



LAKE COUNTY

BROADBAND & DIGITAL EQUITY ACTION PLAN

APPENDIX D. STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT REPORT

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Stakeholder Engagement Overview



Through this process, we have worked to engage key stakeholders and members of the public from the Lake County community



Engagement Objectives



To create an actionable plan that meets the needs of all Lake County residents, Lake County aimed to continually and tactically engage stakeholders throughout the development of the Broadband and Digital Equity Action Plan. This document details what actions Lake County took to interact with stakeholders and gather their feedback as part of the Plan’s development.

Engagement Objectives



Collaborate with county agencies, stakeholder groups, and communities to:

- Build off and complement Lake County’s previous broadband engagement efforts
- Mobilize a diverse stakeholder ecosystem through four distinct, tailored outreach methods
- Identify and understand community concerns and needs and gather stakeholder feedback for the development of the countywide Plan

Engagement Methods

One-on-One Interviews

Questionnaires

Focus Group Meeting

Community Meeting

How many stakeholders were engaged?

33

Stakeholders
Interviewed

One-on-one interviews gave the opportunity for stakeholders to provide their insights on the current state of Lake County broadband and its impact to their operations/programs.

33

Questionnaire
Responses

Questionnaires identified existing digital inclusion activities throughout Lake County and groups that have digital equity needs.

24

Focus Group
Participants

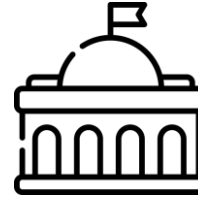
Local government leaders and other key stakeholders identified potential projects and collaboration opportunities for Lake County to pursue in closing the digital divide.

20

Community
Attendees

Community members from across Lake County came together to discuss their lived-experiences and what the County should take to address the local digital divide.

Stakeholder Entities Engaged



State & Federal
Government



County & Local
Government



Elected Officials



Public Libraries



Schools &
Educational
Institutions



Nonprofits/Com
munity Anchors



Workforce & Economic
Development Agencies



Public Housing
Agencies



Internet Service
Providers

Key Question: What is the current state of broadband in Lake County?

Comments from stakeholders on the current state of broadband in Lake County focused on the quality/availability of existing broadband, digital equity concerns, leveraging community anchor institutions

Broadband accessibility issues largely reflects quantitative analysis

- Communities without broadband access in Lake County are not confined to one particular geography
- Community members and stakeholders stated that areas in the north and west in the county had poor internet speeds/quality
- Lower population density is a significant reason why additional broadband investment hasn't been made in underserved or unserved areas of the county

Digital equity concerns are concentrated amongst specific populations

- More urban areas of the county have challenges related to digital adoption
- Seniors, non-English speakers, people in poverty have additional barriers to digital literacy and digital adoption compared to other populations
- Demand for additional digital equity programming (devices, digital literacy trainings, etc.) exceeds supply
- While individuals expressed support for digital devices for students, most schools have device lending programs in place

Libraries, community anchor institutions, and other computer labs provide a digital lifeline

- Residents from underserved or unserved areas make use of public Wi-Fi from libraries and other institutions due to poorer service speeds at home
- Individuals who lack home-internet or devices leverage local device lending programs
- Existing digital equity programming and device lending programs are siloed to particular communities and are not significantly coordinated between areas

Consensus that digital access and digital literacy is essential to living in Lake County

- Digital adoption and literacy is key to accessing social services, banking, jobs, and other opportunities that are a critical part of modern-day life
- Residents without high-quality internet feel left out and isolated from the broader community

Key Question: What should Lake County do to address the digital divide?

Stakeholders leveraged their subject-matter expertise to provide insights on how Lake County should address broadband infrastructure, digital equity issues, and what role Lake County should take in solving those issues

Broadband infrastructure requires outside intervention

- Communities without existing high-quality internet access require third-party investment to ensure deployment of new infrastructure
- Potential solutions for reaching unserved and underserved populations include regulatory reform, outside investment, promoting competition between ISPs, a Lake County led internet, and more
- Need for long term planning to address aged infrastructure

Effectively leverage state and federal funding opportunities

- Lake County is not the only entity looking to close the digital divide in the region. Potential opportunities for collaboration with other municipalities.
- Both the state and federal government will be relying on governments like Lake County to effectively identify underserved and unserved areas and administer digital equity programming
- Lake County should be prepared to compete for both new funding opportunities and make use of existing grant programs

Equip residents with the ability to be digitally included

- Teaching residents how to use digital services and equipping them with devices/internet will allow nonprofits and government agencies to more effectively and efficiently provide residents with services (e.g. knowledge of how to apply for benefits online)
- Lake County government agencies would benefit from better broadband availability in the field to more effectively provide service and more quickly communicate with residents about emergency and non-emergency matters

Lake County can lead partnerships to address broadband access and digital inclusion challenges

- Existing digital inclusion initiatives may not always be coordinated throughout the County
- Lack of central group leading effort to address all aspects of Lake County's digital divide
- The County can leverage the work of existing stakeholders working to address digital inclusion challenges (from those doing ACP sign up to individuals at the Lake County court system providing digital navigation assistance)

One-on-One Interviews



Key stakeholders were engaged as part of the one-on-one interview process

1:1 Interviews

To capture a nuanced, comprehensive understanding of the digital inclusion landscape throughout the county, we engaged government and representative stakeholder organizations that can speak to the **broader digital needs of Lake County** in 1:1 discussions.

We engaged in 1:1 discussions with groups such as local governments and agencies, anchor and educational institutions, and community-based organizations whose work reaches directly into the homes of Lake County residents. We also conducted 1:1 interviews with ISPs.

Meeting Format Approach

The interviews were each roughly 30-minutes, held virtually.

33 individuals across 22 unique entities (including County Departments, elected officials, state government, educational institutions, nonprofits, Internet Service Providers, and more) participated in one-on-one stakeholder interviews.



One-on-one interviews were structured to identify new opportunities

Interview Structure

Welcome and Context (1-2 Minutes)

Brief overview of project and introductions

Structured Questions (18 Minutes)

Interview segment focused on information-gathering related to broadband and digital equity assets, insights on current needs, and priority areas

Follow Up Questions (8 Minutes)

Additional time allocated for follow-up questions and discussion

Call to Action (1-2 Minutes)

Interview segment to prompt discussion of potential role of organization in supporting implementation of broadband and digital inclusion activities

Summary of Questions (further tailored for each interview)

Introduction

1. Tell us a bit about yourself, your department/organization/agency, and your role.

Organization Questions

2. How does broadband and digital inclusion impact your organization, the work you do, and/or the populations you serve?

3. Does your organization have any current broadband or digital inclusion assets or initiatives (e.g., fiber, conduit, public Wi-Fi)?

Current State of Broadband & Digital Inclusion

4. How would you characterize the overall current state of broadband and digital inclusion in Lake County?

a. What is working well / where are gaps or areas that are un(der)served? Consider: coverage, quality, service affordability, device affordability, and digital literacy/mentoring.

Future State of Broadband & Digital Inclusion

5. What, in your opinion, does the future state of broadband access look like in Lake County? What impact would more inclusive broadband access have on the county?

6. What are some potential initiatives or project ideas to get there?

Call to Action

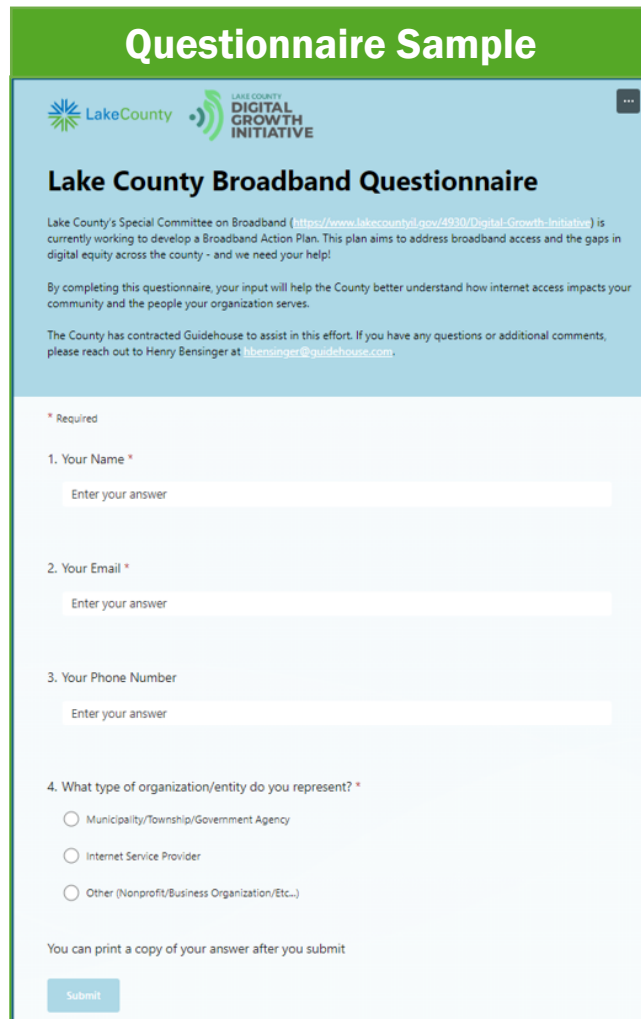
7. How might your organization work with Lake County to implement these and other initiatives?

Questionnaires



Questionnaires were distributed to stakeholders to source additional insight

Questionnaire Sample



The screenshot shows a web-based questionnaire titled "Lake County Broadband Questionnaire". At the top, there are logos for Lake County and the Lake County Digital Growth Initiative. The text explains that the questionnaire is part of a Broadband Action Plan to address digital equity. It asks for the respondent's name, email, and phone number. The fourth question asks for the type of organization or entity represented, with radio button options for "Municipality/Township/Government Agency", "Internet Service Provider", and "Other (Nonprofit/Business Organization/Etc...)". A "Submit" button is at the bottom.

Lake County Broadband Questionnaire

Lake County's Special Committee on Broadband (<https://www.lakecountynil.gov/4930/Digital-Growth-Initiative>) is currently working to develop a Broadband Action Plan. This plan aims to address broadband access and the gaps in digital equity across the county - and we need your help!

By completing this questionnaire, your input will help the County better understand how internet access impacts your community and the people your organization serves.

The County has contracted Guidehouse to assist in this effort. If you have any questions or additional comments, please reach out to Henry Bensinger at hbensinger@guidhouse.com.

* Required

1. Your Name *

Enter your answer

2. Your Email *

Enter your answer

3. Your Phone Number

Enter your answer

4. What type of organization/entity do you represent? *

Municipality/Township/Government Agency

Internet Service Provider

Other (Nonprofit/Business Organization/Etc...)

You can print a copy of your answer after you submit

Submit

About the Questionnaire

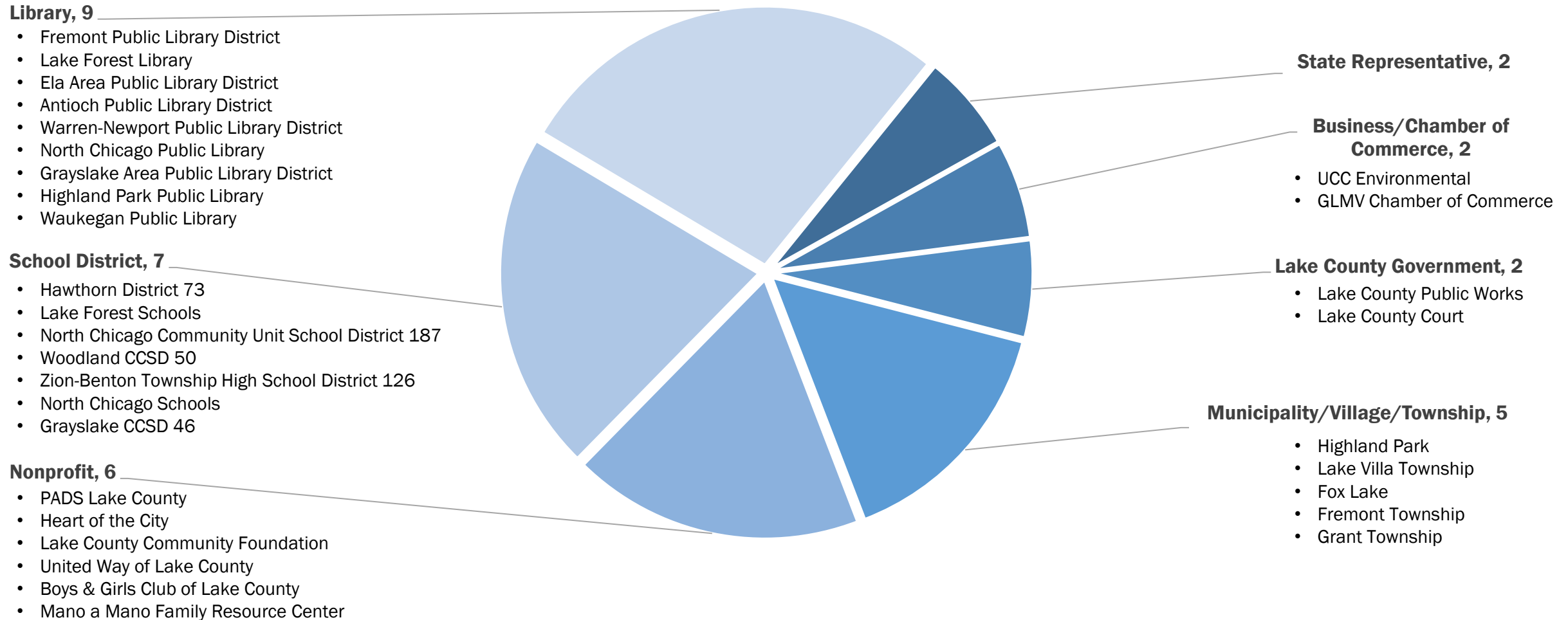
Questionnaires were meant to inform asset mapping and broadband needs and gaps; catalog current digital equity initiatives; and give stakeholder groups a method to provide direct feedback. Questions included the following:

- What plans/programs does your organization offer in Lake County this is focused on increasing access to the internet, internet capable devices, etc.?
- What challenges do populations that your organization serve face in accessing the internet?
- How can Lake County or other entities support your organization in creating programs to foster internet connectivity for the people your organization serves?

Questionnaires were designed for four different types of respondents:

1. General Stakeholder Groups (ex. community anchor institutions, educational institutions, etc.)
2. Government Entities
3. Internet Service Providers
4. Elected Officials

Respondents represented a wide range of Lake County stakeholders



Libraries, schools, and community organizations/nonprofits are providing digital equity assets across Lake County

Libraries and schools are providing significant digital resources:

Devices

- Almost all libraries are providing some type of digital device to local residents and have onsite computer resources
- Library devices are loaned out, but are limited in quantity
- Some schools are either directly providing devices to students or are assisting families in signing up for programs to get devices and other essentials

Digital Literacy & Education

- Libraries provide a source of either on-demand tech assistance with several responding libraries having a dedicated help-service
- There are often specific types of courses available that are regularly provided to residents or that are available on-demand
- Tech assistance and courses varies between libraries

Providing Internet

- Public libraries are a reliable source of public WiFi in most communities with computers available for use
- Several schools directly pay for the internet for families in need. At one school, students experiencing homelessness get a phone that can act as a hotspot
- Several schools assist students in signing up for ACP and similar programs

Nonprofits are providing services themselves or acting as connectors:

Direct Services

- Nonprofits are acting as community anchors providing onsite WiFi to clients
- One nonprofit is providing free public WiFi to its neighborhood in the Southside of Waukegan
- Digital literacy classes, loaning devices, and facilitating device donations are all other ways that nonprofits are contributing

Assisting Clients

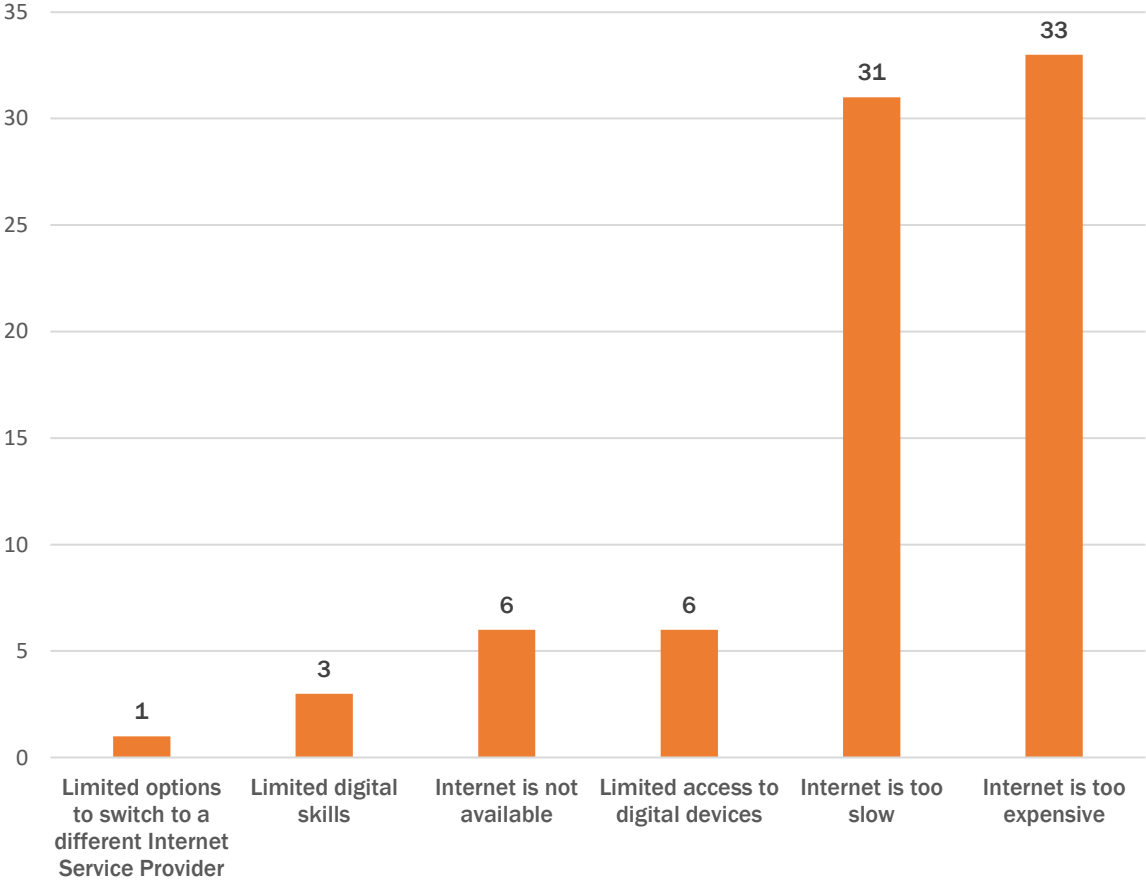
- United Way leverages its 211 service to connect individuals with digital equity resources in their communities
- Nonprofits assist clients in signing up for existing government services that they qualify for

Funding Others

- Other nonprofits are funding the work of other nonprofits or even funding local library programs

Responses indicate a wide range of digital equity need

Which of the following challenges (if any) do your residents/clients face in accessing the internet?



Response Analysis

- All questionnaire respondents indicated that **internet is too expensive in Lake County**
- Many respondents indicated that internet is too slow in Lake County

Questionnaire respondents offered a range of suggestions for how Lake County could help

Make use of existing digital programming, stakeholders, and services:

Support Existing Programming

- Libraries noted that they are already providing significant digital equity services and requested that Lake County support their existing work

Coordinate Stakeholders

- Lake County could **bring together community partners** that are already working to address digital equity
- Lake County could work with ISPs and other entities to coordinate the planning and rollout of new infrastructure

Communicate with the Public

- **Publicize and connect residents to existing programming**
- Engage with the public to ensure they are signed up for ACP and other programs like Lifeline

Fund new projects to close the digital divide:

Devices & Digital Training

- Nonprofits and libraries directly asked for increased **funding for digital devices and digital literacy training** (in the form of grants to providers)
- Increase the presence of digital literacy programming in Lake County

Better Broadband Infrastructure

- Nonprofits and libraries noted that there was a **need for better internet in certain areas or parts of Lake County**
- Some respondents wanted government provided broadband for residents
- Offer low-cost or no-cost internet options

Focus on vulnerable groups

- Multiple respondents noted that **seniors and immigrant groups had particular digital equity needs** and suggested Lake County pursue programming for those specific populations

Focus Group



The focus group featured key stakeholders engaged in addressing the digital divide

Focus Group Overview

As part of the stakeholder engagement, a focus group meeting was held on August 23rd, 2023. This meeting was attended by 24 stakeholders across the community and was held for 2 hours. The focus group meeting included discussions on regional broadband needs and digital equity from the perspective of local governments, non-profits, and other stakeholder groups.



Focus group format and response themes

Focus Group Structure

Welcome and Context (5 Minutes)

Brief overview of project and introductions

Lake County Growth Initiative (15 Minutes)

Discussed Special Committee on Broadband and the goal of improving broadband access, FCC definition of broadband, broadband availability data and maps.

Group Discussion – Broadband & Digital Equity Needs (40 Minutes)

Discussed challenges people in the community have experienced

Group Discussion – Potential Projects and Solutions (40 Minutes)

Discussion on how the challenges should be addressed

Final Thoughts (20 Minutes)

Recap on themes that emerged from discussion

Summary of Group Discussion

Group Discussion – Broadband & Digital Equity Needs

1. Are there locations in your area that do not have strong internet access? Is this reflected in the map shown
2. Where do people access the internet in your community? Are there particular community anchor institutions in your area?
3. What are the biggest challenges related to broadband and digital equity in your community? Are there access, affordability, or adoption challenges?
4. What are the major drivers of those challenges? Who in your communities have you seen struggle the most with accessing internet?

Themes from Discussion

- Access and affordability are key factors to addressing the digital divide
- Need to educate people on core digital skills
- Must prevent people from “falling behind”

Group Discussion – Potential Projects and Solutions

Review of leading practices in broadband accessibility and adoption point to strong partnerships and a focus on cost-lowering solutions.

1. What projects or initiatives are planned or in-progress to address these digital equity challenges in your community?
2. What projects or solutions do you think should be taking place to improve broadband accessibility in Lake County?

Themes from Discussion

- Lake County serving as a convener to develop a comprehensive plan
- There is not one solution; requires a combination of infrastructure, training, devices
- Streamline coordination and improve communication to ensure all resident are aware of programs and services
- Emphasize community and intergovernmental partnerships

Community Meeting



The Community Meeting revealed additional information about residents' lived experiences

Community Meeting Overview

As part of the stakeholder engagement, Lake County held a community meeting on September 13th, 2023. This meeting was attended by over 20 community members representing different communities across the county.

This event was open to the general public including Lake County residents and all stakeholders doing business in Lake County.

The purpose of the community meeting was to bring constituents together, listen to concerns and priorities, and capture their perspectives on broadband accessibility, affordability, and digital literacy. Participants also provided feedback on potential projects Lake County is considering.

The meeting also served as an opportunity to inform and connect residents with resources like ACP.



Community meeting format and response themes

Public Community Meeting Structure

Welcome and Context (10 Minutes)
Brief overview of project and introductions

Broadband Overview (15 Minutes)
Brief overview on broadband, discuss why it is important and impact on daily life.

Affordable Connectivity Program (10 Minutes)
Summary of the FCC program that provides a discount on monthly internet bills for qualifying low-income households; how to enroll

Interactive Discussion (75 Minutes)
Review broadband availability and broadband subscription maps of Lake County; discuss access and adoption of broadband and the community needs

Final Thoughts (10 Minutes)
Open discussion with participants and review of proposed solutions

Summary of Group Discussion

Small Group Discussion - Review of Broadband Availability and Broadband Subscription Maps

1. Do these maps reflect your experience with broadband in Lake County?
2. Is your home or business well-served by high-speed internet?

Themes from Discussion

- Reliability of current service
- Lack of high-speed options

Group Discussion – Individual Experiences

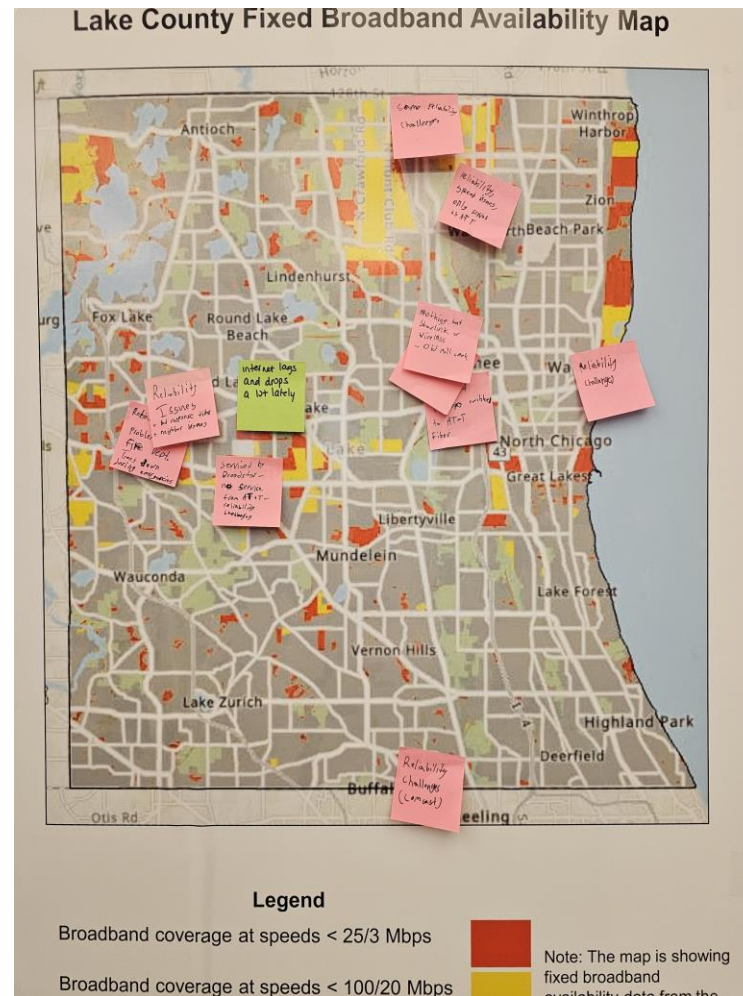
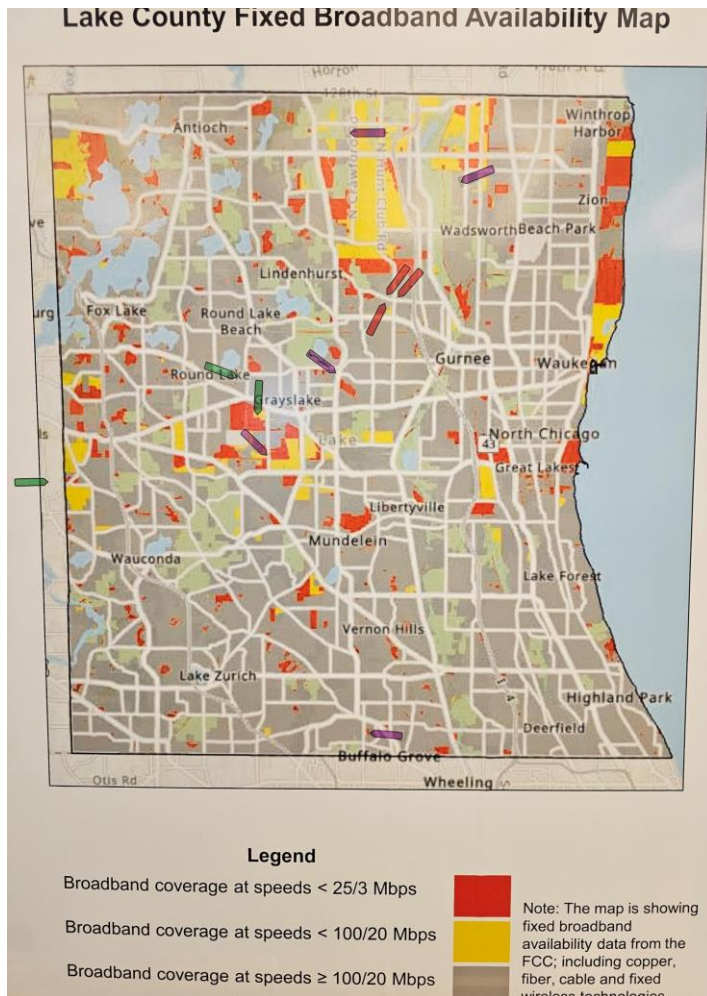
Review of challenges participants have encountered.

1. What internet services or providers are available in your community/area?
2. What do you and your family use the internet for in your everyday life? What types of devices are most used or most important in your household?
3. What are the challenges to getting an internet subscription in Lake County?
4. Do you rely on schools, libraries, community organizations, or other places for free WiFi access, computer access, or digital skills training?
5. How might your community benefit from having better internet access?
6. What should the County consider including in its Broadband Plan? What improvements would you like to see?

Themes from Discussion

- Participants use the internet for work, school, healthcare, entertainment, and communicating with family and friends. Need access to reliable, high-speed internet
- Those that cannot access broadband service are being left behind, since so many services are dependent on use of the internet
- Lake County has many great organizations (non-profits, schools, libraries) that can be a part of the solution
- Opportunity for additional regulation and policies to assist broadband efforts
- Need access to devices and digital literacy training

At the community meeting, attendees marked where they experienced internet issues



Analyzing the Maps

At the community meeting, Lake County provided broadband availability maps for residents to interact with. Stickers and post-it notes were used to mark where attendees experienced broadband and digital equity challenges.

These stickers/notes generally aligned with areas that FCC data and mapping showed lower broadband speeds.

Additionally, the notes show that community meeting attendees came from wide range of Lake County regions.

On the notes, some residents remarked that they faced:

- Reliability and speed issues even when an area was marked as served
- Lacked internet options beyond fixed wireless or satellite



LAKE COUNTY
**DIGITAL
GROWTH
INITIATIVE**