) offers a digital literacy course typically priced at $50 to $55. Additionally, VGCC's Small Business Center provides specialized individual classes catering to specific needs within the community.

Availability of Apps and Online Content

The availability of apps and online content designed for self-sufficiency plays a crucial role in empowering residents. Websites and applications that are user-friendly, easily accessible, and intuitive in design contribute to a positive user experience. By simplifying navigation and reducing barriers, individuals can confidently explore online resources, access necessary information, and carry out tasks independently. This self-sufficiency is vital in empowering residents to utilize digital tools effectively for various purposes, such as education, communication, and accessing essential services.

Collectively, by addressing these five elements, Vance County is actively working towards promoting digital inclusion and empowering its residents in the digital era. These efforts ensure that every individual has the opportunity to thrive in the digital age and fully participate in the numerous benefits offered by digital connectivity.

Quality Technical Support

In order to ensure smooth and successful digital experiences, quality technical support is essential. Residents should have access to reliable and knowledgeable technical support services that can assist them with troubleshooting, connectivity issues, and general technical queries. Quality technical support ensures that individuals can overcome any obstacles they may encounter, enabling them to maximize the benefits of their digital connectivity and devices.

What we currently have:
- Tech support services are provided by Data Forge, offering technical assistance to address various issues.
- VCPS is in the process of establishing a student tech center where students can obtain certification and then receive paid hourly wages for providing tech support to their peers.

CHALLENGES

Our alliance has faced some challenges throughout this process. Firstly, we were unable to obtain some crucial information from the community. The data we have is more general, and a 2019 survey focused only on businesses rather than residents. Gathering data from residents proved daunting as we struggled with how to get the word out and collect information. Postage rates, even at bulk rates, were too costly for this project at this time. We discussed using water bills to distribute the survey but could not guarantee a high return rate.

Additionally, the "availability" of broadband, as reported by the collected statistics, was misleading. Many homes reported having broadband available, but the speed was only up to 5 Mbps, which is insufficient for taking courses, submitting job applications, or conducting telehealth appointments.

Another challenge we faced was the availability of alliance members themselves. We were unable to gather all the key players we wanted from the start. However, we started strong with enthusiastic members. As the process wore on, the availability of these individuals proved challenging. Some members changed jobs or retired during the process, and attendance and participation at meetings waned over the last year.

WEBSITE INFORMATION

The Vance County Digital Inclusion Alliance did develop a website during our planning phase. The initial intent was to help us continue to glean information from the residents of Vance County, as we do recognize that most people at least have smartphones and can answer survey questions that will be fed into a database; this helps circumvent the challenges of postal mailings we encountered. However, we also wanted to have a one-stop shop that the community can come to for all elements of the digital divide, regardless of where their needs lie. The pages are set up to correspond to the elements of digital inclusion and include links to the various resources available. For example, Vance County's plan to expand broadband through the GREAT Grant program is available, digital literacy programs and workshops can be found here, and locations for low-cost or free technology will also be posted. Survey questions can be changed and updated as the county progresses–as one problem is solved, other focus areas may come to light. We anticipate this to be a fluid website that grows and adjusts to the needs of the residents.
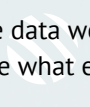
Identify the specific needs with regard to digital inclusion in Vance County.

01

Obj 1: Review the data we currently have to determine what else we need to know.
Obj 2: Ensure most current data is available to determine the who, where, and how many still have gaps.
Obj 3: Hold a public forum to elicit community input as appropriate.
Obj 4: Analyze the data received and summarize to drive next steps.

Identify key stakeholders within Vance County who are providing digital services to the residents.

02

Obj 1: Identify new entities who are providing access to digital literacy.
Obj 2: Identify new entities who are providing digital equipment (laptops, computers, etc.)
Obj 3: Identify new entities who are providing technical assistance.
Obj 4: Put comprehensive information onto a website/resource guide OR develop a resource guide including locations of services available.

Advocate on behalf of the residents of Vance County for better access to digital resources.

03

Obj 1: Provide letters of support for grant applications as appropriate.
Obj 2: Support residents and agencies in challenging service maps as appropriate.
Obj 3: Keep residents of Vance County informed of what the alliance is doing for them through various means, including but not limited to the website, a regular newsletter, or additional in-person forums.

Enhance current efforts to close the digital divide in Vance County.

04

Obj 1: Pursue grant awards as appropriate.
Obj 2: Continue to support collaborative efforts to address digital literacy skills training.
Obj 3: Explore new ways to satisfy needs as they arise, staying open to changing information and circumstances and new initiatives (such as state and federal opportunities).
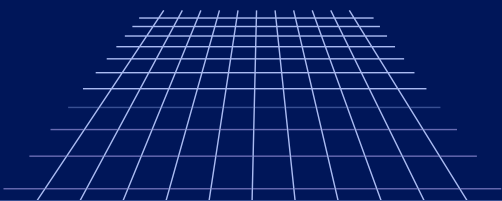
Great News for Vance County!

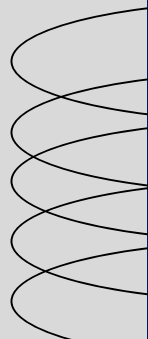## Funding Secured from GREAT Grant Program!

DIGITAL LITERACY SKILLS PROGRAMS

Learn and grow with our digital literacy skills programs. Accessible to all, we are collaborating with various organizations and locations to help you thrive in the digital world!

ENHANCING BROADBAND AVAILABILITY

Vance County has been awarded funding from the GREAT Grant program to improve and expand broadband access in our community. This means faster and more reliable internet for everyone!

CHECK THE TARGET AREAS

Discover which areas the grant will benefit on the NC Completing Access to Broadband (CAB) Planning Tool at arcgis.com.

Moving Forward Together

The Vance County Digital Inclusion Alliance is committed to our goals and objectives. As we grow, we'll welcome new partners, explore innovative solutions, and bridge the digital divide one step at a time.

Let's Build a Connected Future!

CONTRIBUTORS

HUBZONE TECHNOLOGY INITIATIVE

HENDERSON-VANCE COUNTY CHAMBER of Commerce

Kerr-Tar Regional Council Of Governments

HENDERSON VANCE COMMISSION

HENDERSON.VANCE COUNTY
Economic Development Commission

VG
Vance-Granville Community College

Vance County Schools

NC COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

GANG FREE

DATAFORGE

KD7 INC.

TurningPoint
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

Vance County Senior Center

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