

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1503

As Reported by House Committee On:
Technology, Economic Development, & Veterans
Appropriations

Title: An act relating to furthering digital equity and opportunity in Washington state.

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 History:

Committee Activity:

Technology, Economic Development, & Veterans: 1/31/25, 2/18/25 [DPS];
Appropriations: 2/24/25, 2/27/25 [DP2S(w/o sub TEDV)].

Brief Summary of Second Substitute 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.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, & VETERANS

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 9 members: Representatives Ryu, Chair; Kloba, Vice Chair; Barnard, Ranking Minority Member; Cortes, Donaghy, Paul, Shavers, Simmons and Thomas.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 3 members: Representatives Keaton, Volz and Waters.

Minority Report: Without recommendation. Signed by 1 member: Representative Penner.

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 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 3 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 Substitute 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.

It is a goal of Washington that by 2028 broadband speed goals for the state are reviewed and updated with input provided by entities, such as the Forum, communities, tribes, nonprofit organizations, local governments, consumer-owned and investor-owned utilities, relevant state agencies, and public and private entities.

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 unserved and underserved communities and populations, 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 policymaking 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 of 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 cochairs 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.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill:

The substitute bill:

- restores current law with regard to state broadband speed goals for 2024, 2026, and 2028;
- removes the state broadband goal for 2030;
- establishes the goal that by 2028 state broadband goals will be reviewed and updated with input from various entities; and
- requires the Office of Equity to coordinate with other agencies for an outreach effort to unserved and underserved communities and populations, instead of to hard-to-reach and low-income communities.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available. New fiscal note requested on February 18, 2025.

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

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) The SBO has been focusing more on the infrastructure side of broadband access, so it makes sense to assign more digital equity duties to the Office of Equity. Broadband access and digital equity have to work together. Many areas of the state lack affordable high-speed internet. Digital access is fundamental to student success. Libraries play a critical role in providing access to online services, because not everyone can have devices in their home. Librarians teach important media literacy skills. This bill addresses critical gaps. Veterans are losing access to healthcare as they age, because it is harder to obtain services in person. The internet is a critical resource for people with disabilities and

aging Washingtonians. This bill removes some oversight from digital equity programs.

(Opposed) None.

(Other) The SBO was charged with meeting specific goals for broadband access, and this bill helps align those goals with future funding opportunities. The SBO has been focused on securing federal funding. The SBO has worked with the Office of Equity to convene the Forum. The Office of Equity is working to bring government closer to communities, and digital equity work is in line with that mission. This bill codifies the division of labor between the SBO and the Office of Equity. The Office of Equity has invested in staffing and has included additional voices in the Forum. The state speed goals should not be changed, especially to the extent that they play a part in how state broadband grant and loan programs assess applications.

Persons Testifying: (In support) Representative Mia Gregerson, prime sponsor; Misha Cherniske, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction; Erica Limon-Trefielo, Communities in Schools of Washington; Sai Samineni; Carolyn Logue, Washington Library Association; Steven Bock; William Booth, Creating Pathways; Khalid Sirad; and Florence Bien-Aime, Open Doors for Multicultural Families.

(Other) Dave Pringle, Dept. of Commerce; Scott Richards, WA Public Utility Districts Association; Patrick Stickney, WA State Office of Equity; and Chris Herman, Washington Public Ports Association.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Majority Report: The second substitute bill be substituted therefor and the second substitute bill do pass and do not pass the substitute bill by Committee on Technology, Economic Development, & Veterans. Signed by 19 members: Representatives Ormsby, Chair; Gregerson, Vice Chair; Macri, Vice Chair; Berg, Bergquist, Callan, Cortes, Doglio, Fitzgibbon, Leavitt, Lekanoff, Peterson, Pollet, Ryu, Springer, Stonier, Street, Thai and Tharinger.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 9 members: Representatives Couture, Ranking Minority Member; Connors, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Schmick, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Burnett, Dye, Keaton, Manjarrez, Marshall and Rude.

Minority Report: Without recommendation. Signed by 3 members: Representatives Penner, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Caldier and Corry.

Staff: Sydney Jeffrey (786-7303).

Summary of Recommendation of Committee On Appropriations Compared to Recommendation of Committee On Technology, Economic Development, & Veterans:

The Appropriations Committee recommended:

- removing the Utilities and Transportation Commission as one of the entities in which the Office of Equity must collaborate with in order to develop and monitor implementation of a state digital equity plan;
- extending the timelines for publication of the statutorily required Digital Equity Plan and for the state plan and review process thereafter;
- providing the Office of Equity with discretion as to when it will provide recommendations to the legislature regarding the state Digital Equity Plan; and
- adding a null and void clause, making the bill null and void unless funded in the budget.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date of Second Substitute Bill: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed. However, the bill is null and void unless funded in the budget.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) Broadband adoption is a parallel effort with broadband infrastructure. Access to broadband is an equity issue insofar as it allows access to so many other basic resources. This bill is designed to advance digital equity in Washington, as reliable high-speed internet is essential for education, healthcare and economic opportunity, and informed participation in the state and country's democracy.

From a criminal justice angle, digital equity matters because the state prisons are located in the farthest areas of the state and incarcerated people are asking for more education and programming courses. Broadband makes remote learning and education opportunities a cost-effective and safe option. Digital equity does more than just contribute to public safety. It also defends democracy and empowers voters by giving all voters quick access to information on campaign candidates.

The \$2 excise tax per smart device included in this bill will help serve and prepare over a million scholars in Washington for the future of work and the future of what a digitally supported workforce looks like. This bill aligns with the state's broadband goals with the real needs of communities, is common sense legislation, and a smart investment that promises measurable progress towards digital inclusion.

Some outcomes of currently funded programs include justice involved, women of color in

their early sixties being able to obtain the required certifications for a job with a local internet service provider or a visually impaired tribal member in Whatcom County receiving needed adaptive technology and now leading workshops throughout their community. This bill will continue providing equitable oversight of these highly needed services.

(Opposed) It is impossible to be equal rights and equity, which is based on discrimination. An individual cannot support equitable opportunities based on moral declassifications. Treating unserved or underserved communities more favorably is blatantly discriminatory. All citizens have the right to equal opportunity to digital access regardless of their location, race, or socioeconomic status. This bill should be expanded to include people who are trying to obtain digital equality in order to do their jobs and to get it throughout the state, which is desperately needed.

(Other) The work required from this bill aligns with the mandate of the Office of Equity itself and brings the government closer to its communities, particularly in underserved and rural communities. The bill codifies this work. The office signed an interagency agreement with the Department of Commerce last May through the end of the current fiscal year to lead staffing of the digital equity forum and outreach to hard-to-reach communities. In the time that the two agencies have led the support, they have been able to transform the Digital Equity Forum to a site of material engagement and have increased substantially the participation of members of the forum and members of the community.

Persons Testifying: (In support) Representative Mia Gregerson, prime sponsor; Heather Kelly, League of Women Voters of Washington; William Booth, Creating Pathways; Sai Samineni; David Keyes, digital equity adviser, former member State Digital Equity Forum and founder of City of Seattle Digi; and Harpreet Kaur, Washington Build Back Black Alliance (WBBA).

(Opposed) John Axtell.

(Other) Patrick Stickney, WA State Office of Equity.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.