

Racial Equity and Social Justice (RESJ) Impact Statement

Office of Legislative Oversight

EXPEDITED ADMINISTRATION - NON-MERIT POSITIONS - SPECIAL BILL 4-23: PROJECTS MANAGER

SUMMARY

The Office of Legislative Oversight (OLO) anticipates Expedited Bill 4-23 will have a minimal impact on racial equity and social justice (RESJ) in the County. Allocating a dedicated staff person for coordinating digital equity efforts in the County would likely not be enough to affect the digital divide by race and ethnicity. This Bill could have a positive impact on RESJ if there were more funding for targeted programs and services, and more RESJ focus in the responsibilities of the new staff person.

PURPOSE OF RESJ IMPACT STATEMENTS

The purpose of RESJ impact statements (RESJIS) is to evaluate the anticipated impact of legislation on racial equity and social justice in the County. Racial equity and social justice refer to a **process** that focuses on centering the needs, leadership, and power of communities of color and low-income communities with a **goal** of eliminating racial and social inequities.¹ Achieving racial equity and social justice usually requires seeing, thinking, and working differently to address the racial and social harms that have caused racial and social inequities.²

PURPOSE OF EXPEDITED BILL 4-23

The National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) defines digital equity as “a condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy, and economy. Digital equity is necessary for civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services.”³

The goal of Bill 4-23 is to enhance the County’s focus on digital equity issues and establish a central point for the coordination and oversight of digital equity initiatives. The Bill seeks to achieve this goal by establishing a second, non-merit Special Projects Manager in the Office of the County Executive. According to the County Executive, a major initiative for the Special Projects Manager would be to improve digital equity by:

- coordinating efforts to extend the physical infrastructure needed to access high-speed broadband in the County;
- expanding access to affordable high-speed broadband, home computers, and digital literacy training;
- seeking and deploying grants;
- establishing a network of digital navigators;
- creating a comprehensive online digital literacy resource portal; and
- managing relationships with County Government and local partners, such as educational institutions, employers, and Worksource Montgomery, to align County efforts on equity, digital literacy, and career training.⁴

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Expedited Bill 4-23, Administration - Non-Merit Positions - Special Projects Manager, was introduced by the Council on behalf of the County Executive on January 31, 2023.

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE AND RACIAL EQUITY

NDIA defines the digital divide as follows:

The digital divide is the gap between those who have affordable access, skills, and support to effectively engage online and those who do not. As technology constantly evolves, the digital divide prevents equal participation and opportunity in all parts of life, disproportionately affecting people of color, Indigenous peoples, households with low incomes, people with disabilities, people in rural areas, and older adults.⁵

The digital divide is multifaceted and is driven by broader inequities across several realms. A 2020 article from researchers at the University of South Carolina described some of these inequities:

- **Built environment:** Lack of broadband Internet availability region-wise; limited access to free public Internet in community buildings such as libraries; absence of structural support/housing insecurity
- **Social and community context:** Shared or cultural expectations regarding use of digital devices, telehealth, and telemonitoring; mistrust of technology and/or medical community
- **Education:** Literacy; varying degrees of digital literacy; inconsistent or unavailable education regarding changes in technology
- **Economic stability:** Inability to purchase devices or upgrades; affordable devices may not have capability to work with proposed programs; inconsistent access to devices due to economic instability
- **Health and healthcare access:** Choices of technology/programs heavily tied to reimbursement; healthcare systems likely to pursue advanced technology that may outpace patient capability; patient comorbidities may affect ability to effectively use technology⁶

Structural racial inequities in areas such as these makes the digital divide pronounced among Black, Indigenous, and Other People of Color (BIPOC). For instance:

- A 2020 study of national data by researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles found that, among households with school-age children, “Black and Hispanic households are significantly more likely (1.3 to 1.4 times) to experience limited access to technology as compared to non-Hispanic Whites.”⁷
- A 2021 study from the Pew Research Center found that “Black and Hispanic adults in the United States remain less likely than White adults to say they own a traditional computer or have high-speed internet at home.”⁸
- A 2021 study of 562 older adults published in the Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities found that, “[o]lder African Americans were one-fifth as likely to own a computer than were European Americans.”⁹
- A 2021 study of 152 rural southern counties by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies found that Black residents lacked home Internet access at nearly double the rate of White residents in the same region.¹⁰

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Just as the digital divide is rooted in multiple inequities, its consequences also span multiple realms, including health care, education, and employment.¹¹ For instance, a June 2022 Racial Equity Impact Assessment from the Office of Racial Equity and Social Justice described how BIPOC students are disproportionately impacted by the homework gap – where limited access to technology at home affects students’ ability to adequately complete schoolwork.¹²

ANTICIPATED RESJ IMPACTS

To consider the anticipated impact of Bill 4-23 on RESJ in the County, OLO recommends the consideration of two related questions:

- Who are the primary beneficiaries of this bill?
- What racial and social inequities could passage of this bill weaken or strengthen?

For the first question, to understand who is affected by the digital divide, OLO considered the share of households in the County who have access to technology by race and ethnicity.

Census data summarized in Table 1 suggests, across racial and ethnic groups, relatively high shares of households in the County have access to a computer and broadband Internet. However, it is important to note that in this data, smartphones and tablets are included as computers and cell phone companies as broadband service providers. Thus, this data may underestimate the extent of the digital divide in the County by race and ethnicity since the functionality of smartphones and tablets is more limited than laptops and desktops and cell phone service is a less reliable source of Internet than high-speed broadband.

Table 1: Share of Households with a Computer and Households with Broadband by Race and Ethnicity, Montgomery County¹³

Race and ethnicity	Share of Households with a Computer	Share of Households with Broadband
Asian	99.2	97.8
Black	97.0	94.6
White	98.8	96.1
Latinx	98.2	95.5

Source: Table S0201, 2021 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Estimates, Census Bureau.

Looking particularly at the availability of a laptop or desktop and high-speed broadband provides a more nuanced understanding of the County’s digital divide by race and ethnicity. An analysis of Census microdata summarized in Table 2 suggests that lower shares of Latinx households have access to a laptop or desktop at home compared to other households. The data also suggests that, compared to White and Asian households, lower shares of Black and Latinx households have access to high-speed broadband.

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Table 2: Share of Households with a Laptop or Desktop and Households with High-Speed Broadband by Race and Ethnicity, Montgomery County¹⁴

Race and ethnicity	Share of Households with a Laptop or Desktop	Share of Households with High-Speed Broadband
Asian	97.0	91.5
Black	91.3	84.4
White	94.9	91.0
Latinx	84.2	82.9

Source: OLO Analysis of 2021 ACS 5-Year Estimates Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS), Census Bureau.

For the second question, OLO considered how the Bill could impact the digital divide in the County by race and ethnicity. Black and Latinx residents could disproportionately benefit from coordinated digital equity efforts. However, it is not clear from the Bill's staff report if/how the new staffer will target efforts by race and ethnicity. Further, absent more funding for targeted programs and services, the addition of a staff person alone is unlikely to materially change the digital divide in the County by race and ethnicity.

Taken together, OLO anticipates Bill 4-23 will have a minimal impact on RESJ in the County. Allocating a dedicated staff person for coordinating digital equity efforts in the County would likely not be enough to affect the digital divide by race and ethnicity. This Bill could have a positive impact on RESJ if there were more funding for targeted programs and services, and more RESJ focus in the responsibilities of the new staff person.

RECOMMENDED AMENDMENTS

The Racial Equity and Social Justice Act requires OLO to consider whether recommended amendments to bills aimed at narrowing racial and social inequities are warranted in developing RESJ impact statements.¹⁵ OLO anticipates Expedited Bill 4-23 will have a minimal impact on RESJ in the County. As such, OLO does not offer recommended amendments.

CAVEATS

Two caveats to this racial equity and social justice impact statement should be noted. First, predicting the impact of legislation on racial equity and social justice is a challenging analytical endeavor due to data limitations, uncertainty, and other factors. Second, this RESJ impact statement is intended to inform the legislative process rather than determine whether the Council should enact legislation. Thus, any conclusion made in this statement does not represent OLO's endorsement of, or objection to, the bill under consideration.

¹ Definition of racial equity and social justice adopted from "Applying a Racial Equity Lens into Federal Nutrition Programs" by Marlysa Gamblin, et.al. Bread for the World, and from Racial Equity Tools. <https://www.raciaequitytools.org/glossary>

² Ibid

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³ “Definitions,” National Digital Inclusion Alliance. <https://www.digitalinclusion.org/definitions/>

⁴ Introduction Staff Report for Expedited Bill 4-23, Administration – Non-Merit Positions – Special Projects Manager, Montgomery County Council, Introduced January 31, 2023.

https://apps.montgomerycountymd.gov/ccllms/DownloadFilePage?FileName=2779_1_23736_Bill_4-2023_Introduction_20230131.pdf

⁵ “Definitions,” National Digital Inclusion Alliance.

⁶ Anita Ramsetty and Christin Adams, “Impact of the Digital Divide in the Age of COVID-19,” Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association, April 2020. <https://academic.oup.com/jamia/article/27/7/1147/5826352>

⁷ Paul M. Ong, “Covid-19 and the Digital Divide in Virtual Learning,” Center for Neighborhood Knowledge, University of California, Los Angeles, Fall 2020. https://knowledge.luskin.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Digital-Divide-Phase2_brief_release_v01.pdf

⁸ Sara Atske and Andrew Perrin, “Home Broadband Adoption, Computer Ownership Vary by Race, Ethnicity in the U.S.,” Pew Research Center, July 16, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/07/16/home-broadband-adoption-computer-ownership-vary-by-race-ethnicity-in-the-u-s/>

⁹ Ruth M. Tappen, et al, “Digital Health Information Disparities in Older Adults: a Mixed Methods Study,” Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities, January 2021. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7790471/>

¹⁰ Dominique Harrison, “Affordability & Availability: Expanding Broadband in the Black Rural South,” Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, October 6, 2021. <https://jointcenter.org/affordability-availability-expanding-broadband-in-the-black-rural-south/>

¹¹ Bhaskar Chakravorti, “How to Close the Digital Divide in the U.S.,” Harvard Business Review, July 20, 2021. <https://hbr.org/2021/07/how-to-close-the-digital-divide-in-the-u-s>

¹² Racial Equity Impact Assessment (REIA) for Supplemental Appropriation (SA) #22-94, Office of Racial Equity and Social Justice, June 27, 2022. <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/ore/Resources/Files/22-94.pdf>

¹³ Latinx is an ethnicity rather than a race; therefore, Latinx people are included in multiple racial groups throughout this impact statement unless where otherwise noted. Estimates for Native American and Pacific Islander constituents not available for all data points presented in impact statement.

¹⁴ Estimates calculated from ACS PUMS data are less precise than pre-tabulated data because PUMS data is a subsample of the full ACS sample.

¹⁵ Bill 27-19, Administration – Human Rights – Office of Racial Equity and Social Justice – Racial Equity and Social Justice Advisory Committee – Established, Montgomery County Council