



MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and Council Members

FROM: Rondella Hawkins, Telecommunications & Regulatory Affairs Officer, Financial Services Department

THROUGH: Ed Van Eenoo, Chief Financial Officer

DATE: May 31, 2022

SUBJECT: Digital Equity (Fiscal Year 2022 Councilmember Fuentes Budget Rider 5)

This memorandum is intended to provide information in response to Council Member Fuentes Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 Budget Rider 5 regarding assessing, identifying, exploring, and developing viable sustainable longer-term solutions to address the problem of digital equity.

BACKGROUND

In 2014, the City Council approved the [Digital Inclusion Strategic Plan](#) with its vision for every Austin resident to have an opportunity to be fully engaged in the digital society, and to access and use digital and communications technology, with a purpose “to address access and adoption of digital technology, to serve as a guiding document for providing digital inclusion opportunities in effecting the City’s goals to ensure all Austin residents are served.”

COVID-19 caused major areas of disruption for the community’s health, work, education, and the economy, and brought to light the disparities in Austin for equitable, reliable, and affordable access to resources and services essential in residents’ daily life. Many found it challenging to connect with the resources and services of the City and other needed essential services.

The Financial Services Department (FSD) has been engaged in assessing and creating Digital Inclusion solutions to meet the immediate needs of the community, while assessing viable long term strategic and sustainable solutions to closing the digital divide in Austin.

According to our research and stakeholder input and engagement, five pillars for sustainable Digital Inclusion have been identified:



FSD'S DIGITAL INCLUSION PROGRAM AND SERVICES OVERVIEW

FSD currently has programming that seeks to meet the goals of Digital Equity in Austin through the following Digital Inclusion programs and services:

1) Affordable Connection to the Internet

Affordability is one of the major barriers for households to connect to the internet and get the broadband they need for their daily lives for work, schoolwork, healthcare, civic engagement and more. The U.S. Congress recently created the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), a long-term, permanent \$14 billion program subsidy to ensure low-income Americans have an affordable way to connect to the internet. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is administering the ACP to offer qualifying individuals \$30 monthly towards internet connectivity and a one-time award of up to \$50 to purchase devices, through participating Internet Service Providers (ISP's).

FSD is coordinating a marketing and outreach campaign on ACP for the community that will be further expanded by our incoming Senior Public Information Officer. A web page has been created to aid the community in connecting with ACP information (<https://www.austintexas.gov/affordableinternet>). We are working with a network of community partners to ensure the ACP information is shared widely. We placed an article in Austin Energy's "Austin Utilities Now" [March 2022 newsletter](#) that reaches over 500,000 households in Austin. We request that Council Members include the ACP information in their Council newsletters and communications and will follow-up with sample messaging.

In addition to the outreach on ACP, FSD is partnering with the Community Technology and Telecommunications Commission, Austin Public Library, and community partners including the Housing Authorities of the City of Austin and Travis County on a series of Town Hall meetings to ensure the voices of the community continue to be heard around the challenges of digital equity lived experiences and to help qualified individuals sign-up for ACP. Town Hall meetings were held in April and May, in English and Spanish, and plans are underway to expand the language offerings to meet the needs of more Austinites

2) Robust and Reliable Internet Connection

During the pandemic and severe winter weather crisis, many of the resources and essential services communications were moved online. This made having a reliable and robust internet connection a necessity. To determine if users have sufficient and reliable connectivity, data is needed on broadband speed and strength. Unfortunately, that data is not readily available from the ISPs and the FCC's broadband data maps are not accurate and not granular enough at the household level. The FCC is in the process of updating its current broadband maps with more detailed and precise information on the availability of fixed and mobile broadband services. In the interim, it is requiring users to conduct their own speed tests. A strong and reliable internet connection also depends on the quality and availability of the infrastructure. FSD is exploring a partnership with Travis County on a digital inclusion needs assessment of underserved areas of Travis County and Austin, along with a county-wide sampling of the quantitative residential technology survey and will develop a plan of action.

3) Devices - Computer Refurbishment and Distribution

Since 2019, FSD has worked with Communications and Technology Management and other City departments to divert retired computers from the landfill, refurbish them in-house within FSD using interns, and make those devices available for public benefit. FSD built the refurbishment program from a pilot project into a permanent program. Distributions are made to non-profits in the community, who then provide their clients with the needed devices. To date, 1,743 devices have been refurbished and disbursed, with 375 devices in FY 2021. Devices are sourced primarily from the City of Austin; however, we are actively seeking private sector partners with computer refresh cycles like the City to increase our inventory and output.

4) Digital Literacy Training Services, Computer Lab Locations, and Train the Trainer Programs

FSD currently maintains a contract with Austin Free-Net (<https://www.austinfreenet.org/>) valued at \$198,000 annually to:

- Provide digital literacy training: 674 clients served in FY 2021 during the pandemic.
- Maintain public access computer labs - in FY 2021, 2,962 clients served at two locations: DeWitty Center and Austin Resource Center for the Homeless (DeWitty was the only public computer lab open in Austin during the pandemic).
- Provide train-the-trainer services to key nodes in the community to build digital inclusion capacity - in FY 2021, 38 trainers were trained.

FSD is collaborating with the Austin Public Library and Austin Free-Net to build out the Digital Navigator program. The Digital Navigators are trained staff and/or volunteers who help guide individuals and families with their digital needs. The Digital Navigators assist their clients to meet their individual goals of finding affordable and reliable connection to the internet, learning the skills they need to adopt and use their devices, and learn how to navigate online resources safely and easily for work, study, workforce development, financial services, and telehealth, etc.

5) IT Support - Early Childhood Shared Services Model

In 2021, FSD co-created the Early Childhood Shared Services Model, which focuses on tech-enabled support for daycare businesses. Data gathered from the United Way for Greater Austin Success by Six and Travis County indicated that in 2021 there were 34,000 children under the age of six living in poverty in Austin/Travis County, with only 3,000 childcare spots available. With a focus on strategies and solutions aligned with the City of Austin Council Priorities on economic recovery and resilience, as outlined in [Resolution No. 20210325-111](#), childcare was explored as a gateway to workforce development. A tech-enabled tool was used to build the capacity of the daycare businesses by identifying common needs and creating a structure to share resources (staff, technology, information, funds) among a network of centers or homes. The interest and needs of the childcare community were gauged through a tech enabled survey of childcare providers designed by United Way and deployed by Workforce Solutions Capital Area and Workforce Solutions Rural Area to licensed centers, licensed family homes, and registered family homes. (Completed September 2021). A diverse Tech-Enabled Shared Services Alliance Co-Design Team of local childcare providers is creating the program. The City of Austin allocated \$11 million of ARPA funds to childcare and family support services. Of this amount, \$750,000 will support the shared services alliance work.

The following are additional activities that FSD is engaged in to support the expansion of digital inclusion in our community:

1) DIGITAL INCLUSION FOR CREATIVES

Public Access Community Television, Producer Workforce Development, and Production Equipment Access

FSD is committed to and focused on supporting the resilience and growth of the creative economy of Austin in partnership with the Economic Development Department. FSD currently maintains a contract with Austin Film Society (<https://www.austinfilm.org/austin-public/about-austin-public>) valued at \$875,000 annually to:

- Launch a new workforce development training program for low-income individuals for occupations related to Austin's creative sector to make more opportunities more accessible with a focus on diversity and equity. \$400,000 in ARPA funding is being used towards this new program, launched in FY 2021, and FSD leveraged existing video production facilities and equipment to make this possible.
- Provide community access to the public access television facility and state of the art video production equipment, training, and distribute local non-commercial content and manage video programming over cable television systems and streaming services.

In FY 2021, this service impacted 981 clients (568 of whom received media production training), facilitated the cablecasting of 25,992 hours of content (of which 23,333 was local programming and 3,961 hours were non-repeat programming), and supported 265 equipment checkouts.

2) INVESTMENT BY THE CITY OF AUSTIN IN ADVANCING DIGITAL INCLUSION WORK OF THE COMMUNITY

Grant for Technology Opportunities Program (GTOPS) - (www.gtops.org)

The City supports and builds the capacity of community-based organizations that advance the work of digital equity in Austin through the community investment known as Grant for Technology Opportunities Program (GTOPS), which celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2021. This matching-fund grant is currently funded at \$400,000 annually with funds divided among three funding opportunities:

- **GTOPS Capacity** - \$25,000 in capacity building funding is available with awards ranging from \$150 to \$2,500 made available to organizations with budgets under \$1,000,000 per year.
- **GTOPS Mini** - \$50,000 in project-based funding is available with awards up to \$10,000 made available to organizations with budgets under \$1,000,000 per year.
- **GTOPS Core** - \$275,000 in service delivery funding available with awards up to \$35,000
- \$50,000 in funding will be used for strategic funding for community needs.

3) STRATEGIC FOCUS

2021 Leadership Austin Digital Inclusion Fellow

In 2021, the Community Technology and Telecommunications Commission held special conversations on the lived experience of Austin residents with the digital divide. Experience from previous City-supported projects and the data from the City's Digital Inclusion Strategic Plan also pointed to the growing urgency. A group of CIOs from the City, St. David's Foundation, Travis County, Texas Association of School Boards, and private sector representatives approached St. David's Foundation to fund an additional Leadership Austin Fellow to solely focus on the challenges of digital inclusion. The Leadership Austin Digital Inclusion Fellow was created by Leadership Austin and housed in FSD in 2021. The part-time Fellowship was funded by St. David's Foundation and became a full-time Fellowship with additional funds from FSD and significant support from FSD staff. The 2021 Fellow continues to work as a senior consultant with FSD for this multi-year, multi-phased project. Here is a link to the FSD staff presentation to the Community Technology and Telecommunications Commission in December 2021 regarding Digital Inclusion and Affordable and Reliable Internet Project <https://www.austintexas.gov/edims/document.cfm?id=373665>.

4) DATA-DRIVEN APPROACH

The last residential technology survey conducted in 2017 and published in 2018 found that 95% of Austin residents use the internet at home with any device and any type of connectivity. However, this number masked the disparities between communities and levels of access. According to the 2018 data, the communities that tend to face the highest barriers to digital access were communities of color, low-income individuals and families, older adults, limited English proficiency, and people with disabilities. The data indicated that smartphone use was widespread, however, device gaps for education, employment, and health uses were widespread. Affordability and skills gaps were the primary barriers for people who did not use the internet in 2018. This data will be verified for 2021-2022 through the following:

- **Data Analyzed on U.S. Census's American Community Survey and Council Districts** - Children's Optimal Health (COH) partnered with FSD to analyze and create a series of filterable data tables based on the most recent data from the Census's American Community Survey (ACS) 2019 5-year average data. COH used data provided by the City, and the tables include Census Tract IDs, Council District ID, and ZIP code associated with the Tract. The data focused on internet access and devices. (*Completed in November 2021*)

Here is a link to their interactive data portal:

<https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/e7fa447a6a3e47a7889efbbafae9e644/page/ACS-Demographics-%26-Internet-Access-Data/>.

To better understand the lived experience and challenges of the community with the digital inclusion during COVID-19 and Winter Storm Uri, the FY 2022 residential technology survey was divided into two survey measure tools: 1) a qualitative lived experience tool and 2) a quantitative survey tool.

- **Qualitative Data, Lived Experience** - FSD contracted and partnered with MEASURE Austin to conduct the community lived experience qualitative research project. MEASURE Austin and the Austin Urban Technology Movement in collaboration with Dr. Reyda Taylor, a data scientist consultant, conducted 8 focus groups between December 2021-January 2022 in English, Spanish, and Dari. The qualitative surveys focused on community lived experience with residential technology access, affordability, adoption, devices, training, barriers and needs. *(Completed in February 2022)*

Link to the March 9, 2022 presentation to the Community Technology and Telecommunications Commission (refer to agenda items 2a.1 and 2a.2):

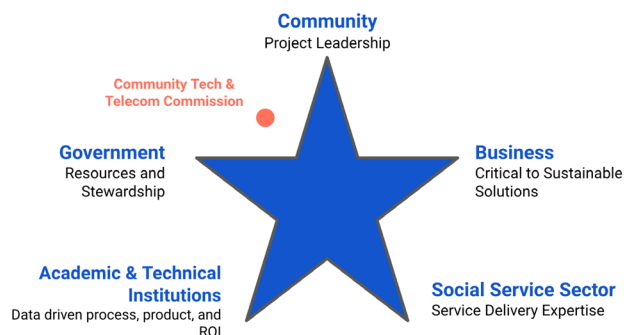
https://www.austintexas.gov/cityclerk/boards_commissions/meetings/10_1.htm.

- **Quantitative Survey and Gap Analysis** - FSD is exploring a partnership with Travis County on a 2022 Residential Technology Quantitative Survey for a county-wide asset mapping and gap analysis on affordability, access, adoption, devices, digital literacy training, barriers and needs. Travis County has dedicated funding, staff, and a [FUSE Corps](#) Executive Fellow (an experienced professional that is placed in local government to help solve pressing challenges) for the project. Discussions are underway to finalize the collaboration. FSD plans to bring an interlocal agreement with Travis County to City Council by late Spring 2022. *(Expected completion of the quantitative survey is end of year in 2022)*
- **National and Texas Models for Digital Equity Best Practices** - Another set of data gathered and analyzed in 2021 were the results from various models and best practices on digital inclusion and equity. The data was collected through research, interviews and direct meetings with national partners and cities. Texas cities included San Antonio, Dallas, Houston and the Texas Cities and Counties Collaborative for Broadband.

5) STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND OUTREACH ACTIVITIES

FSD is coordinating a multi-sector diverse stakeholder engagement process with community groups, social service groups, academic and technical groups, business, and the private sector including ISP's, local, county, and state government. The outreach includes over 400 one-on-ones, meetings, presentations and discussions and we have an interdepartmental digital equity collaboration with multiple City departments.

Stakeholder Sustainable Cross-Sector Solutions



FSD is also conducting regular outreach through facilitating the Digital Empowerment Community of Austin and the Social Inclusion Taskforce (serving older adults) of the region. These are networks of nonprofits, educational institutions, social service providers and stakeholders working together to improve our

community's ability to participate in the digital society, close the digital divide and make Austin a more digitally inclusive city.

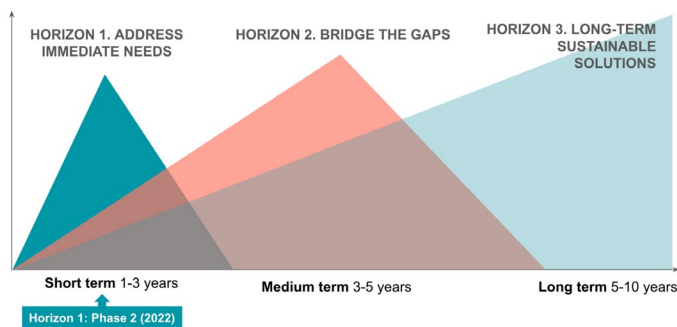
A statewide cities and counties broadband coalition has also developed among the major Texas municipalities and counties that include Dallas, San Antonio, El Paso, Austin, and Harris and Travis Counties. This coalition meets regularly to share information and resources around broadband data, challenges, solutions, and funding opportunities and to work with the newly established Texas Broadband Development Office (BDO) to keep them apprised of the challenges and broadband funding needs of the urban areas of Texas.

PROJECT HORIZON & CHALLENGES

Horizon 1: Phase 1 (Completed 2021). The goals of Phase 1 were to conduct much of the data gathering and data analysis of the qualitative, lived-experience, American Community Survey data, and State and national best practices of broadband models and to strengthen stakeholder engagement to have a “reactivated, engaged and collaborating cross-sector of stakeholders in a wide-reaching and community-wide effort.” Both goals were met.

Horizon 1: Phase 2 (2022) We are exploring the collaboration between City of Austin and Travis County on the completion of the quantitative data collection and residential technology survey. Travis County has dedicated funding, staff, and a 2022 Executive FUSE Fellow to support the digital inclusion collaboration of the City of Austin/Travis County.

A 3-horizon view of Sustainable Solutions



Goals and activities for Horizon 1: Phase 2 in 2022:

- **Conduct a quantitative residential technology survey** of underserved areas of Austin/Travis County.
- **2014 Digital Inclusion Strategic Plan Refresh** will include a community digital inclusion roadmap, feasibility plan and funding pathways.
- **Explore Funding Opportunities** with Texas Broadband office, City of Austin Economic Development and Government Relations Office targeting economic development and resilience and other.

Among the challenges in closing the digital divide in Austin are the following:

- **Affordability** - lack of true competition city-wide for prices and cost.
- **Sufficiency** - lack of agreement on sufficient, appropriate, necessary internet speeds.
- **Adoption**- lack of trust of tech, fear of personal data use, persistent affordability issues and digital literacy needs.
- **Devices** - insufficient devices in low-income households, over-reliance on smartphones.
- **Geography** - wireless signal doesn't reach some places (e.g., topography, hills, geography).
- **Build environment** – wireless signal can't penetrate some construction materials.
- **Aging infrastructure and ubiquitous levels of service** - the broadband providers need to upgrade and make investments.
- **Limitation of the data** - lack of hyper-local data and parity among data sets.
- **Infrastructure, assets, and internet services** - mapping is missing, but efforts are underway by various sources

- **Speed tests** – internet services providers do not release their data; options being explored on speed tests.
- **Structure and governance** - exploring regional v. local digital inclusion project.
- **Funding** - federal, state, private and P3 (public-private-community) funding needed.
- **Technology Solutions** - vetting needs to be inclusive, future-proofed, sustainable.

In the next couple of months, FSD staff will seek City Council's approval of a \$100,000 interlocal agreement with Travis County who is making a \$250,000 investment for a residential quantitative survey and analysis. In addition, Travis County is applying for a \$150,000 St David's Foundation investment to go towards Phase 2 (2022) and Phase 3 (2023) of the project. Phase 2's efforts will help to determine in Phase 3 where best to apply resources and prioritization when expanding broadband access to the underserved communities in Austin and Travis County.

We look forward to keeping the Mayor and Council updated on our progress and activities and appreciate your support. For more information or questions, please contact me at (512) 974-2422 or Rondella.Hawkins@austintexas.gov or Khotan Harmon at (512) 968-3023 or Khotan.Harmon@austintexas.gov.

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