Dear Indiana Broadband Office:

The undersigned members of the Indiana Skills2Compete Coalition appreciate the opportunity to provide comments on Indiana's draft Digital Equity Plan. Our focus is primarily on how Indiana can invest in and measure digital skills. The Indiana Skills2Compete Coalition is a bipartisan group of state legislators as well as education, business, labor, and community leaders that come together with the aim of developing a skilled workforce and serving as a resource for policymakers and state leaders working toward that end. We use research on best practices to promote public policies that create education and training opportunities in alignment with the needs of employers, offering more Hoosiers an opportunity to secure high-wage, family-sustaining jobs.

A major policy priority is creating and supporting inclusive digital skills policies so that people can access good jobs, and businesses can hire for in-demand positions. As stakeholders in this important discussion, we welcome the chance to share our experience and observations with the Indiana Broadband Office.

Digital skills are critical in Indiana's current job market, where 89% of jobs require digital skills. These jobs are across every industry, particularly impacting the majority of jobs in Indiana that require more than a high school degree but not a college degree. Workers who qualify for jobs that require even one digital skill can earn an average of 23 percent more than in a job requiring no digital skills, yet 1 in 3 workers do not have even the foundational digital skills necessary to enter and thrive in today's jobs, and these statistics are magnified for historically marginalized populations, like people of color.

Over and over again, **when people are asked why they want to learn digital skills, they answer: *To get a job***, or to get a better job. This reality is a cornerstone of the work that digital inclusion providers and advocates have been doing in Indiana for more than 30 years, and the programs and services that adult education, community college, and workforce development organizations offer in every corner of our state.

The federal Digital Equity Act, passed as part of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act in 2021, is a generational investment in meeting this demand. The funding that Indiana is receiving through this legislation will not only help residents get badly needed access to high-speed internet and digital devices, but also equip them with the skills they need to **_use_** those tools effectively to achieve their economic and career aspirations. **Equipping people with the digital skills they need for the workplace and beyond is an integral part of achieving broader digital inclusion goals.**

A crucial finding of [the digital equity report from the National Skills Coalition](#) is the **_overwhelming demand for frontline, entry-level workers to use technology on the job_**. People need both the foundational, basic skills that are commonly covered in introductory classes, as well as more specialized skills relevant to their particular industry or occupation. Here are just a few examples:

- Robotics in the retail, logistics and warehousing, and meatpacking industries
- Scanner, point-of-sale, and other e-commerce technologies in the retail sector
- Safety technologies, blueprint technologies, and other mobile applications in the construction sector
- Industrial Internet of Things (IoT) devices and on-board tractor and harvester software and hardware systems in the agricultural sector
- Cybersecurity in the healthcare, local government, and utility industry sectors

As this research makes clear, today's digital skills stretch far beyond the traditional image of a white-collar worker sitting at a desktop computer. ***The jobs in which Digital Equity Act "covered populations" are currently working – and the new jobs they aspire to – require digital skills.***

Investment in digital equity also benefits businesses. A [2022 survey](#) from the Indiana Chamber of Commerce found that 83% of businesses struggle to meet their talent needs, with a skills mismatch being a primary driver. Investments in digital skills helps employers train and hire the workforce they need to thrive. Businesses will also be able to avoid turnover costs (estimated at $25,000 when a worker quits within the first year to over $78,000 after five years) as their digitally up-skilled workers will be retained for longer and able to contribute more productive to the company. This means that the investment in digital equity will lead to a win-win for Indiana workers (able to succeed in the labor market) and Indiana businesses (able to hire and retain digitally-skilled workers).

Benefits from digital equity investment will extend beyond businesses and workers, however, creating additional tax revenue for the state and federal government, with estimates of additional taxes ranging from $1,840 to $3,680 per Indiana household per year.

For all these reasons and many more, it is crucial that we thoughtfully incorporate digital skills training in Indiana's digital equity plan, investing in our community members – including rural residents, veterans, low-income individuals, people of color, and people with language or literacy barriers, among others – so that we all may succeed and thrive.

Effectively expanding access to the internet, to devices, and to skills will also require us to be thoughtful about investing in the workforce needed to undertake these ambitious goals. We would like to see greater emphasis within the plan on how the state intends to recruit and train workers to meet these essential needs. In particular, developing effective strategies to attract more women and people of color into the digital infrastructure workforce while also supporting their training by meeting needs like childcare and transportation will be critical.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit these comments. **Questions about this submission can be directed to Erin Macey, emacey@incap.org, 317-270-0874.**

Sincerely,

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Emily Weikert Bryant, Executive Director of Feeding Indiana's Hungry

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COMMENTS:

Digital equity investment is like a stool with three critical legs upon which the program rests – internet, device, and capacity. We appreciate that already in this plan there is attentiveness to all these elements in Goals 1 and 2 (internet and capacity), and support for capacity-building of individuals in Goal 3, Strategies 3 and 4 respectively.

Regarding the first two "legs" of the stool, internet and capacity, we see a great strength in how Indiana Broadband Office is approaching this to facilitate the creation of affordable and smooth internet and device access. In particular, we also note the strength of Goals 1 and 2 in reaching a variety of Hoosiers, spanning populations that are rural/urban, dis/abled, of a variety of races and walks of life. We wonder if particularly for reaching veterans (a group represented with low numbers in the original assessment), nonprofits as well as the Veteran's Affairs office might be of service in establishing a firmer community connection to this demographic.

Regarding the third "leg" of digital equity, skills specifically, we are glad to see Goal 3, particularly Strategies 3 and 4 in the plan, as the commitment to uplifting local organizations that are already engaged in change is a meaningful one. Empowering local organizations that are already embedded in their communities is an important mechanism for uplifting that community, and we note with appreciation that throughout Goal 3 and Implementation Strategy 1 there is such concrete grounding in local resources.

As the Indiana Broadband Office determines how it will invest the formula funding received via the Digital Equity Capacity Grants, it is important to prioritize investments in digital skills and in building up the workforce needed to implement the plan.

To assist the Indiana Broadband Office in these two goals, we offer the following resources:

Building Digital Skills

- ***We urge your support for contextualized and integrated program models*** that help individuals build digital skills in the context of the real-world settings in which those skills will be used. For example, a healthcare program that prepares entry-level workers to use mobile apps for patient care and timekeeping, or a basic digital skills class that allows participants to become comfortable using technology to support their own and their children's education, navigate job-application and payroll software, or access telehealth services.
- While we appreciate that basics such as shopping will be taught, as per Strategy 3.4, we also want to highlight the importance of ensuring we are not simply offering people new ways to participation in consumption, but also offering them the chance to contribute to production by providing employable skills.

- We urge your support for programs offered by organizations that have ***earned the trust of community members*** over time and have established strong relationships with covered populations. Many nonprofit organizations, faith-based organizations, public libraries, and

similar groups have a head start in helping individuals build digital skills because they are already known and trusted resources in our communities. Additional partnerships could come from working with adult high schools and adult education centers, as such community-serving organizations are already embedded in the community that would likely be interested or already providing in digital training workshops. Indiana can more effectively meet its goals of building covered populations' digital skills if it contracts with organizations that already have a demonstrated record of success in serving those populations.

- We urge your support for programs that result in ***high-quality, portable and stackable credentials*** that individuals can use across a wide variety of settings. While <u>not every digital skills training program must result in a credential</u>, those that *do* should be sure that they are providing relevant, in-demand credentials that will be genuinely useful to participants. As documented by the nonprofit Credential Engine, there are [tens of thousands of different types](#) of certifications, certificates, badges, and other credentials in existence, including many that are focused on digital skills. It is impractical for Indiana Broadband to try to individually assess whether each of these credentials is valuable. Instead, it is preferable to establish guardrails for what constituents a [quality non-degree credential](#) and require program providers to meet those general guidelines. However, engaging non-profits, academic institutions, and employers in conversation about the relative value of credential programs is recommended.

- We urge your support for programs that offer ***holistic support services*** to help digital skill-building participants persist and succeed. Barriers such as lack of childcare, transportation, digital devices, or broadband access can hinder individuals' ability to succeed in training programs. Not every organization needs to offer every type of service, but digital skill-building programs should at a minimum have strong referral relationships with partners who can support other needs, both through direct financial assistance and program staff who can support navigation and connection to resources. This is especially important given that one of the most vulnerable populations that has the most difficulty accessing remote work as identified by the initial assessment on page 12 is single mothers. Concrete plans should be made to ensure that all populations have access to these trainings.

- We urge your support for programs for all that offer paths to increase adaptability in the modern workforce, particularly around the innovations of AI and automation. While we do note that Objective 3.3.1 focuses on the inclusion of AI in educating leaders, and 3.4.4 addresses AI ethical concerns. While educating leaders on AI implications is important, we also believe that this should be extended to everyone undergoing the training. Learning about how AI can increase workflow productivity is part of adapting to the future of the online workplace, and something that all residents, not just a selected few, should be able to take part in.

Measuring digital skills

1. ***Establish a simple, standardized set of measures that <u>all</u> digital skill-building programs will report on.*** Having a set of common measures is crucial to providing Indiana Broadband and members of the public with easy-to-compare results over time, across different programs, and across local jurisdictions.

2. ***It is vital that these measures be associated with <u>outcomes</u>*** – that is, observable changes in ability or capacity – and not simply outputs or measures of activities carried out. Outcome measurement allows program providers and other stakeholders to gauge if programs are helping people achieve intended goals. In particular, they can help state leaders identify potential bottlenecks (programs or geographic areas where participants are getting stuck or not flourishing) as well as springboards (programs or areas that are doing an especially good job of helping people advance).

3. ***Specifically, we recommend that these common measures include:***

    a. <u>Number and percentage of individuals who have achieved a measurable digital skill gain</u>, disaggregated by type of gain (foundational/basic, applied/industry-specific, or advanced digital skills) and covered population (particularly for Goals 3 and 4 on page 53-57)
    b. <u>Number and percentage of individuals who have attained a quality non-degree credential</u>, disaggregated by covered population
    c. <u>Number and type of digital skills program slots established or expanded</u>, disaggregated by type of training provider (nonprofit organization, higher education institution, worker center, etc.); type of training (foundational/basic, applied/industry-specific, or advanced digital skills); and geographic location (urban, suburban, rural). When possible, we also encourage the collection of demographic data to ensure that equitable access goals are being met.
    d. <u>Number and percentage of employment activity of individuals following the training</u>. This information could be distributed as a follow-up survey both in the short- and long-terms following participation in a program. This would help determine if any particular programs, courses, or characteristics prove especially helpful.
    e. <u>Number and reason behind "no shows" for trainings</u>, to help Indiana Broadband determine if a common barrier such transportation or childcare prevented individuals from participating in the workshops.

4. ***Provide flexibility <u>within</u> the common measures***. Specifically, Indiana should provide multiple options for *how* programs can demonstrate that participants have made a measurable digital skills gain – including pre/post testing, credential attainment, employment promotion/advancement, and others. This will give providers vital flexibility in designing programs that are responsive to the real needs of people on the ground, without shoehorning all participants into a single type of assessment. Similarly, states should allow providers to report on any type of credential that meets quality guidelines, without "picking winners" by selecting just one credential that all providers must use.

5. ***We also recommend that Indiana Broadband collect additional qualitative data from a subset of programs.*** This data can add richness and depth to the quantitative measures described above, and can point the way to future improvements. Collecting this data in a limited fashion – perhaps by contracting with an evaluator to conduct interviews with a small percentage of programs – can be a cost-effective way to gather valuable information from:
    a. <u>Program participants</u> about what inspired them to enroll in digital skills training and how they have defined success for themselves;

b. <u>Program providers</u> about how they define success in digital skill-building and what they have learned from trying to apply the required measures listed above;
c. <u>Employers</u> about how they gauge digital skills among jobseekers and workers, and their experiences hiring individuals who have completed Digital Equity Act-funded training programs.

6. ***Collect basic demographic data without adding unnecessary burdens.*** Indiana should strike a balance between collecting enough information that it is possible to track success in closing equity gaps for covered populations, without imposing on individuals' privacy or unnecessarily burdening program providers with complex requirements<u>. Data collection and reporting requirements should never be a stumbling block to improving equity for covered populations.</u>

   To that end, programs should be strongly encouraged to use proxy measures (such as whether a person resides in a high-poverty zip code or receives SNAP benefits), rather than attempting to assess eligibility on a case-by-case basis (such as by asking participants to individually confirm their income eligibility). This issue is especially urgent given the difficult circumstances faced by many covered populations. People with very low incomes, those who are incarcerated or recently returned from incarceration, and people with limited English or literacy skills are disproportionately likely to lack government-issued identification. **No data collection requirement should further burden already-marginalized individuals with additional hoops to jump through before services can be obtained.**

   Similarly, the Indiana Broadband Office should follow best practices used in the public health and education fields and ensure that individuals born outside the United States are ***not*** required to demonstrate a specific immigration status to participate in digital equity programs. This flexibility has already been adopted for the Affordable Connectivity Program by major Internet Service Providers. Programs should be marketed so that individuals know they will not be asked about immigration status or need to have a given status to attend. Partnership with local nonprofits that serve immigrant communities is encouraged to make this language accessible and clear.

<u>Building the Workforce Needed to Implement the Plan</u>

The state's ambitious digital equity plan will require skilled workers to successfully implement aspects of the plan. Incorporating deeper thinking about the strategies the state will use to identify, recruit, train, and support this workforce would be beneficial. Given the shortage already of digitally-skilled workers, the program is likely to meet challenges in implementation without careful strategizing as to recruitment.

We suggest that a snowball approach could be beneficial for this, with a core team identified and recruited based on meeting pre-determined criteria and residing within communities that will be targeted. From there, expanding the workforce assigned to this project to include program participants above a pre-determined threshold of competence and participation would offer individuals the opportunity to connect from peers and see the real-life applicability of their skills. Offering continued training and professional development to program participants who are selected to stay on as workers

would be crucial to facilitating this in a sustainable manner. Resources on digital navigator models from the NDIA or World Education may be useful in building this out.