

2023-2028

# WAYNE COUNTY DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN

➤➤ Wayne County Broadband Task Force



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# INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, our use of technology accelerated. Schools performed instruction online, many workers went from going into the office to working remotely, and health professionals relied on telehealth services to care for their patients. Unfortunately, too many of our residents could not take full advantage of these technologies because they either did not have a good internet connection or proper digital devices. This led to some of our students falling behind in school, our residents being unable to do their work, and some of our most vulnerable populations being unable to get the health service they needed.

Even outside the direct impacts of the pandemic, our economy and society are digitizing rapidly. Our growing digital economy and society are affecting key workforce and economic development areas. Therefore, if we don't become digitally inclusive, we face a significant threat to the future of our communities. For these reasons, the Wayne County Broadband Task Force developed a Digital Inclusion plan to help our communities prepare for our increasingly digital society.



The group tasked with solving this problem is the Wayne County Broadband Task Force. The task force is representative of our community with members representing multiple important organizations like the Chamber of Commerce, EDC of Wayne County, the City of Richmond, Forward Wayne County, Reid Health, and more.



To address, the digital divide, the task force developed a 5-year digital inclusion plan to ensure our county is prepared for the future digital economy.

The plan is separated into 3 goals that address the three pillars of Digital Inclusion

1. Broadband Infrastructure
2. Digital Skills Development
3. Internet and Device Affordability

Over the next five years, the task force will address these goals by pursuing specific objectives. However, as the broadband landscape changes, the task force will make appropriate adjustments to these objectives to accomplish the overall mission.

## Task Force Mission

Wayne County residents will have access to broadband when needed at an affordable rate. Further, Wayne County residents will have access to a variety of providers offering varying speeds for their needs.



# WHERE ARE WE NOW?



This section discusses the current digital inclusion conditions in Wayne County. These conditions were collected by the Purdue Center for Regional Development in the Wayne County Broadband Data Validation and Demand Aggregation Survey. The task force also utilizes data from the Federal Communication Commission (FCC), the National Bureau of Economic Research, and more.

Our findings are centered around the current conditions of the three digital inclusion pillars: broadband infrastructure, digital skills development, and internet/device affordability.

***"It is essential for Wayne County to prepare for our digital future. This plan will make sure that we not only keep up with the digital age but thrive in it."***

***Jeff Plasterer***

*Wayne County Commissioner*

## Broadband Connectivity

According to the FCC, internet service is counted as "broadband" if it delivers download speeds of at least 25 megabits per second, and upload speeds of at least 3 megabits per second (or 25/3 for short). However, the Broadband Taskforce is aiming for minimum internet speeds of 50/10 in Wayne County.

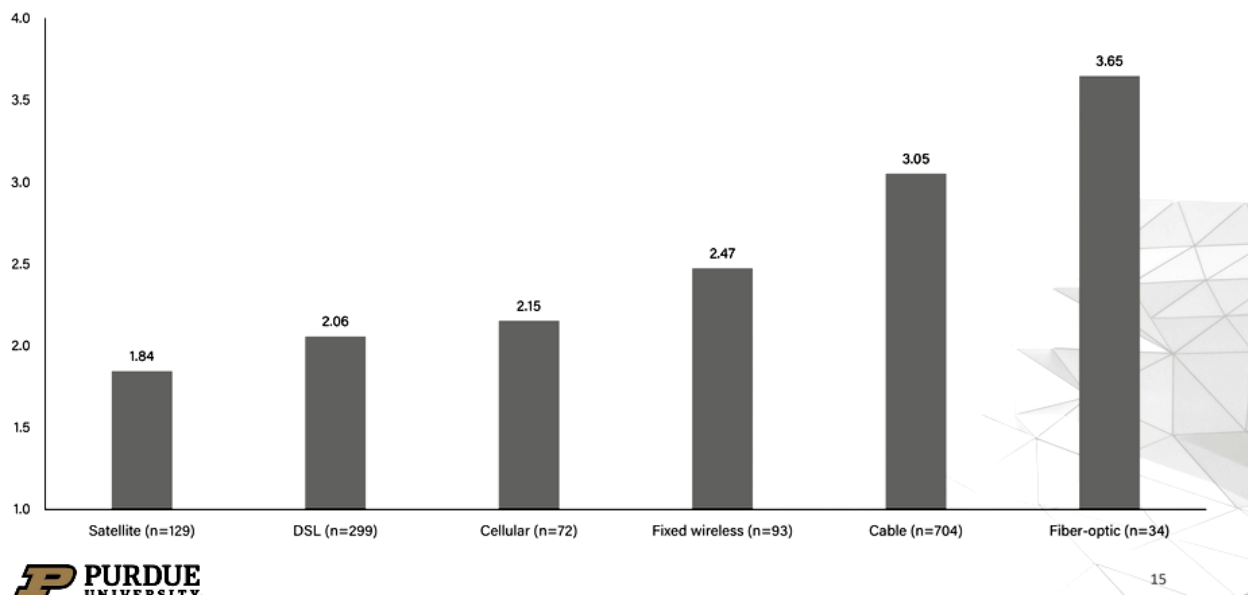
Currently, the median internet speed in Wayne County is estimated to be 23/5 according to the open access M-Lab dataset. This does not meet the minimum requirements for "broadband" according to the FCC, and it is slower than the Broadband Taskforce's goal. Additionally, according to the Wayne County Broadband Data Validation and Demand Aggregation Survey, approximately 9% of Wayne County residents have no internet connection at all. Of those that do have an internet connection in Wayne County, roughly 57% of residents were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their internet connection while 41% were unsatisfied or somewhat unsatisfied with their internet citing issues such as an unreliable connection, slow speeds, and high costs.

The strongest predictor of satisfaction levels was the internet infrastructure technology that was available to the home. Looking at Figure 1, consumer satisfaction was highest for those who had a fiber-optic internet connection and lowest among those with a satellite internet connection.

**Figure 1:**

### Satisfaction by home technology, avg. responses

Scale includes unsatisfied (1), somewhat unsatisfied (2), somewhat satisfied (3), and satisfied (4)



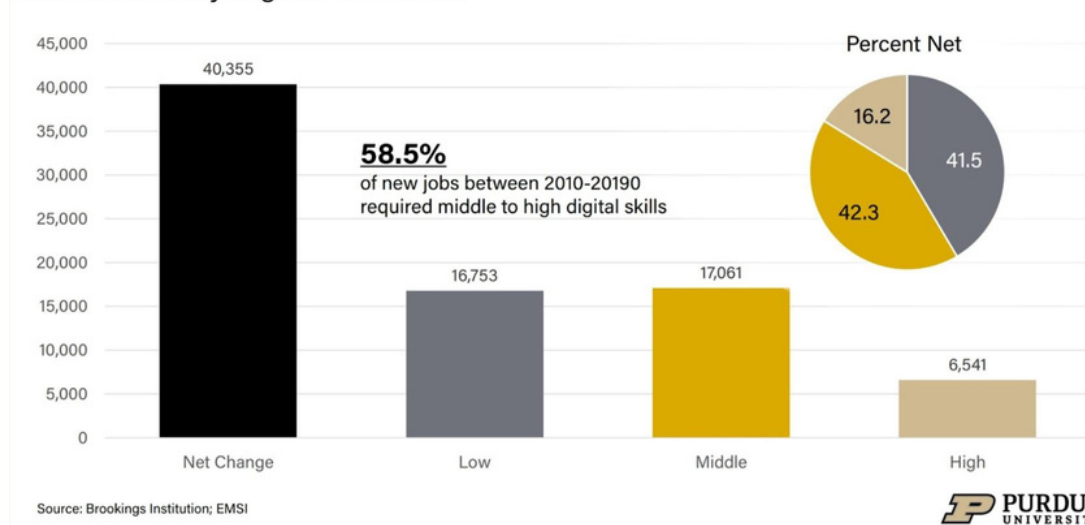
## Digital Skills Development

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization defines digital skills as "a range of abilities to use digital devices, communication applications, and networks to access and manage information". At the most basic level, these skills enable people to use digital devices to effectively find, evaluate, and share information, and to communicate and collaborate within the network. However, digital skills can also include skills that are relevant to certain attractive job markets such as learning how to use specific software or gaining knowledge in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics.

The Broadband Task Force recognizes that the internet is a tool. Therefore, learning how to use it effectively is just as important as having access to it. According to the Wayne County Broadband Data Validation Survey, residents with an internet connection have done e-learning, online job searches, telehealth appointments, online banking, remote work, video conferencing, and more. Those who gain access to the internet can use this tool in a variety of ways that can make their lives much easier, and open doors to new opportunities. These new opportunities, however, come with a learning curve that must be overcome.

**Figure 2:**

### Workforce Development: Small City Indiana 2010-2019 Share of Jobs by Digital Skills Level



Additionally, as our economy becomes much more digitized, employers are looking for workers who possess the relevant digital skills. For example, According to Figure 2, the majority of new jobs require digital skills no matter the income level. Our workforce needs to possess these skills, so our communities can take advantage of job opportunities down the road. However, according to the National Skills Coalition, a third of American Workers lack the digital skills needed to thrive in a more technology-integrated economy.

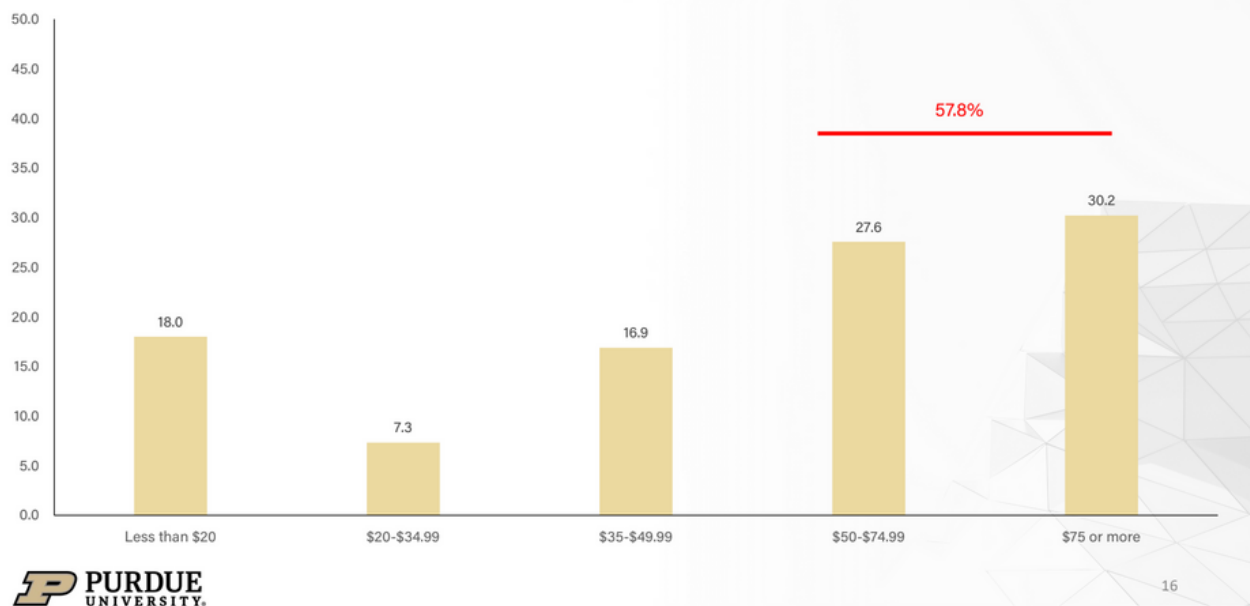
## Internet Affordability

Nearly half of those with no internet access cited cost as a reason for not connecting. Affordability can be a large barrier that prevents residents from adopting internet services. These individuals who cannot afford the monthly subscription for internet service are missing the benefits of its application that may aid in financial stresses. Easy access to information on government assistance, information on job offerings, online banking, and preventative health monitoring could assist those at the lowest income distribution but is much easier with an internet connection.

Of those with an internet connection, roughly 77% cite high costs as a reason for their internet being unsatisfactory. This could be partly because over half of internet subscriptions in Wayne County have a monthly cost of over \$50 as is shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3:**

### Home internet monthly cost, only internet no bundle (n = 983)



## Summary

These findings led the Wayne County Broadband Task Force to make its own Digital Inclusion Plan. This plan aims to provide reliable internet service to more county residents, provide sufficient training on digital-related skills to our residents and workforce, and aid in the affordability of the internet and related devices.



# WAYNE COUNTY DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN

## GOAL #1

### Improve Access to Internet Infrastructure Throughout the County

- **Obj 1a:** Gather relevant data to assess broadband infrastructure (2023)
  - *Task 1a1:* Analyze public data regarding broadband connectivity (e.g., FCC Form 477, Census ACS, Microsoft, M-Lab, Broadband Now)
  - *Task 1a2:* Engage in continuous one-on-one conversations with providers to learn their broadband infrastructure footprint as well as potential future investments
  - *Task 1a3:* Promote statewide Indiana Farm Bureau Speed Test for residents of Wayne County.
- **Obj 1b:** Identify broadband Investment priorities from data in Obj 1a. (2023-2028)
  - *Task 1b1:* Define the level of service (e.g., minimum advertised speeds, technology, etc.)
  - *Task 1b2:* Document the number of households, businesses, and farmsteads within priority areas.
- **Obj 1c:** Encourage and coordinate residents to apply for the Indiana Wi-Fi Project. (2023-2028)
  - *Task 1c1:* Coordinate with local schools, libraries, and other community organizations to promote Indiana's Wi-Fi Project formally known as the Indiana Connectivity Program.

- **Obj 1d:** As necessary, draft requests for qualifications (RFQs) or request for proposals (RFP) from providers that include priority areas, level of service expected, and discounted or tiered services to promote competition in Wayne County. **(2023-2028)**
- **Obj 1e:** As necessary, analyze responses to RFQ or RFP, identify, and align potential government responses to support provider responses. **(2023-2028)**
  - *Task 1e1:* Once the cost of investment is known from providers to upgrade or build broadband infrastructure in the broadband investment priority areas, government responses will need to be identified and outlined. These may include dig once policies, streamlining easements and rights-of-way, tax credits, waiver tax abatements, repurposing existing economic development funds, and leveraging state/federal grants in order to ensure ROI is maximized for providers.

## GOAL #2

# Improve digital skills among groups, organizations, and government agencies in the community

- **Obj 2a:** Information gathering on digital literacy (2023)
  - *Task 2a1:* Conduct a survey targeted at a variety of Wayne County employers who are members of the chamber to understand what digital skills they are looking for in their current and future workforce. (3rd Quarter, 2023)
  - *Task 2a2:* Inventory current digital skills workshops and resources currently offered in Wayne County to identify gaps and create awareness about ongoing initiatives in the community.
- **Obj 2b:** In partnership with other stakeholders involved in digital skill training (e.g., senior citizen centers, workforce development programs, schools, churches, businesses, etc.) draft a plan that, among other things, identifies additional curriculum to be taught, locations to be used, frequency of the training offering, along with volunteers and/or instructors available who can conduct the training. (2024)
  - *Task 2b1:* Focus on barriers to adoption that affect older populations as well as populations where a language barrier may be present.
- **Obj 2c:** Promote the use of online applications to aid in the efficiency of current government services. (2025)
  - *Task 2c1:* Identify the government service that can be most helped using an online platform. (Updating licenses, scheduling appointments, checking on permit status, reporting local issues). Tracking the most visited pages on your website or finding out where the most time is being spent can determine the most valuable need.
- **Obj 2d:** As a part of EDC's Strategic Plan, realign economic development efforts to 1) provide support to existing businesses and their online presence and competitiveness; 2) become a “remote work” friendly community; 3) ensure current and future workforce has both relevant digital and digital soft skills.

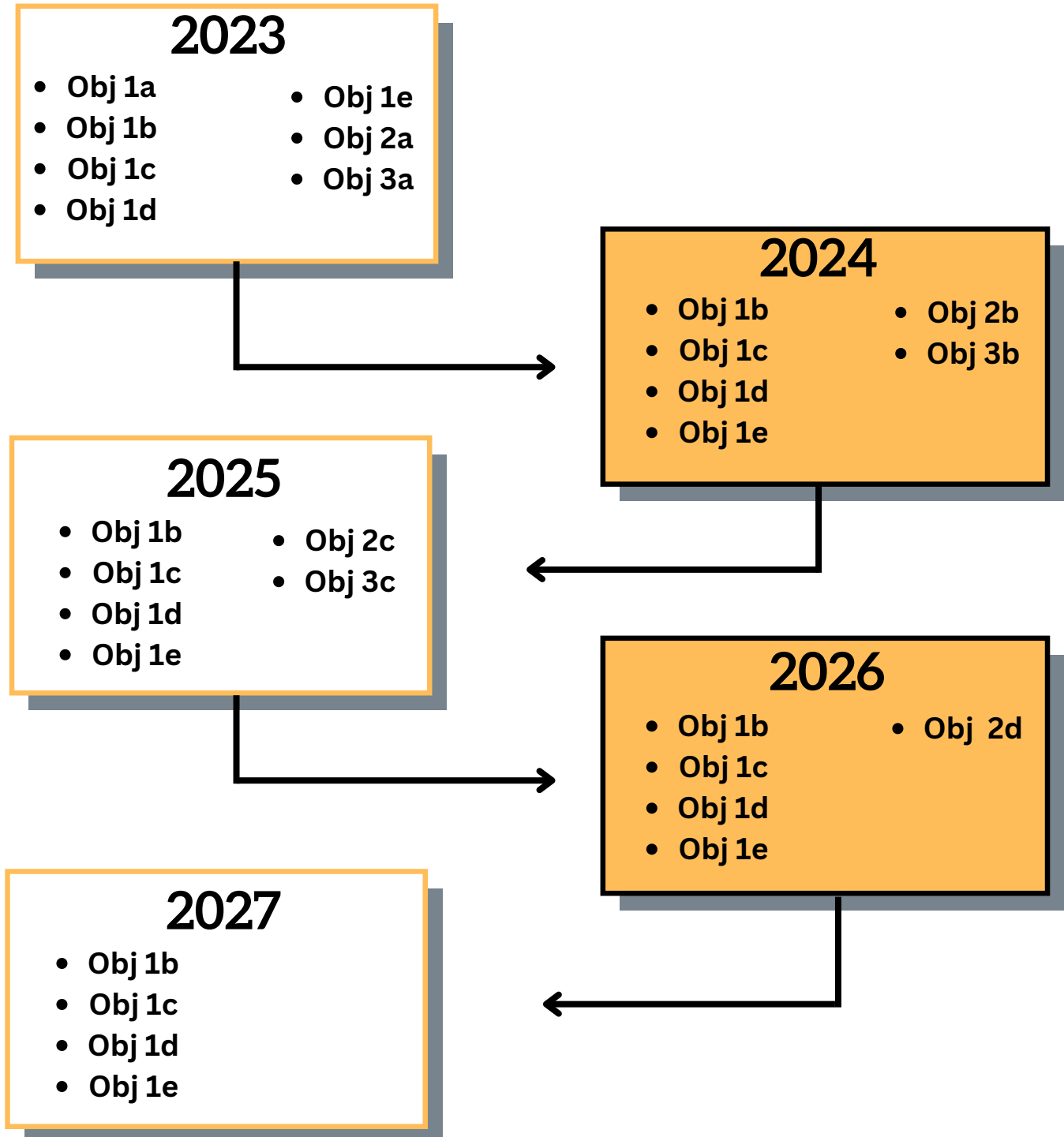


## GOAL #3

# Aid in the Affordability of the Internet and Related Devices

- **Obj 3a:** Collect adoption + affordability data to better target programs that help those underserved populations.
  - *Task 3a1:* Identify and publicize subsidized internet service plans provided by internet providers to the relevant populations.
  - *Task 3a2:* Encourage and coordinate eligible residents to apply for the Affordable Connectivity Program
  - *Task 3a3:* Create a platform that informs residents where providers are offering coverage to let residents know of alternative options and pricing in the area.
- **Obj 3b:** Increase access to affordable computing devices and software.
  - *Task 3b1:* Promote funding opportunities from the FCC's Emergency Connectivity Fund.
  - *Task 3b2:* Inventory businesses and organizations in the community that would be interested in donating equipment.
  - *Task 3b3:* Identify an organization or organizations willing to manage both the equipment and the volunteers and implement a device loan/sale program. This loan/sale program should also require the completion of digital literacy workshops prior to receiving digital equipment.
  - *Task 3b4:* Recruit and maintain a core group of tech-savvy volunteers willing to help reformat donated equipment.
- **Obj 3c:** Promote opportunities to collaborate with communities to improve access to health information and telehealth services
  - *Task 3c1:* Promote funding opportunities that address telehealth advancement.
  - *Task 3c2:* Help coordinate networking partners that address telehealth advancement.

# TIMELINE



# TASKFORCE MEMBERS

## Task Force Convener

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### *Taskforce Members*

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