

government partners together to discuss creative options and establish the best approach to bring high-speed Internet access to all residents.

Performance Measurements

Establish appropriate performance measurements to track the implementation of the *Plan*. These should be measurable and obtainable goals tracked via an ongoing collection of quantitative and qualitative data that is disaggregated by race.

Outreach and Communication

Develop an outreach and communication strategy to reach local, regional, State, and federal governments on the *Plan* recommendations and encourage its implementation.

Advocacy and Education

Create an advocacy platform for digital equity and literacy, and educate local supporters on how to help carry it out.

Government/Nonprofit Support

Information sharing amongst local, regional, State, philanthropic, and federal funding sources is imperative to ensure that funding opportunities can be reviewed and applied for. Additionally, information for residents about government, nonprofit, and corporate programs to reduce their Internet costs located in one place would be a helpful resource. A single point of contact and/or website resource would make this process easier for everyone.



Cultural / Community Awareness and Residential Stories

Continue to collect stories and information from residents that support the need for high-speed broadband Internet, specifically from Latinx, Black, and rural community members to ensure that the solutions FCDE Committee is putting forward meet their needs and address the barriers that they face.

Enabling Digital Equity

This action is trifold and should be prioritized while broadband Internet is established across the County: 1) ensuring access to an Internet-enabled device in each household (preferably desktop computer or laptop); 2) creating a toolkit to identify resources to address the lack of Internet-enabled devices, training, and support, allowing residents to find the support that they need to be successful, and allowing nonprofit and social services agencies to point residents to available resources; and 3) continual evaluation of agency and organization websites, media, and communications to ensure that it is accessible to all users and Internet-enabled devices.

Recognize the Inequities that Exist within Internet Access

Committees should work with local organizations and governments to recognize, acknowledge, and bridge the inequities with Internet access. Specifically, socio-economically disadvantaged residents, communities of color, and those who only own a smartphone cannot fully use the Internet.

SHORT-TERM ACTIONS

Enabling Smart, Accessible, User-Friendly Community Centers

Ensure that community centers, libraries, and other public places where residents can access the Internet are accessible and have resources to access the Internet.

Supporting Digital Literacy

Develop resources and materials to aid in mentorship and training via Digital Navigators and Digital Experts located throughout the County.

Utilize Digital Equity to Promote Work and Employment for New “Remote” Economy

FCDE Committee to convene agencies and organizations that bring job seekers together, and develop a guide of best practices to promote work and employment to determine the best way to move the County towards a new “remote” economy.

Create Internal Digital DEI Plans and Processes for Organizations

Develop a sample DEI *Plan* and processes for nonprofit and community organizations, to allow these agencies to update and adopt their own DEI *Plans* and procedures.

Asset Survey

FCDE Planning Committee should develop a community survey to determine what community assets are available to bridge the digital divide.

LONG-TERM ACTIONS

Identify and Support the “Missing Middle”

Identify “missing middle” residents and work with nonprofit and community organizations to provide resources for these individuals to pull themselves out of poverty and close the poverty gap.

Provide Wraparound Services with Digital Literacy Training

Develop a wraparound services strategy for the County’s disadvantaged residents, so those individuals can fully utilize digital literacy training.

Building Digital Infrastructure

Work with community technology centers to develop a network to bring high-speed Internet access to communities not currently served by ISPs.

Connecting Forsyth County

Executive Summary

Prepared by A/R360 Consultants



Digital, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) strategies are vital to empowering communities and individuals to succeed in the economy—as caregivers, parents, wage earners, and students. The Internet is the most powerful tool for education, services, entertainment, research, health, and socialization. Without access to it, communities and individuals are at a distinct disadvantage in our modern connected world.

The Forsyth County Digital Equity (FCDE) Planning and Steering Committees recognize the role the Internet plays in people’s lives and the impact it has on community empowerment and engagement.

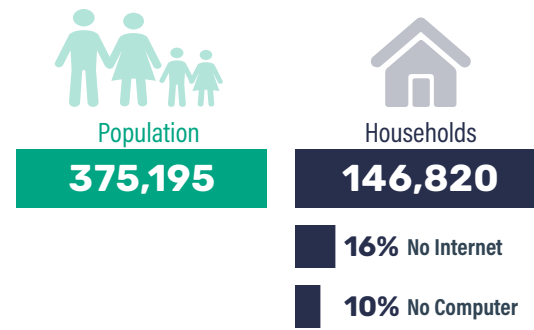
The Committees comprise leading nonprofits, foundations, service providers, educational institutions, and community organizations in Forsyth County, North Carolina. They understood that County residents were being left behind - without

Internet-enabled desktop computers or laptops; affordable and consistent Internet access; and the knowledge of how and what the Internet offers. **Figure 1** details the 23,570 households in the County that do not have Internet access and 14,400 households with no computer.

Through a competitive award process, the FCDE Committees engaged a consulting firm, A/R360 Consultants, LLC (A/R360), for a three-month term to gather and assess research; map the County; survey communities; interview community members and stakeholders; and write the County’s first *Digital Equity Plan (Plan)*. This Executive Summary and an accompanying Data Demographics complement the *Plan*; additional information and data is available on the *Plan*’s website [FCDigitalEquity.org](https://www.fcdigitalequity.org).

The *Plan* includes a review of the Internet usage, devices, gaps, and demographics of the County, and

Figure 1 Household Access



23,570 of households in Forsyth County do not have Internet access.

14,400 households have no computer.

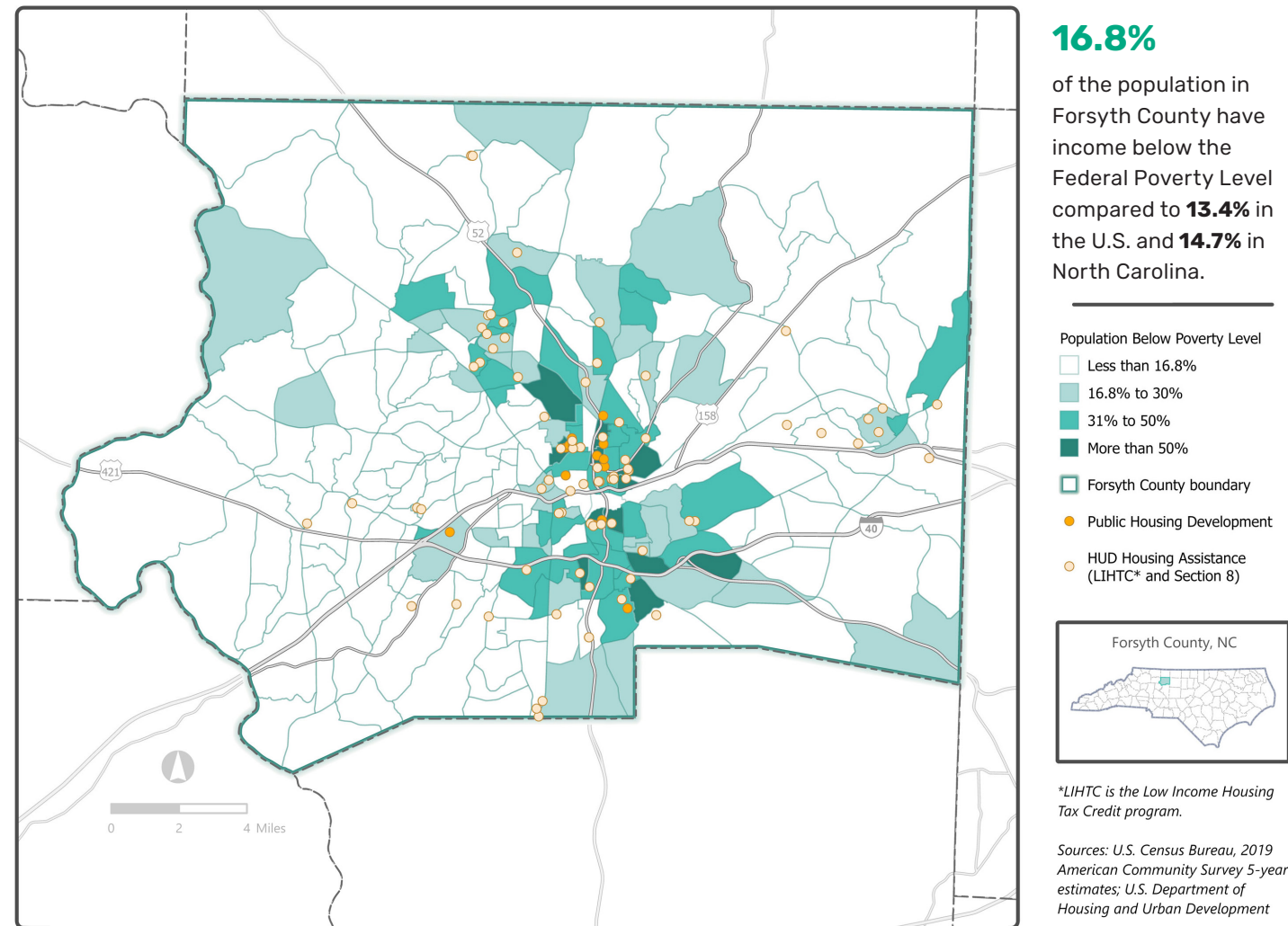
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2019 American Community Survey 5-year estimates

Figure 2 A higher percent of minorities are in poverty compared to non-Latinx whites.

	Forsyth County	North Carolina	United States
Overall Poverty Rate	16.8%	14.7%	13.4%
Non-Latinx White	9.5%	10.2%	9.6%
Minority	26.7%	22.5%	19.3%
Black	24.9%	22.5%	23.0%
Latinx	33.7%	26.4%	19.6%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2019 American Community Survey 5-year estimates

Figure 3 Poverty Level Map of Forsyth County



More data and context is available in Forsyth County's Digital Equity Plan. Download and read the full version by scanning this QR code or visiting FCDigitalEquity.org.

outlines why DEI is important to the lives of County residents and the strength of its communities. Finally, the *Plan* offers recommendations derived from analysis of the data, surveys, research, and interviews completed. This *Plan* is intended to be a living document that serves as a foundation for the programs and projects that will close the digital gap.

Summary of Findings

The Internet plays a vital role in the lives of Forsyth County residents, and those that do not have consistent or convenient access to broadband Internet in their home are at a distinct disadvantage. In speaking with residents and stakeholders, three things became apparent:

- the cost of high-speed Internet is too high;
- the availability of high-speed Internet is out of reach for too many - either because Internet does not reach to their homes/apartments or because community centers were inaccessible (transportation, too far away, etc.); and
- residents felt they needed more education to become digitally literate/fluent to use the Internet.

In Forsyth County, a higher percentage of minorities live in poverty, compared to non-Latinx whites. Forsyth County has large Black and Latinx populations; higher than the State and national populations. Forsyth County's poverty rates are significantly higher than State and national averages; and communities of color are more than likely to live in poverty, as shown in **Figure 2**.

Figure 3 shows where these residents live. The Census Bureau tells us that of the households that have an Internet-enabled device, 17% have only one device; of those 17%, 56% of those devices are smartphones.

While a smartphone, which is not relying on home broadband Internet access, provides access to the Internet, presents a serious barrier for accessing and completing schoolwork for example; healthcare; or job applications. Low-income households, especially those in communities of color, tend to be those that only have smartphones, and places these individuals at a disadvantage from those that have a desktop computer or laptop with the Internet.

Specifically, regarding healthcare, residents without access to the Internet and a desktop computer to laptop do not have access to telehealth, their electronic medical records, or vaccine registration, as the recent COVID-19 pandemic proved.

Although broadband Internet access should not be held up as a solution to all that ails us as a society, digital equity is a powerful tool that plays a vital role in reducing systematic and long-term inequalities. For instance, digital equality can assist in combating poverty, improving health, and supporting educational attainment.



Recommendations

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

Create Oversight Structure to Direct Plan Implementation

Create an Oversight Committee, with several Sub-Committees, including Legislative, Training, Broadband, Literacy, Outreach, Social Media, and Advocacy, to direct the funding and implementation of the *Plan*.

Address Infrastructure, Digital Policy, and Technology Adoption

FCDE Committee Members should meet with County and City elected leaders to discuss the *Plan*; have conversations about residents' needs; and implement high-speed broadband Internet for all residents. Local government leaders should embrace the need for high-speed broadband Internet to advance all residents' socio-economic status and create new economic opportunities, jobs, businesses, and wealth.

Promoting Public-Private Partnerships

Bring Internet Service Providers (ISPs); public and private organizations; and