
**Technology, Economic Development, &
Veterans Committee**

HB 1503

Brief Description: Furthering digital equity and opportunity in Washington state.

Sponsors: Representatives Gregerson, Ryu, Ortiz-Self, Berry, Peterson, Reed, Goodman, Ormsby, Parshley, Macri, Ramel, Hill and Bergquist.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Expands the duties of the Washington State Office of Equity (Office of Equity) regarding digital equity, including requiring the Office of Equity to monitor implementation of the Digital Equity Plan and publish an ongoing overview of its progress in promoting digital equity.
- Transitions certain duties from the Statewide Broadband Office to the Office of Equity, including the duty to conduct an outreach effort regarding broadband and digital equity programs.
- Updates the state's broadband speed goals.

Hearing Date: 1/31/25

Staff: Emily Poole (786-7106).

Background:

Statewide Broadband Office.

The Statewide Broadband Office (SBO) is the central broadband planning body for the state, and as such, it is tasked with promoting deployment of broadband infrastructure and greater broadband access. Among other duties, the SBO is required to coordinate an outreach effort to hard-to-reach communities and low-income communities across the state to provide information

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about broadband programs available to consumers.

The SBO is tasked with updating the state's broadband goals and definitions for broadband service as technology advances, except that the state's definition for broadband service may not be actual speeds less than 25 megabits per second download and three megabits per second upload.

Washington State Office of Equity.

The Washington State Office of Equity (Office of Equity) serves the purpose of promoting access to equitable opportunities and resources that reduce disparities and improve outcomes statewide across state government.

Digital Equity Forum.

The Digital Equity Forum (Forum) develops recommendations to advance digital connectivity and advises the SBO on Department of Commerce digital equity grant programs. In developing its recommendations, among other requirements, the Forum must develop goals that are consistent with the SBO's broadband goals and strengthen public-private partnerships. The SBO and the Office of Equity are jointly responsible for transmitting the Forum's recommendations to the Legislature by October 28, 2025, and every odd-numbered year thereafter. A majority of the participating members must appoint an administrative chair for the Forum.

Digital Equity Plan.

The SBO, in consultation with the Forum and certain agencies, must develop a state Digital Equity Plan (Plan). In developing the Plan, the SBO must identify measurable objectives for documenting and promoting digital equity among underserved communities.

The SBO was required to submit a report by December 1, 2023, to the Governor and the Legislature including a description of how the SBO collaborated with key stakeholders to develop the Plan and recommendations to help improve broadband adoption.

Summary of Bill:

Statewide Broadband Office Duties.

The purpose of the SBO is expanded to include developing and improving broadband adoption and digital equity within the state. In carrying out its purpose, the SBO must collaborate with relevant state agencies and community anchor institutions, in addition to other entities. The SBO must provide data to the Office of Equity regarding broadband adoption and digital equity programs to assist the Office of Equity in accomplishing its duties.

The state's definition for broadband service may not be actual speeds less than 100 megabits per second download and 20 megabits per second upload. New broadband speed and access goals are established for 2028, 2030, and 2032, including the goal that by 2028 all Washington businesses, residences, and community anchor institutions will have access to broadband service of 150 megabits per second download and 20 megabits per second upload.

The Washington State Office of Equity Duties.

The Office of Equity, in coordination with the SBO, is responsible for improving digital equity by facilitating the provision of digital devices and services.

The Office of Equity, instead of the SBO, is tasked with undertaking an outreach effort to hard-to-reach and low-income communities, including providing information about broadband and digital equity programs and assisting consumers in enrolling in these programs. The Office of Equity is required to coordinate with state boards and commissions that support the participation of people from underrepresented populations in policy-making processes.

The Office of Equity is required to develop and monitor implementation of the Plan, and the development of the Plan must build upon the previous efforts the SBO. The Office of Equity must submit a report to the Governor and the Legislature by December 1, 2026, including the Plan, a description of the Office of Equity's efforts, an evaluation of existing digital equity initiatives and funding needs, recommendations, and other required contents.

The Office of Equity must also submit a report and revised Plan every two years. The Office of Equity must make publicly available, on an ongoing basis, an overview of progress made in promoting digital equity, according to the measurable objectives identified in the Plan. As part of this requirement, the Office of Equity is required to have oversight over and direct future improvements to the SBO's public data resources used to track digital equity.

Digital Equity Forum.

The Office of Equity must provide staff support for the Forum, and the Office of Equity is solely responsible for transmitting the Forum's recommendations to the Legislature. Members of the Forum are not prohibited from receiving compensation. A majority of the members may appoint an administrative chair or co-chairs for the Forum.

The Forum is required to recommend opportunities for sustainable digital equity funding.

Miscellaneous.

Definitions for certain terms, including "community anchor institution" and "low-income," are added or modified.

Statutes relating to the Plan and the Forum are recodified in the RCW chapter relating to the Office of Equity.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on January 21, 2025.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is

passed.