FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**FRANKLIN COUNTY DIGITAL EQUITY COALITION RECEIVES $20.2 MILLION TO SUPPORT DIGITAL EQUITY WORK IN CENTRAL OHIO**

*Contributions Will Go a Long Way Towards Connecting Those in Need to Digital Access*

Today, City of Columbus Mayor Andrew J. Ginther and Franklin County Commissioner John O’Grady announced a joint commitment of $20.2M to Smart Columbus on behalf of the Franklin County Digital Equity Coalition. These important funds will lessen the digital divide in our community, ensuring all under-resourced residents have greater access to affordable, reliable high-speed internet, and the digital resources necessary to live, learn, and earn online.

The digital divide is the gap between those who do and do not have access to affordable, reliable internet, devices, and digital skills. According to the 2021 U.S. Census Bureau’s American Communities Survey, in Franklin County:

* Over 80,000 households (10%), representing over 200,000 people do not have a home Internet subscription, and
* Over 66,000 households (5%) do not have a computer.

In addition, one-third of working-age Americans possess limited, if any, digital skills, and one in six are unable to use email, web search, or other basic online tools according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. By ensuring under-resourced residents have access to affordable, reliable residential Internet, connected devices, and digital skills training, we can inclusively expand participation in the modern, digital economy.

"Having reliable internet is as crucial as having access to clean water and electricity," said Mayor Ginther. " Every resident deserves to have full access to affordable, high-speed internet as well as the digital devices that bring these services directly into the home or the palm of your hand – regardless of your ability to pay."

Legislation before Columbus City Council will authorize $15 million of the city’s American Rescue Plan Act funding and Franklin County will contribute $5.2M to support this initiative. Altogether, these funds will do the following:

* Increase access to affordable, reliable home internet among the 80,000 households that are currently underserved by at least 50 percent.
* Distribute 10,000 computers, tablets, smartphones, or other internet-enabled devices to households in need.
* Deploy decentralized digital skills training programs at community organizations, equipping 10,000 residents with new digital skills.
* Establish a digital equity ecosystem in which 1,500 trained advocates (librarians, school counselors, social workers, etc.) across 100 partner organizations are aware of the issue, sharing resources, deploying support programs and raising awareness.
* Invest $800,000 in competitive grants to partner organizations for digital inclusion programs.
* Establish an ecosystem of local companies and community organizations to provide a steady, sustainable stream of low-cost, high-quality devices to residents in need

“Empowering underserved residents with affordable digital access to healthcare, financial management, and job opportunities represents significant steps forward to generational and impactful progress in Franklin County,” said Board of Commissioners President, John O’Grady. “My colleagues and I remain unwavering in supporting our neighbors and this initiative is a testament to our dedication in fostering positive change and bridging the digital divide.”

Select pilot programs are currently underway and will be deployed at scale in 2024. Additional pilot programs will be launched and scaled in the years to come, with full scale operations in place by 2027. Get updates and more by visiting [ConnectCentralOhio.com](http://connectcentralohio.com/).

You can view the full press conference here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-uPUk0yPhFQ>

***About Franklin County Digital Equity Coalition***

The Franklin County Digital Equity Coalition (DEC) includes over 40 organizations, representing government, education, healthcare, social service, the private sector and other anchor institutions. The Coalition initially formed in response to the pandemic in March 2020. The City of Columbus Department of Technology in partnership with Smart Columbus have led the Coalition since early 2022. In November 2022, the DEC published the Digital Equity Action Agenda, outlining key strategies to close the digital divide and achieve digital equity for all in Central Ohio. For more information, visit franklincountydigitalequity.org.

***About Smart Columbus***

Smart Columbus is an agile, collaborative innovation lab that serves the Columbus Region by anticipating and advancing what is new and next at the intersection of technology and community good. By promoting thought leadership on the future of cities, fostering an ecosystem of regional partners, and delivering human-centered technology deployments in the areas of mobility, sustainability, digitalization, and emerging urban technologies, Smart Columbus seeks to offer residents a more frictionless experience with Columbus’ infrastructure, systems and services, increasing access to opportunity, and improving quality of life. Smart Columbus was founded in 2016 when Columbus won the first-ever Smart City Challenge. For more information, visit smartcolumbus.com.