

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1503

As Reported by House Committee On:

Technology, Economic Development, & Veterans

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].

Brief Summary of 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.

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

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: 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.