Overcoming the Digital Divide

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Broadband internet has been described as a "super social determinant of health" in that it serves as a gateway to other important social resources.

Employment, education, banking, food assistance, and many other basic social and economic opportunities now depend on having internet access. For people with chronic conditions, having no internet makes it more difficult to schedule appointments, message a provider, receive lab results, and renew prescriptions.[1]

Ohio is among the most digitally disconnected states in the United States, based on data from the National Digital Inclusion Alliance.[2] For example, in rural Southeast Ohio, 75% of residents lack access to the internet in their homes or on a cellular phone.[3]

Following are public programs designed to help people in Ohio and elsewhere connect to the internet, access devices, and receive digital skills training.

For more information, visit Cardi-OH's podcast on the digital divide in health care and expanded resource on strategies to maximize patient communications with digitally excluded patients.

Home Internet

Most internet service companies offer deeply discounted monthly internet plans to lower-income households, and many communities offer resources to assist with internet access.

Among the largest resources serving Ohio is the Emergency Broadband Benefit, providing a monthly discount for internet service to eligible households. By 2021, more than 400,000 Ohio households had enrolled in the program. In 2022, this program transitioned to become the Affordable Connectivity Program. The program is open to families with income at or below 200% of the federal poverty level, or with a household member who participates in certain government assistance programs (e.g., SNAP, Medicaid, WIC).

Lifeline is a federal program that lowers the monthly cost of phone or internet service for income-eligible customers.

There are two ways to apply for Lifeline:

- Call your local internet company and ask for help with the company's application process.
- Fill out the online application, available in English and Spanish, at lifelinesupport.org.

Public Hotspots

Many local programs provide free networks of Wi-Fi hot spots available via schools and public libraries. For example, BroadbandOhio maintains a list of locations where Ohioans who may not otherwise have access to home internet can rent hotspots or access public hotspots.

Digital Skills Training and Device Access

Devices and connectivity alone cannot address digital skill gaps. Patients in most areas of Ohio can receive free digital skills training sessions at their local public library. In addition, many parts of the state have local organizations that provide free or low-cost devices. EveryoneOn is a comprehensive resource for helping patients get connected, find training, and access devices. Patients can search for resources by zip code on the organization's website, EveryoneOn.org, or receive personalized assistance by telephone at (301) 539-9192.

References

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The Ohio Cardiovascular & Diabetes Health Collaborative is funded by the Ohio Department of Medicaid and administered by the Ohio Colleges of Medicine Government Resource Center. The views expressed in this document are solely those of the authors and do not represent the views of the state of Ohio or federal Medicaid programs.

*Social Determinants of Health Working Group