EQUITY IN EDUCATION
COALITION

CONNECT WASHINGTON COALITION PROPOSAL
Closing the Digital Divide and Ending Digital Inequities for Washington Families

SUMMARY

The current COVID-19 global pandemic has shown a glaringly bright light on many social inequities negatively impacting Black, Indigenous, and Communities of Color, low income communities, students, and elders. Digital access and use is no exception. As many schools moved to virtual instruction in the Spring of 2020, many students and their families struggled to access technical equipment such as laptops; access high-speed Internet services needed for multiple students and household members to engage in critical online activities; and access the knowledge or support to effectively learn or engage in a virtual environment. The majority of school districts in Washington State have announced that at least part of the 2020-21 school year, instruction will be again online.

The Connect Washington Coalition (CWC) is proposing a multi-pronged approach to meet the needs of those students and families that have historically and currently been most excluded from accessing quality digital services. This proposed solution would include:

- affordable, robust broadband internet service;
- internet-enabled devices that meet the needs of the user;
- access to digital literacy training;
- quality technical support; and
- applications and online content designed to enable and encourage self-sufficiency, participation and collaboration.

Specifically, we are proposing that Washington State and collaborating partners support the implementation of:

Enhanced Digital Inclusion Response

As efforts to expand broadband infrastructure to unserved areas and provide wifi to some of these areas continue, there remains a need to enhance the parallel crisis response to ensure residents in need are able to find and afford internet, obtain devices, develop digital skills, and obtain technical and digital navigation support. Libraries, schools, and others are handing out hotspots and are

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providing some technical and use support, but there is a gap in providing help for families in using the internet and getting connected to other devices, digital skills, and learning resources.

Connect Washington Coalition is proposing the following steps and investments to enhance the current broadband infrastructure work and other actions being taken by the State to support student internet connectivity. This proposal will provide additional support services to fill gaps in helping struggling families.

1) **Digital Navigator Program**
   CWC will solicit proposals and issue contracts to support the development of programs to directly address people's barriers to digital access and provide online assistance for residents needing help with basic use of computers, internet, and online services and applications. CWC also proposes bulk buying the necessary technologies (laptops, hotspots, etc.) for Digital Navigators to distribute to those furthest from digital equity, as identified by the Digital Navigators themselves. We suggest a pilot program of 20 Digital Navigators spread across the State's 10 congressional districts, and an initial purchase of 5,000 laptops and 2,000 hotspots to provide digital access services to demographically and geographically diverse populations.

2) **Digital Equity Local Response Projects**
   To complement the Digital Navigators program and support community-based solutions, CWC will solicit proposals for direct service, ready to implement projects that address critical needs in helping underserved, vulnerable residents with internet, devices, digital skills, and technical support, as was done previously when the State contactracted with the Washington State University and the State Commerce Department Community Technology Opportunity Program (CTOP).

3) **Statewide Digital Equity Dashboard**
   As Digital Navigators collect data, CWC proposes working in parallel to build mapping technologies for identifying specific areas in the State of Washington where the need is greatest to provide broadband and/or WiFi hotspot access.

This approach can be successful for all communities in Washington State with adequate funding as well as leveraging existing partnerships across sectors and cultural groups. We respectfully ask for $6,063,118 to support the design and implementation of this vision. King County, Konica Minolta, and Facebook have already committed resources to this effort.

BACKGROUND

Since January 2020, Washington State has seen escalating cases of COVID-19 infection and deaths. As infection rates increase, the same communities that experience chronic inequities are at the frontlines of the pandemic; communities of color are close to quarantine sites, experience

messaging barriers, and lack culturally responsive mechanisms to educate and equip our folks with life-saving information. According to data from Washington State, people of color are disproportionately affected by COVID-19, particularly among American Indian and Alaskan Native, Latinx, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and Black communities. Additionally, our Asian American communities are targeted by hateful bias and Anti-Asian stigma around the virus outbreak that originated in Wuhan, China, and the ensuing pandemic.

In March of 2020, Governor Inslee moved WA State into a quarantine zone, with the "Stay Home Stay Healthy" initiative that required most every job and sector to either transition to work from home, lay-off staff, or - for those deemed essential workers - move to wearing masks, washing hands, and using hand sanitizer, among other health initiatives mandated by the Department of Health of Washington State. For many in our communities, as well as decision-makers and advocates, the inequities in our systems became quickly visible and, in some cases, exacerbated because of the State's response to COVID-19.

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, an estimated 735,000 people in Washington State do not have an internet connection in their homes. An additional 500,000 households rely solely on limited cell phone data plans, while 30,000 others still use slower dial-up services. Even in the technology hub of King County, 20% of households are underserved, having no broadband, or having service that is underused, expensive or slow, according to a recent county study.

As coronavirus grips the nation, the Internet connects communities to critical education, food, housing, healthcare, and mental healthcare systems and resources, as well as offers an economic lifeline to workers who can do their jobs from home and platforms to find new jobs amidst historically high unemployment. But without access to high-speed Internet, many in Washington state, particularly low-income communities, communities of color, students, and elders, are left to suffer and scramble, on top of the trauma in trying to survive through a global pandemic.

School and library closures in mid-March eliminated access to free computers and the internet many people relied on, exacerbating digital inequities that have always existed, leaving our communities to fall between the cracks. For instance, the Northshore School District with almost a flip of the switch launched "classroom in the cloud," lending 4,000 laptops and 600 wireless hotspots to kids in just a few days through leveraging a uniquely resourced budget boosted through district-friendly local taxes and generous donations. Many educators in South King County, on the other hand, have almost completely lost touch with some kids since March, struggling to supply students with digital technologies, but not having the budget or resources to do so.

Even in the greater Seattle region — one of the country's leading technology hubs — a significant digital divide persists, particularly for low-income families. Households earning $25,000 or lower in Seattle have the lowest internet access rates, with 21% of these households lacking any internet

access, according to a 2018 technology study by the City of Seattle. Other research has similarly found a disproportionate lack of broadband adoption and opportunity in these underserved populations facing financial and other barriers. English as a second language speakers are more likely to lack the internet than native English speakers, according to city data. Living without computers or the internet is a reality for many Beacon Hill International Elementary School students from immigrant families; when the school closed due to the novel coronavirus, first-grade teacher Nisha Daniel found about half of her 51 students lacked the resources they needed to do school work remotely. Tacoma School District is reporting, as of July, that 13,000 of its elementary school students will not have access to laptops come September.

Our elders are not fairing well during these times either. In April 2020, Mercy Housing Northwest, an affordable housing provider, saw more than 300 new requests from residents wishing to get laptops or tablets in their homes for the first time. Many senior residents would access their email from the library, or visit their building's community rooms to use computers, providers said, but those places have been closed for several months now. Many seniors or elders lack a credit card or debit card to set up an internet contract. Some residents have old bill delinquencies following them. Living on a fixed income is a struggle for our elder community and sometimes the extra $70 charge for the internet can, literally, be less food on the table for our elders.

CONNECT WASHINGTON COALITION

Connect Washington Coalition (CWC) is a collaborative of digital access stakeholders across the state working to increase digital access for Black, Indigenous, Communities of Color, low-income communities, students, and elders. CWC grew out of the Internet Action Crisis Team, launched in April 2020 by Washington State Representative Mia Gregerson, an informal weekly gathering to coordinate and share information around digital access. Using the momentum of the Internet Action Crisis Team, the Connect Washington Coalition has been building statewide strategies for digital equity, responding to our communities' urgent digital access needs and working towards a Washingtonian where everyone has universal, affordable, and sufficient internet, devices, and the skills to participate in our communities.

CWC convenes representatives from multiple organizations and agencies who work on internet access and/or digital inclusion, forming a collaborative of public and private partners, that is led by experts in digital inclusion and centered around communities farthest from digital equity. CWC includes representatives from:

- National Digital Inclusion Alliance
- Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction
- King County Information Technology
- Seattle Information Technology

- Hoh Tribe Lobbyist
- Lummi Nation Lobbyist
- Equity in Education Coalition
- Communities in Schools of Kent
- AARP Washington
- King County Housing Authority

The strength of the Connect Washington Coalition lies in its diversity of stakeholders, including on-the-ground community-based organizations, Tribal leaders, national experts in digital inclusion, large nonprofits reaching millions of people, public officials, government offices, and internet service providers.

CLOSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE AND ENDING DIGITAL INEQUITIES

CWC is proposing a multi-pronged approach that addresses the three foundations of digital equity - (1) Lack of affordable and adequate internet access, (2) lack of hardware (laptops, modem, hotspot), and (3) digital literacy - while centering low-income communities, students, families whose dominant language is not English, elders, communities of color, residents who need assistive technology, and others who are most affected by the digital inequities.

The proposals intends to target:

1) Kids and families who cannot access public education;
2) Elders and seniors who cannot access tele-health and tele-mental health services;
3) Underemployed individuals impacted by COVID-19 who cannot access essential services and job training.

In this, we are working towards digital inclusion.

Digital inclusion refers to the activities necessary to ensure that all individuals and communities have access to and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). This includes five elements:

- affordable, robust broadband internet service;
- internet-enabled devices that meet the needs of the user;
- access to digital literacy training;
- quality technical support; and
- applications and online content designed to enable and encourage self-sufficiency, participation, and collaboration.

Digital Inclusion must evolve as technology advances and requires intentional strategies and investments to reduce and eliminate historical, institutional, and structural barriers to access and use technology.

I. DIGITAL NAVIGATOR PROGRAM

The Digital Navigator program presents an innovative approach to the challenges of connecting people to the internet. Digital Navigators work to identify people in need of internet access, hardware, and digital skills, provide people with those technologies and digital literacy support, and connect people to opportunities and resources for digital inclusion, including food, housing, health, and mental health services.

Digital Navigators offers a digital layer to the social safety net: Digital Navigators are experienced, trauma-informed social service providers, who, while reaching out to families around food, housing, health, and mental health services, are also cross-trained to offer digital access and digital literacy support.

Digital Navigators will be able to connect people to the internet through three key channels:

1) Connecting people to existing opportunities (ex. how to sign up for internet providers' low-income programs, how to access refurbished computers donated by a local technology company);

2) Directly provide people who are farthest from digital equity and are not able to afford or access existing programs with wifi hotspots, laptops, tablets, and other device; and

3) Administer basic digital skills support. (ex. helping connect a computer to wifi, assisting people in signing up for unemployment online).

The National Digital Inclusion Alliance developed the Digital Navigator model to adapt traditional digital inclusion support to the social distancing required by COVID-19; as schools and libraries closed, the primary point of digital access for many communities disappeared overnight, leaving a massive hole in services and creating a crisis for many students, elders, low-income communities, and communities of color. In addition, even for families who receive laptops and hotspots, many are faced with navigating the internet for the first time and are struggling to connect. The Digital Navigator program works to address these issues, serving those facing barriers to digital access through an innovative, streamlined, community-based, and long-term solution, building resiliency and digital equity for our communities into the future.

Digital Navigators consolidate all of the components of digital inclusion - internet, devices, and skills - and deliver digital accessibility as trusted messengers who work with community members most impacted by digital inequities through multiple one-on-one interactions; Digital Navigators will be housed in community-based organizations, community centers, senior centers, school districts, and/or other nonprofits and public institutions. This offers a solution to many of the barriers our communities face, from access to hardware to needing guidance on how to use their devices. The National Digital Inclusion Alliance model also includes the Digital Navigator training as a coordinating tool where digital inclusion resource mapping could contribute to community planning, prioritizing the building of more resources, statewide asset mapping, data collection, and coordination with Washington's Broadband Action Team.

CWC also envisions the Digital Navigator model to provide a holistic solution to the multi-pronged crises of the pandemic: housing, food, health, mental health, and digital access. For example, if a family lives in a low-income apartment complex and loses their apartment, they lose access to a number of critical services: they connected to low-speed internet in their apartment, had food delivered to their complex, accessed health care in the storefront clinic located at the bottom of the building, and connected to community organizations in the complex's recreation center. In addressing digital inequities during a pandemic, our approach must recognize that basic and digital needs are related, and understand that human services navigation is critical in digital navigation.

For someone to serve our family, they should be versed in human services navigation in order to even be in a position to take advantage of digital navigation. These Digital Navigators will be able to reach our most vulnerable communities by speaking our communities' languages and sustaining personal relationships with our families over a multitude of critical resources and opportunities. Moreover, cross-training existing social service providers, housed in trusted community-based organizations, community centers, and senior centers, provides an opportunity to tap into systems that are already in place for a rapid launch of digital access and literacy services, as well as an opportunity for workforce development. Digital Navigators will also serve as on-the-ground data collectors to better educate Washington State's work on broadband infrastructure, technological equipment, and other digital equity projects, providing a detailed picture of our communities needs and where resources should be invested.

We have identified over 50 community based organizations, community centers, and senior centers as potential homes for Digital Navigators, with a starting goal of 2 Digital Navigators in each of Washington's 10 congressional districts to develop a pilot program. This will approximately serve thousands of individuals over the span of a year, after which we will evaluate the program's success and if successful, prepare the program to scale.

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As Digital Navigators assess Washington's digital equity needs, it is critical to get hardware, devices, and internet access to disconnected communities' as quickly as possible. The Digital Navigator program will identify and help distribute the necessary technologies to our communities' as well as provide basic digital skills to help people get set up. CWC proposes a large scale, bulk buy of certain technologies in order to facilitate the connecting of families with hardware, devices, and internet.

The Equity in Education Coalition, a leading member of CWC, is partnering with Konica Minolta to secure 30,000 Lenovo 100e Chromebooks (2nd Gen AST) and Sector 5 E4 LTE Chromebooks with Chrome Licenses and Chromebook Deployment Services, as well as manufacturer warranty for up to 2 years, 4 GB memory, and 32 GB hard drive. In addition, the Sector 5 E4 Chromebooks are reinforced to reduce damage from impacts and prolong life - perfect for students and seniors.

In addition, Facebook is offering an in-kind donation of their community technical support hotline, YUPRO. YUPRO is a team of 30 multilingual call center operators set-up to provide a central calling location for those seeking internet, hardware, and digital skills. We envision this hotline working in tandem with the Digital Navigators program: YUPRO can offer referrals to clients' regional Digital Navigators for support in getting connected to low-income internet programs, hardware, hotspots, as well as food, housing, and healthcare services. YUPRO will also be able to offer basic digital skills support, allowing Digital Navigators to do more outreach to communities.

II. ACTIVATE DIGITAL EQUITY LOCAL RESPONSE PROJECTS

In coordination with the Digital Navigators program, CWC proposes re-activating the WA State Community Technology Opportunity Program fund and encouraging private sector partnerships to provide urgent need grants to community-based organizations to provide local or regionally responsive services addressing critical broadband adoption and digital equity issues. This digital equity competitive grant program would promote the expansion of digital equity across the state by supporting digital inclusion activities in local jurisdictions to address digital opportunity gaps and spur greater adoption of broadband across populations throughout Washington.

As Digital Navigators help families through individual service provision, these local response projects will build community-led solutions to specific regional barriers to access. These local grantees or solution providers could provide assistance on a variety of issues such as: help seniors register for low-income internet programs, start or build up programs to refurbish computers, offer technology support to families on specific school's learning management systems, or remote assistance to help residents with broadband adoption.

These grants would enable population-specific support for disadvantaged residents (e.g. for older adults, limited English speakers, residents of low-income housing, people with disabilities, and veterans). Specifically, "Underserved residents" refers to: (a) Individuals who live in low-income households; (b) Aging individuals; (c) Incarcerated individuals; (d) Veterans; (e) Individuals with disabilities; (f) Individuals with a language barrier, including individuals who are English learners or who have low levels of literacy; (g) Individuals who are members of a racial or ethnic minority group; or (h) Individuals who primarily reside in a rural area.

This mechanism would also enable the State to be ready for potential federal funds, enabling digital inclusion projects throughout the state in areas of need.

Grantees would be selected by a review committee representative of state agencies, like the Department of Commerce, Office of Equity, Department of Social and Human Services, industry representatives, Washington nonprofit service sector, and others with expertise in digital inclusion and community services.

III. STATEWIDE DIGITAL EQUITY DASHBOARD

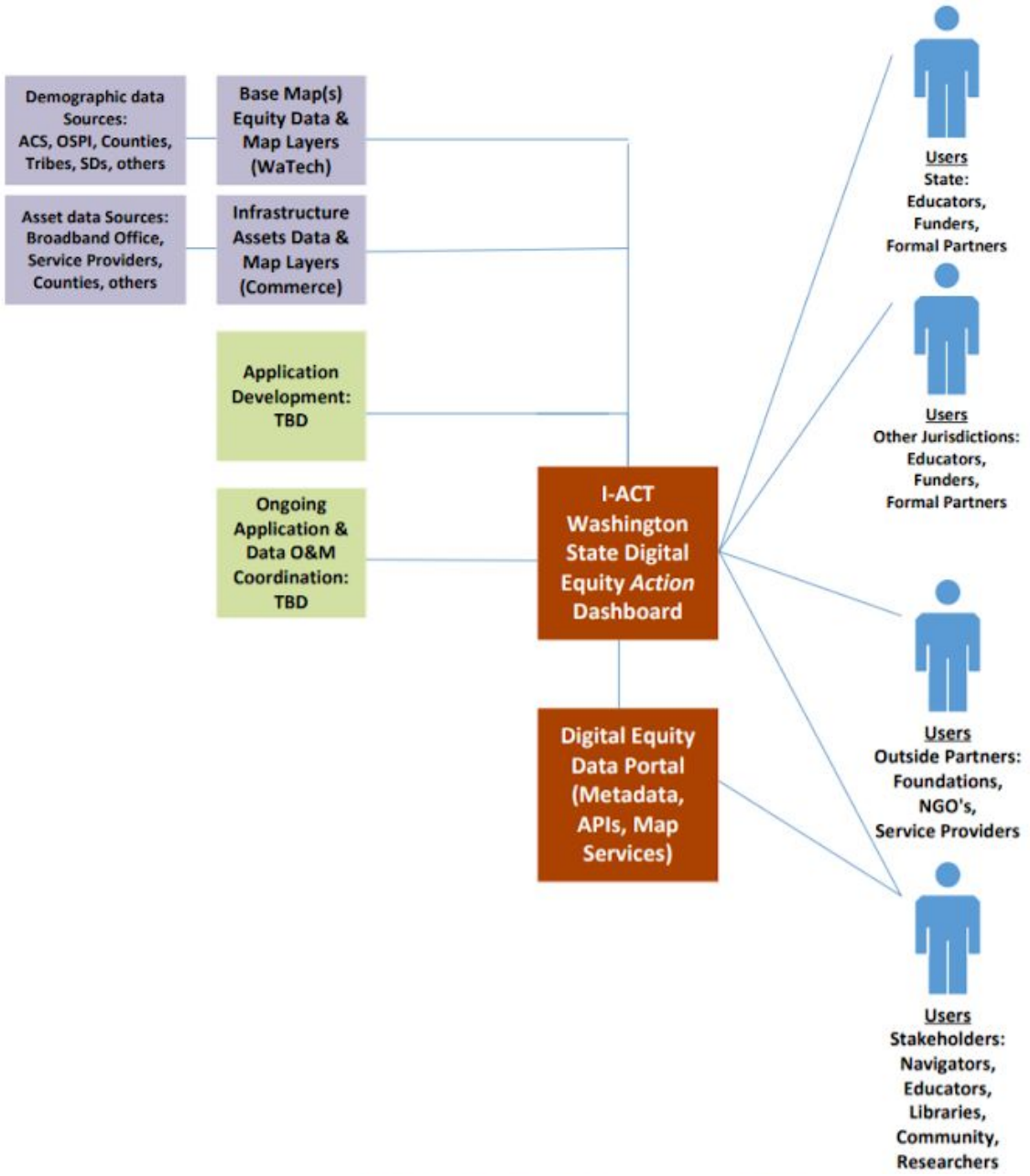
A necessary component for this initiative is the development of a statewide GIS-based digital equity management dashboard. The Washington State Digital Equity Dashboard will be an ongoing resource. It will allow stakeholders to identify specific areas in the State of Washington where the need is greatest to provide broadband and/or WiFi hotspot access so that every segment of the community can connect to the Internet. Functionality of the dashboard will include:

- Display components:
    - Interactive GIS-basedGIS based map
    - Graphical display of user-selected data (based on the map view area)
    - Graphical display of broadband and/or WiFi hotspots by demographic quintiles (based on the map view area)
    - Graphical display of broadband and/or WifFi hotspot equity score for selected demographics (based on the map view area)
- Ability to navigate the map from a statewide view to the census block group level and intermediate geographic levels, such as Counties, Cities, Tribes, School Districts, and Legislative Districts
- Ability (in the future) to display change over time of broadband and/or WiFi hotspots and of Broadband & WiFi equity scores
- Legend facilitating user-defined data display (univariate or multivariate)
- Key data layers (in addition to the key boundaries identified above) include:
    - Broadband access data
    - WiFi hotspots data
    - Demographic data

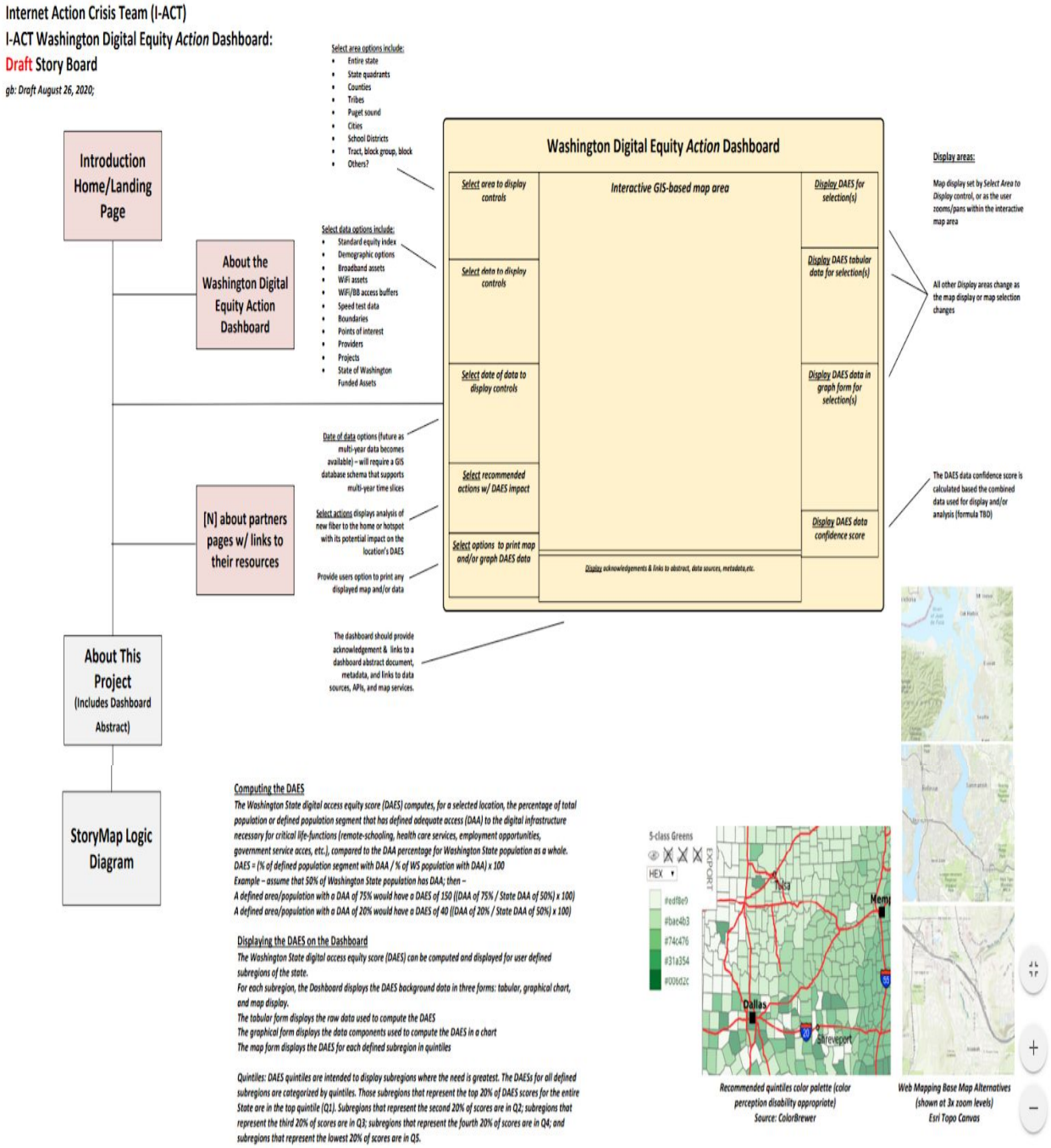
The objectives of the Washington State Digital Equity Dashboard will include:

- Clearly identify where the need is greatest for future investment in Broadband/WiFi infrastructure
- Incentivize investment in underserved areas
- Support Broadband/WiFi grant requests
- Provide a means of acknowledging WiFi Hotspot sponsors

Attachment I. Digital Equity Action Dashboard: Draft Use Case Diagram



Attachment II. Digital Equity Action Dashboard: Draft Story Board



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BREAKDOWN OF AMOUNT REQUESTED

BUDGET ITEM	DESCRIPTION	COST
Program and Partnership Leads	Support gatherings and communications of program and partnership leads from CWC for program development and management.	$250,000
Digital Navigators	Direct 1:1 assistance providers. Salary and benefits for two Digital Navigators in 10 regions across the State for $100,000 each	$2,000,000
Outreach and Marketing	Outreach to digitally un- and under-served populations through flyers, ethnic media, community organizations and centers, senior centers, and other community institutions. Translations.	$200,000
Program Impact Evaluation and Reporting	External evaluations consultant and program staff reporting.	$400,000
Hardware and Hotspots	Hotspots, laptops, and other devices for Digital Navigators to distribute to clients. 2,000 hotspots at $140 each 4,800 Lenovo Chromebooks at $189 each 200 Sector 5 LTE Chromebooks at $350 each Chromebook deployment services for 5,000 devices at $5 each	$1,415,118
Director of Digital Navigators Program	One Director to oversee Digital Navigators, trainings, program support, and other duties as needed	$125,000
Coordinator of Digital Navigators Program	One Coordinator to support Director, conduct outreach, organize gatherings, and other duties as needed.	$100,000

Training costs	Contracts with trainers. Staff time for training. Costs for 1-2 gatherings of all program staff, Digital Navigators, and others as needed.	$250,000
Travel costs	For Digital Navigators and Program Staff to travel to clients to deliver technology.	$150,000
Community Grants for Local Response Projects	Sub-grants to community-developed digital equity projects.	$500,000
Statewide Digital Equity Dashboard	Develop dashboard.	$250,000
Administrative Costs	7.5% for administration of programs, human resources, taxes, insurance, management oversight, phone, internet, and rent.	$423,000
TOTAL		$6,063,118