

---

# INTERNET FOR ALL

---

## Needs Assessment Guide



U.S. Department of Commerce  
National Telecommunications and Information Administration

# Internet for All

## Introduction

---

The federal government is making historic investments in high-speed Internet access for all Americans; one important component of this investment is the State Digital Equity Planning Grant Program, which is a formula-based grant for all 50 States, Washington D.C., and Puerto Rico, as well as the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, American Samoa, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Indian Tribes, Alaska Native entities, and Native Hawaiian organizations.

Developing a comprehensive Digital Equity Plan requires careful planning and intentionality. The State Digital Equity Planning Grant Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) Section IV.C.1.b.ii. requires plans developed with grant funds to include “a digital equity needs assessment, including a comprehensive assessment of the baseline from which the State is working and the State’s identification of the barriers to digital equity faced generally and by each of the covered populations in the State.” In addition, the Broadband, Equity, Access, and Deployment Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) Section IV.B.3.b. also requires that the Five-Year Action Plan include the results of a needs assessment for underrepresented communities and an asset inventory. Subsequently, recipients of both grant programs must be sure to align their strategy to conduct a needs assessment that fulfills both the State Digital Equity Planning Grant and the BEAD Program requirements as appropriate.

*This guidance document is for informational purposes only and is intended solely to assist grant recipients in better understanding the National Telecommunication and Information Administration (NTIA) State Digital Equity Planning Grant Program, and the requirements set forth in the program’s NOFO. This guidance does not and is not intended to supersede, modify, or otherwise alter applicable statutory or regulatory requirements, or the specific requirements set forth in the program’s NOFO. In all cases, statutory and regulatory mandates, and the requirements set forth in the program’s NOFO, shall prevail over any inconsistencies contained in the guidance below.*

*Many of the methods in this resource may implicate the Human Subjects Research (HSR) Specific Award Condition (SAC). Please refer to the [HSR SAC Guidance for State Digital Equity Planning Grants](#) and comply with all applicable provisions before starting any activities that implicate HSR.*

### **What is the Purpose of a Needs Assessment?**

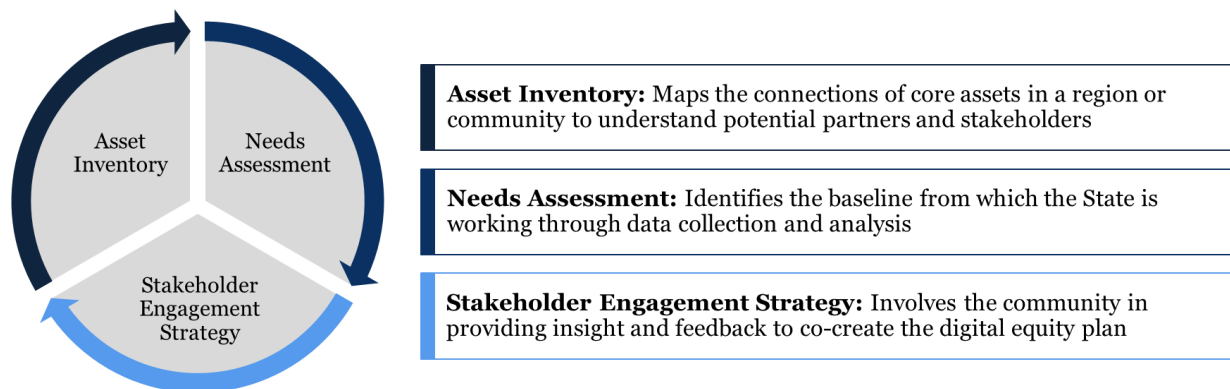
The purpose of a digital equity needs assessment is to identify the baseline from which states and territories are working and the barriers to digital equity. Barriers could be related to affordability, devices, digital skills, technical support, and digital navigation. The needs assessment will serve as a current baseline from which the State/Territory can measure its progress toward closing the digital divide; these baseline measures will inform Plan objectives and implementation strategies in order to set achievable targets.

Under the State Digital Equity Planning Grant Program, Tribal entities are not required to conduct and record formal needs assessments, and instead should identify barriers to digital equity that focal populations face. States and Territories should, as part of identifying the needs of populations within their border, make a concerted effort to understand the needs and barriers of Tribal entities that can be incorporated in the overall needs assessment. States should ensure alignment with and integration of specific Tribal entities’ digital equity plans in their overall State Digital Equity Plan.

Identifying barriers and conducting a needs assessment will require data collection, both qualitative and quantitative, as well as analysis and evaluation. A needs assessment follows the collection of this information and focuses on the analysis of this inventory to identify gaps in support and community ecosystems.

Needs assessments and asset mapping are often done concurrently, and these assessments will need to be continuously updated throughout the life of State Digital Equity Plan development and plan implementation. To support comprehensive asset mapping, NTIA has developed and released an [Asset Mapping Guide](#) which outlines data equity gathering best practices.

The asset inventory, needs assessment, and stakeholder engagement strategy are closely interrelated and can be used to iterate upon and inform each other.



Needs assessment data collection and analysis should be responsive to the statutory requirements put forth in the Infrastructure Act and the NOFO. The statutory requirements set forth in Section 60304(c)(1) of the Infrastructure Act define certain measurable objectives that must be included in each State Digital Equity Plan. NOFO Section IV.C.1.b.i reiterates these objectives, stating:

“Measurable objectives for documenting and promoting, among each Covered Population located in that State—

- a. The availability of, and affordability of access to, fixed and wireless broadband technology;
- b. The online accessibility and inclusivity of public resources and services;
- c. Digital literacy;
- d. Awareness of, and the use of, measures to secure the online privacy of, and cybersecurity with respect to, an individual; and

- e. The availability and affordability of consumer devices and technical support for those devices.”

## How to Conduct a Needs Assessment

---

Conduct the needs assessment by performing surveys and analyzing existing data sets to identify and understand needs and barriers in your communities. Use your asset inventory to inform your needs assessment. If the asset inventory illuminates significant gaps for covered populations or technologically underserved communities, it may be beneficial to intentionally use multiple methods to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges communities are facing.

Needs assessment can be conducted in many ways. This guide focuses on best practices for focus groups, surveys, interviews, and questionnaires as methods for assessing community need. To develop a full picture of community need, multiple methods can be employed simultaneously. Part of conducting the needs assessment is determining which methods are most appropriate for your communities to identify gaps and barriers. Before starting any formal methods for the needs assessment, talk with the people who are doing digital inclusion and equity work and lived experts—those who experience these barriers on a day-to-day basis—to get an understanding of the well-known barriers. These conversations, in addition to your asset inventory, will help inform which methods might be most effective in different contexts.<sup>1</sup> In addition to talking with your digital equity and inclusion partners, consider reaching out to experienced researchers at universities or digital inclusion organizations.

The below sections provide example questions that can help understand the landscape of digital equity aligned to each of the measurable objectives named in the NOFO. The questions are by no means exhaustive and should be modified or adjusted and tested prior to use to understand the specific needs within your State or Territory.

Be aware that different types of questions such as multiple choice, 1-5 Likert scales, or open-ended text boxes may require different tools or methods to implement in existing data collection tools or software. Include instructions to the respondents that clearly communicate how to input responses; do not assume prior knowledge or use of survey tools. Further, particular attention should be paid to data collection tools that may have multiple methods of deployment such as online, paper copies, or phone, to make sure the data collected is comparable. For example, an online survey tool may impose character limits on short-answer questions, whereas paper surveys would not. Lastly, your data collection tools should be evaluated to determine if the questions measure what they are intended to measure. For examples, a survey question intended to measure access to high-speed Internet is effective only if the respondent understands what high-speed Internet is and therefore, you may have to include speed thresholds in such a question.

---

<sup>1</sup> Many of these methods may implicate the Human Subjects Research (HSR) Specific Award Condition (SAC). Please refer to the [HSR SAC Guidance for State Digital Equity Planning Grants](#).

## Surveys

Conducting a survey will provide a set of quantitative data that can serve as a helpful baseline; the data can be analyzed and conducting follow-up surveys in future years can help measure:

- The success of outreach efforts;
- Results of investments in digital literacy training and digital equity programs;
- Changes over time to the identified needs and barriers; and
- The impact of the Digital Equity Plan once it is implemented.

Surveys can be conducted through email, social media, mail, robocalls, text campaigns, and/or field canvassing. They can be also conducted using a random sample or with intentionality behind how participants and communities are selected. The survey questions themselves can center around the types of barriers faced by the general population and covered populations.

### Sample Survey Questions

<b>Type of Barrier</b>	<b>Sample Questions</b>
Availability of fixed and wireless broadband technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>In what ways do you use Internet service that are relevant to your life? (Select all that apply)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Education</i></li> <li>○ <i>Work</i></li> <li>○ <i>Entertainment</i></li> <li>○ <i>Communicating with family and friends</i></li> <li>○ <i>All of the above</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Affordability of access to fixed and wireless broadband technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>How much does your household pay per month for Internet service?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>I do not pay for Internet service</i></li> <li>○ <i>Less than or equal to \$30/month</i></li> <li>○ <i>Between \$30/month and \$50/month</i></li> <li>○ <i>Between \$50/month and \$70/month</i></li> <li>○ <i>\$70/month or more</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>
The online accessibility and inclusivity of public resources and services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What public spaces are you aware of that provide free access to the Internet? (Select all that apply)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Public library</i></li> <li>○ <i>Community center</i></li> <li>○ <i>High school</i></li> <li>○ <i>Other (please list)</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Digital literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Which of the following skills do you hope to gain from learning how to access the Internet? (Select all that apply)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>How to communicate with friends and family</i></li> <li>○ <i>How to find a job online</i></li> <li>○ <i>How to watch videos</i></li> <li>○ <i>How to find information about public resources and events</i></li> <li>○ <i>Other (please list)</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Awareness of, and the use of, measures to secure the online privacy of, and cybersecurity with respect to, an individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate your ability to detect suspicious behavior online?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>1 – Unable to detect</i></li> <li>○ <i>5 – Able to detect</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>

The availability and affordability of consumer devices and technical support for those devices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What kind of devices do you regularly have access to? (Select all that apply)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Laptop</i></li> <li>○ <i>Desktop computer</i></li> <li>○ <i>Smartphone</i></li> <li>○ <i>Tablet</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>
--	--

### Sample Surveys

Title	Developer
<a href="#">Digital Inclusion Community Needs Assessment</a>	WebJunction, International City/County Management Association (ICMA), and TechSoup Global
<a href="#">DigitalC Survey of Internet Use</a>	DigitalC

### Interviews

Interviews are smaller, one-on-one or one-to-some forums to collect qualitative insights from community members that can provide specific insight into community needs. It may be helpful to conduct interviews with active community leaders who may have thought deeply about digital inclusion needs in their community already.

### Sample Interview Questions

Type of Barrier	Sample Questions
Availability of fixed and wireless broadband technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Why is there a gap in your community between the number of people who have access to the Internet but have not yet adopted the technology?</i></li> </ul>
Affordability of access to fixed and wireless broadband technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What would the ideal cost of Internet be for those in your community?</i></li> <li>• <i>What is your awareness of low-cost providers in your area, and what has your experience been like?</i></li> </ul>
The online accessibility and inclusivity of public resources and services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What challenges do you face in accessing the Internet?</i></li> <li>• <i>What challenges do you see others facing in accessing the Internet?</i></li> </ul>
Digital literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What kind of online activities should be promoted in your community?</i></li> </ul>
Awareness of, and the use of, measures to secure the online privacy of, and cybersecurity with respect to, an individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What types of risks do you see your community facing with increasing online presence?</i></li> </ul>
The availability and affordability of consumer devices and technical support for those devices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What kind of devices are most relevant to members of your community?</i></li> </ul>
Other barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Are there barriers specific to your community when it comes to accessing the Internet?</i></li> <li>• <i>Are there specific things your community would benefit from in learning how to use the Internet?</i></li> </ul>

## Focus Groups

Focus groups can be helpful in collecting qualitative data and expanding upon insights gathered from quantitative findings. For example, if quantitative data reveals a deficit in digital skills present in one group that is not present in others, it may be helpful to host a focus group to build a deeper understanding of the issues at hand.

Focus groups should be intentional in efforts to understand community need, and thus should be conducted where community members live or work. They can and should take place in multiple languages when needed. The focus group questions themselves should be open-ended to allow the gathering of qualitative insights.

### Sample Focus Group Questions

<b>Type of Barrier</b>	<b>Sample Questions</b>
Availability of fixed and wireless broadband technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Why don't you use the Internet?</i></li> </ul>
Affordability of access to fixed and wireless broadband technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Do you think that the cost of Internet service is too high for you?</i></li> </ul>
The online accessibility and inclusivity of public resources and services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What challenges do you face in accessing the Internet?</i></li> <li>• <i>If not at home, where do you go to access the Internet?</i></li> </ul>
Digital literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What skills, if any, do you hope to gain from accessing the Internet?</i></li> </ul>
Awareness of, and the use of, measures to secure the online privacy of, and cybersecurity with respect to, an individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>What organizations in your community do you trust?</i></li> </ul>
The availability and affordability of consumer devices and technical support for those devices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Where are some places members of your community frequent that could be used as sites for technical support or digital navigation?</i></li> </ul>
Other barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Are there barriers specific to your community when it comes to accessing the Internet?</i></li> <li>• <i>Are there specific things your community would benefit from in learning how to use the Internet?</i></li> </ul>

## Questionnaires

Questionnaires can be helpful tools to gather focused insights from a specific community or community group. Respondents can answer on paper or electronically, and questionnaires typically include both yes/no questions and short answer questions to generate qualitative data; alternatively, the focal point of surveys is generally to collect quantitative and comparable data.

### Sample Questionnaire Items

Type of Barrier	Sample Questions
Availability of fixed and wireless broadband technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you use the Internet?               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Yes</li> <li>○ No</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Affordability of access to fixed and wireless broadband technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you ever been charged extra for going over your data limit for Internet service?               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Yes</li> <li>○ No</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
The online accessibility and inclusivity of public resources and services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you use the Internet on a daily basis?               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Yes</li> <li>○ No</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Digital literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are you interested in taking classes online to learn new skills?               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Yes</li> <li>○ No</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Awareness of, and the use of, measures to secure the online privacy of, and cybersecurity with respect to, an individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you or someone you know ever been a victim of an online scam?               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Yes</li> <li>○ No</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
The availability and affordability of consumer devices and technical support for those devices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you know where you can go to find technical support for your personal devices when you need it?               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Yes</li> <li>○ No</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Other barriers	

## The Needs Assessment and the State Digital Equity Plan

NTIA has published a [State Digital Equity Plan Guidance](#) document as well as a [State Digital Equity Plan Template](#). While both are optional resources, they may be helpful in structuring your State Digital Equity Plan to meet the requirements of the State Digital Equity Planning Grant Program.

The digital equity needs assessment is just one component of the State Digital Equity Plan and the [Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment \(BEAD\) Program Five-Year Action Plan](#) and is intended to serve as a baseline for understanding digital equity needs within a State. Subsequent to, or in tandem with completing an asset inventory and needs assessment, you can assess where further outreach is required and develop their coordination and outreach strategy as well as their implementation strategy. As stated in the State Digital Equity Planning Grant NOFO, the implementation strategy must be “holistic” and should “establish measurable goals, objectives, and proposed core activities to address the needs of covered populations.”

The proposed core activities will stem directly from needs expressed by community members when conducting the needs assessment.



## How to Use the Information Gathered

Needs assessments identify the baseline from which States and Territories should work to inform their measurable objectives and implementation strategies.

Digital equity plans are by no means static documents; they can and should be iterated upon as information is gathered. For example, a needs assessment may be used to inform an initial stakeholder engagement strategy; but in stakeholder interviews, pertinent information could arise, including additional communities to survey. Returning to communities surveyed and assessed in subsequent years can help build an understanding of how effective outreach strategies were since the initial survey was conducted.

The outcome of a needs assessment should illuminate the types of barriers faced by the general population and by covered populations. Covered populations will have barriers specific to them that may need to be addressed intentionally within a broader strategy for the general population. Sum up findings from the needs assessment by covering the following topics:

- The needs/barriers felt consistently by the population at large
- The needs/barriers that impact the general population, but are more intense or manifest in particular ways for certain populations, including but not limited to covered populations
- The needs/barriers that are unique to specific populations, including but not limited to covered populations

The below examples are for informational purposes only and are intended solely to assist grant recipients in better understanding how to conduct a digital equity needs assessment. This document is intended to provide external examples of well-formed digital equity needs assessments that may serve as helpful references that support each State/Territory in developing its digital equity needs assessment. **The examples featured are third party resources and thus do not adhere to the requirements of the State Digital Equity Planning Grant NOFO.**

Title	Developer
<a href="#">Needs Assessment Guidebook: Supporting the Development of District and School Needs Assessment</a>	State Support Network
<a href="#">Digital Equity Community Needs Assessment Survey</a>	Literacy Minnesota & the Minnesota Department of Education
<a href="#">Digital Inclusion Survey and Assessment: A Report on Digital Connectivity Capabilities and Outcomes in San Antonio and Bexar County</a>	City of San Antonio Office of Innovation
<a href="#">Digital Equity Needs and Opportunities Report</a>	Office for Community Technology, City of Portland
<a href="#">Nashville Digital Inclusion Needs Assessment</a>	Digital Inclusion and Access Taskforce
<a href="#">Digital Equity Playbook: How City Leaders Can Bridge the Digital Divide</a>	National League of Cities