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COMMERCE

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Broadband and Digital
Equity Strategic Plan **(Draft)**



PREPARING FOR UNPRECEDENTED INVESTMENT

Broadband is essential infrastructure for the 21st century. It enables economic growth, access to education and employment, healthcare, access to news and entertainment, as well as connection to family and friends. In short, broadband is necessary for meaningful participation in society. Yet twenty-five percent of Rhode Islanders do not have wired (cable, fiber-optic or DSL) internet subscriptions at home.¹ In parts of the urban core, that number increases to an astounding fifty percent. High-quality broadband for small businesses is not universally accessible. At a time when internet is a basic utility – for remote work, distance learning, telehealth, engagement with digital government, basic business operations, and so much more – this disparity creates a deep digital divide in the state of Rhode Island. Until every Rhode Islander is connected to reliable, affordable high-speed broadband, the State will not reach its potential for economic growth and universal prosperity.

The depth of Rhode Island's existing infrastructure provides a substantial foundation to build from. The Ocean State Higher Education Economic Development and Administrative Network (OSHEAN) has available middle mile fiber

throughout the state, which broadband providers may lease and expand capacity for residential and business uses. The Rhode Island Department of Transportation (RIDOT), the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (RIPTA), and other public entities also have available fiber which may be used to foster middle mile infrastructure solutions.

Rhode Island is at a historic moment to capitalize on its small geographic size, population density, flat terrain, and middle-mile fiber infrastructure to expand broadband access to unconnected and underconnected populations, leveraging unprecedented levels of federal funding, including from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. The State is set to receive at least \$100 million from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration's (NTIA) Broadband Equity, Access & Deployment (BEAD) program in 2023 for investments in last mile broadband infrastructure to bring high-speed, fiber-based service where it is needed the most. The State will also receive Digital Equity Planning and Capacity Grants from the Digital Equity Act (DEA) to plan for and implement digital equity and inclusion initiatives, to be followed by Digital Equity Competitive Grants, which will be open to digital

¹ U.S. Census Bureau. 2019 American Community Survey (ACS), 1-Year Estimates.

inclusion and advancement organizations throughout the state to serve the more than 750,000 Rhode Islanders who are in "Covered Populations" of the DEA. Approximately 164,000 Rhode Island households (approximately 410,000 individuals) are eligible for the \$30-per-month subscription discounts from the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) while funds last. These new sources complement several others from the federal government, including \$25 million that the State has allocated to new broadband infrastructure from the Department of the Treasury's Capital Projects Fund (CPF), potential funding from the State's outstanding Economic Development Authority Build Back Better Regional Challenge grant application, and other federal funds, such as the upcoming Smart Grid Investment Grant Program. These sources can be combined with existing state infrastructure and assets, local government funding and infrastructure assets, and private and philanthropic funding to further expand impact.

In the Fall of 2022, the State will receive \$5 million of its minimum allocation of \$100 million from the BEAD program as Initial Planning Funds to develop a "Five-Year Action Plan," and \$506,000 to develop a "State Digital Equity Plan," both of which must be submitted to NTIA by mid-2023. Broadband infrastructure and digital

equity are both necessary for universal access and adoption. Recognizing the inextricable link between broadband deployment and digital inclusion programs, and following guidance for linking these two federally-required plans from NTIA, the State plans to use these funds to develop a single ConnectRI Program that will maximize the impact of federal funding and achieve universal connectivity and digital advancement for all Rhode Islanders.

This Rhode Island Broadband and Digital Equity Strategic Plan takes stock of the current state of connectivity in Rhode Island and sets forth the State's goals and principles for the disbursement of federal funds, as well as the primary work streams that RI Commerce and its new Office of Broadband and Digital Equity will pursue to develop ConnectRI. The primary purpose of this plan is to help build a common understanding among interested stakeholders of the present state of connectivity in the State and the work ahead, setting a foundation for a participatory planning and project delivery process that will rely on the collaborative efforts of numerous governmental agencies, internet service providers (ISPs), and nonprofit and civic institutions across the state.

Specifically, this Strategic Plan provides an overview of:

The Digital Divide in Rhode Island

This summary of Rhode Island's broadband infrastructure and digital equity conditions, including its strengths and areas for improvement, leverages existing data collection, analysis, and mapping; stakeholder surveys and interviews; and definitions for digital equity, the digital divide, digital skills, and digital literacy. It also identifies additional data collection needs and analyses that are required to fulfill federal funding requirements, maximize available funds, and ensure that the State's resources are directed where they are needed most and where they can have the greatest impact.

Broadband and Digital Equity Goals and Principles to Guide Investment

ConnectRI will be grounded in principles to help the State reach its connectivity goals, informed by both the State's needs and federal guidance on disbursement of broadband infrastructure and digital equity funds. These principles and goals will guide the State's planning, including how to deploy funds for implementation. This Strategic Plan makes these priorities clear both to deliver transparency in the State's efforts and to equip the State's delivery partners with a clear understanding of priorities.

The Roadmap for Development and Implementation of ConnectRI

This Strategic Plan establishes Rhode Island's "plan for planning," providing all Rhode Islanders insight into the work required over the next year to prepare for the delivery of new broadband infrastructure and digital equity programs, including how they can participate in those planning efforts. Specifically, this plan identifies five Work Streams to help Rhode Island make the greatest progress towards its broadband and digital equity goals and make most out of the historic federal funding.