

OPINION

Improving Access to Internet: The Implication of The Digital Equity Act

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In today's world, having access to technology and the internet is like having a key to countless doors of opportunity. But what if you couldn't unlock those doors? This is a reality for many people who are incarcerated or are justice-involved (those who have been in trouble with the law). According to recent statistics, approximately 64% of inmates do not have access to the internet while in prison, exacerbating the digital divide they face upon release (The Prison Policy Initiative, 2024). As a result of their confinement, many have experienced shock upon release when navigating access to digital tools and technologies. This lack of access and digital literacy is called the digital divide.

But there's hope on the horizon. The Digital Equity Act, part of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill of 2020, in combination with the BEAD Act handling broadband deployment, is working to change this. This Act ensures everyone has a fair chance to use technology and the internet regardless of background. It's like ensuring everyone gets a fair

opportunity to learn digital skills and become part of the digital world.

Teaching digital skills to incarcerated individuals could make a significant difference in their lives. It could increase their chances of finding jobs, going to school, navigating the internet safely, and connecting with technology meaningfully. Workforce data supports this claim, indicating that individuals with digital skills are 17% (National Skills Coalition, 2024) more likely to be employed. Imagine being able to take online classes or learn new, marketable digital skills that can be used to ease the process of re-entry into society.

However, the benefits of technology go beyond just finding a job. It also enables incarcerated individuals to stay connected with their loved ones, promote education, and contribute to the workforce talent pipelines. With technology, they can video chat with their families or send emails, which can help them feel less lonely and more connected to the outside world.

Some states are already making plans to make this happen. They're setting up programs in jails to teach people how to use computers and the Internet, which can help prepare them for life outside of prison. However, there are also challenges. Some people worry about privacy and security when using technology in jail, and others wonder if there will be enough resources. Despite these challenges, the Digital Equity Act is a step in the right direction. It's opening doors for people who have been left behind. With access to technology and the internet, everyone can have a fair shot at a brighter future.

In conclusion, states must evaluate programs and initiatives to empower prisoners through digital literacy and skills training. Breaking cycles of poverty and incarceration requires addressing the digital divide and providing

opportunities for individuals to gain essential digital skills. By investing in digital equity efforts, we can create a more inclusive society where everyone has the chance to succeed. Don't hesitate to contact your state Broadband Office and get on the radar of the planning teams to be at the table when the capacity and implementation grants become available to support local efforts.

References:

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