

Digital Equity Challenges

Broadband internet access is a critical service needed for almost every aspect of our lives – from education, employment, and healthcare to civic and social engagement. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of reliable connectivity when homes were transformed into virtual learning, telework, and healthcare spaces and businesses relied on online sales. The global crisis shined a spotlight on and exacerbated many of our communities’ inequities.

In Boone, 19.3% of households do not have fixed broadband internet access, mostly impacting low-income households and older adults. However, broadband can only deliver benefits to those who can connect to it, afford it, and know how to use it. By these measures, broadband is still far from a universal service in Boone. A report by BroadbandNow.com reports Iowa’s average state-wide speed as 74.3 megabits per second. Only 18.5 percent of Iowa’s residents have low-price plan access. The website ranks Iowa as 45th in the U.S., for state broadband access, the report said.

Broadband is still relatively expensive, and survey results regularly show price as the number-one barrier to broadband adoption.¹ Many also lack digital skills—a slight majority (52%) of U.S. adults are still “relatively hesitant” when it comes to new technologies and digital skills, meaning they have low levels of digital skills, limited trust in the internet, or don’t often turn to it as a source.²

Families with school-aged children lacking a wired subscription in the home, face a disadvantage in learning and keeping pace with their peers. These same issues extend to telework, telehealth, e-commerce, distant socializing, and even media streaming. With so much economic activity now taking place online, every household without digital service or skills cannot participate. A full economic recovery will require everyone having access to services from their home.

Lack of internet access puts many at a major disadvantage, hindering important tasks, such as completing virtual learning or homework, researching and applying for jobs,

¹ Monica Anderson, “Mobile Technology and Home Broadband 2019” (Washington: Pew Research Center, 2019).

² John B. Horrigan, “Digital Readiness Gaps” (Washington: Pew Research Center, 2016).

accessing public services, accessing healthcare information and attending telehealth visits, accessing news and emergency alerts, and paying bills.

Our challenge is how to address these digital inequities with library services and programs. Now is an ideal time for libraries to focus on building the digital equity infrastructure, and skills.

Vision and Principles

Digital Equity is an initiative of the Ericson Public Library. Our vision of *Ericson Connects* is for all residents to have reliable access to high-speed broadband internet and the necessary devices from our library and assist in developing programs and services to build technology skills to fully participate in the community and economy. Our work is currently guided by the following three principles:

Connectivity: The Library will invest in infrastructure and network connectivity to support in-library access or hotspot devices for residents.

Access: All residents can access the internet and cost is not a barrier.

Education & Training: Residents have the appropriate skills necessary to be successful on the internet through technology services and programs.