



## The Digital Divide

### **The Missouri Developmental Disabilities Council's Position:**

In Missouri, and across the United States, there is a “digital divide” between people who have access to modern technology such as computers, smartphones, and broadband internet access and those who do not. This divide, which disproportionately affects people with disabilities, can lead to social isolation and lack of access to health care and other critical supports and services. Therefore, Missouri must make sure that, to the maximum extent possible, all citizens have access to the technology they need to take part in all facets of life.

### **The Missouri Developmental Disabilities Council's Reasons:**

Modern technology - including broadband internet access, laptop and other computers, and smartphones - has changed the way people interact with the world. Through such technology, people use social media to make and communicate with friends across the world, attend healthcare appointments through telemedicine, and manage their money. However, there is a "digital divide" between people who have access to such technology and those who do not.<sup>1</sup> People without access to technology can suffer from social isolation<sup>2</sup> and worse physical and mental health.<sup>3</sup> People with disabilities too-often find themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide: one recent study found that people with disabilities are 19% less likely to have a computer, 16% less likely to have a smartphone, and 6% less likely to have broadband internet access at home than those without disabilities.<sup>4</sup> These problems are especially pronounced in rural areas, where people are almost 15 times more likely to lack broadband internet access than people in urban areas.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, Missouri ranks near the bottom of the United States in technology access. Even though the state has spent millions in recent years to upgrade its capacity, it still ranks 32<sup>nd</sup> in the nation in broadband access and in the “bottom 5” in access to low-cost internet. Worse, at a time when access to technology is more important than ever, 23% of Missouri students lack such access and 258 Local Educational Agencies reported that students lacked adequate access to technology due to affordability.<sup>6</sup> These problems persist even though private business and nonprofit entities have made efforts to provide technology and training to underserved communities.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Missouri Developmental Disabilities Council's Recommendations:**

- As a state and society, we must acknowledge that access to modern technology is a necessity rather than a luxury. Without such access, people are “left behind” and unable to take part in many educational, health care, employment, financial and other critical programs and services.
- Missouri public and private entities must continue to invest the financial and technical resources necessary to rapidly expand broadband internet access throughout the state, with an emphasis on rural areas.
- Missouri public and private entities should provide education and training, as needed, to people with disabilities to help them learn how to access and use technology in their day-to-day lives and for their supports and services.
- Missouri public and private entities should support the efforts of nonprofit and other organizations that provide hands-on opportunities for students with disabilities to learn about and use technology.
- Missouri state agencies should make their surplus technology equipment, including computers, smartphones, and tablets, available to people with disabilities and other underserved populations at low or no cost.
- Missouri should conduct an outreach and education campaign to inform people with disabilities and other underserved populations about ways to access technology through public areas and agencies such as schools, libraries, and Missouri Assistive Technology.
- Missouri schools should provide mobile “hot spots” and other technology for students who do not have internet access.
- While Missouri is right to invest in technology, until people with disabilities have equal access to technology, the state must ensure that they have access to education, supports, and services through in-person and other traditional means.



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## References

- <sup>1</sup> e.g., Tecla. (2017). What is the digital divide and how does it affect people with disabilities. Available at: <https://gettecla.com/blogs/news/what-is-the-digital-divide-and-how-does-it-affect-people-with-disabilities#:~:text=The%20Digital%20Divide%20refers%20to,we%20interact%20with%20the%20world> .
- <sup>2</sup> Cho, M., & Kim, K. M. (2022). Effect of digital divide on people with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Disability and Health Journal*, 15(1), 101214.
- <sup>3</sup> Saeed, S. A., & Masters, R. M. (2021). Disparities in health care and the digital divide. *Current psychiatry reports*, 23(9), 1-6.
- <sup>4</sup> Perrin, A. & Atske, S. (2021). Americans with disabilities less likely than those without to own digital devices. *Pew Research Center*. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/09/10/americans-with-disabilities-less-likely-than-those-without-to-own-some-digital-devices/>
- <sup>5</sup> Mishori, R. & Antono, B. Telehealth, rural America, and the digital divide. *Journal of Ambulatory Care Management*, 43(4), 319-322.
- <sup>6</sup> Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2021). Update on statewide broadband plan on closing the digital divide. Available at: <https://dese.mo.gov/media/pdf/april-2021-update-statewide-broadband-plan-closing-digital-divide>
- <sup>7</sup> e.g., McCarty, J. (2021). Bridging the digital divide. *Rural Missouri Digital Magazine*. Available at: <https://ruralmissouri.org/bridging-the-digital-divide/>

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