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**FINAL REPORT OF THE SENATE BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE IN AGING  
COMMUNITIES STUDY COMMITTEE**

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

**Honorable Valencia Seay**  
**Senator, District 34**  
**Chair**

**Honorable Gloria Butler**  
**Senator, District 55**

**Honorable Bill Heath**  
**Senator, District 31**

**Honorable Jason Carter**  
**Senator, District 42**

**Honorable Barry Loudermilk**  
**Senator, District 52**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	3
BACKGROUND.....	3
COMMITTEE FINDINGS .....	4
Accessibility .....	4
Literacy .....	4
Relevance.....	5
COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS .....	5

## INTRODUCTION

The Senate Study Committee on Bridging the Digital Divide in Aging Communities (the "Committee"), was appointed by the Lieutenant Governor, serving as President of the Senate, pursuant to Senate Resolution 5 during the 2011 Legislative Session.

The Committee was composed of five members of the Senate. The Senators serving on the Committee were: Senator Valencia Seay, serving as Chair; Senator Gloria Butler; Senator Jason Carter; Senator Bill Heath; and Senator Barry Loudermilk.

Additional legislative staff assigned to the Committee were: Ms. Lauren Randall, Legislative Assistant to Senator Valencia Seay; Ms. Kate Greer of the Senate Press Office, and Ms. Lauren Greer of the Senate Research Office.

The Committee met on three occasions. The first meeting, which served as an informational meeting, was held on August 22, 2011 at the State Capitol in Atlanta. The Senators who attended the first meeting were Senators Seay, Butler, Heath, and Loudermilk. The second meeting, on August 30, 2011, was also held at the Capitol. Senators in attendance at the second meeting were Senators Seay, Butler, Carter, Heath, and Loudermilk. The final meeting of the Committee was held on November 22, 2011 at Divine Ministries Church in Buford, Georgia. Senator Seay and Senator Butler attended the final meeting of the Committee. At each meeting, the Committee heard testimony from citizens, industry professionals and advocates for regarding the difficulties the elderly population face in the digital age. Some of those testifying included: Mr. Tobias Tillmon, Associate State Director, AARP Multicultural Outreach; Ms. Checha Reddy, Georgia STAND-UP; Mr. Michael Wall, Senior Director, State Government Affairs, Comcast Cable; Mr. Kevin Curtin, AT&T; Dr. Lamar Veatch, State Librarian; Ms. Pamela Roshell, Senior State Director, AARP; and Ms. Marcia Wallace, Legislative Assistant, Georgia Senate.

## BACKGROUND

As our state and country continue to move towards an all-digital operation many of the seniors responsible for our existence are being left behind and shut out of the present and the future. During its hearings, the Committee heard testimony from Georgia citizens, advocates for seniors, and service providers regarding the depth of this digital divide in Georgia.

In recent years, the availability of broadband in much of Georgia has increased while, at the same time, the cost of these services has gone down. Yet, despite these developments, many seniors are hesitant to adopt new technology. Testimony provided to the Committee revealed that the biggest barriers between the aging population and technology are accessibility, literacy, and relevance.

## COMMITTEE FINDINGS

### Accessibility

Mr. Michael Wall with Comcast informed the Committee about its "Internet Essentials" program. The program aims to connect low-income families to the internet through a partnership with local schools. To achieve this goal, cost-effective internet services are provided to families participating in the federal-free lunch program. Participants in the program may purchase a computer with the necessary security and software protection for \$150 and internet service for \$9.95 a month. The "Internet Essentials" program is part of the Federal Communications Commission's "Connect to Compete" Initiative, which is aimed at expanding broadband adoption across the country. The Committee discussed whether this program could also be beneficial to seniors.

Mr. Kevin Curtin with AT&T talked to the Committee about the availability of broadband in Georgia. He said that Georgia is leading the nation for access to broadband, with 94 percent of Georgians able to get DSL and 74% wireless coverage.

Even with the cost of broadband services becoming more affordable, many people are still unable to afford the cost of the infrastructure necessary to utilize the technology.

Dr. Lamar Veatch, the state librarian, told the Committee that there are approximately 400 libraries across the state that provide computers and broadband access to the public. However, he did note that there are only a small number of computers available at each facility.

Several testimonials to the Committee revealed that a lack of transportation or health conditions make it difficult for certain seniors to utilize available technology.

### Literacy

The Committee heard repeated testimony about frustrations with learning to use technology once it becomes accessible. Many seniors said they get overwhelmed with information in training classes and trying to keep up with the pace of technology at home.

Ms. Checha Reddy with Georgia STAND-UP testified that those who are willing to learn need a teacher who is slow, patient and willing to "break it down" for the aging population. Dr. Veatch told the Committee that many of the libraries across the state offer computer training classes, some specifically for seniors. These classes, however, are not offered statewide. Mr. Chuck Ware testified that his six-year old grandchild helped him learn to change his computer's password. His story echoed the sentiment of other citizens who said they would like to see more opportunity for young people to teach them how to utilize the technology.

Ms. Marcia Wallace serves as legislative assistant for Georgia Senators Steve Thompson and Emanuel Jones. Ms. Wallace told the Committee that she is so overwhelmed with the amount of new technology she must learn that she may soon retire. Nevertheless, even in retirement she will still have to learn to keep up because, among other things, her doctor will only consult via email.

### Relevance

Many citizens told the Committee they are simply just not interested in learning to use technology. They recognize its potential, but do not like it or think it is necessary for them to learn.

Other testimony highlighted the importance of seniors knowing how to use the internet in order to apply for jobs, communicate with healthcare professionals, and learn about changes to relevant federal laws.

## COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee recognizes the importance of technology in this new digital age but it also recognizes the difficulty it poses to many of our older citizens. After hearing testimony, many first-hand accounts, about the frustrations of these citizens, the Committee makes the following recommendations.

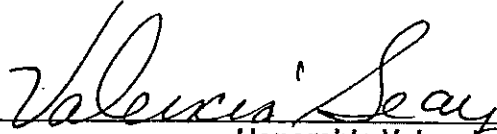
The Committee recognizes that many seniors are unfamiliar with the benefits of cellular technology. Many of those who are familiar, do not know how to utilize it. Specifically, many people do not know that a text message will work even when the phone does not. Because this is one of the many benefits that could be helpful to seniors, especially in an emergency, the Committee recommends affordable and accessible training to seniors on using cell phones.

The Committee recognizes that many seniors do not know how to use the Internet to their advantage or how to communicate through email. Many seniors, who do, easily become overwhelmed with information and messages in their inbox. To help remove this hurdle, the Committee recommends affordable and accessible training to seniors on using the Internet and email.

The Committee further recognizes that even with training on new technologies, many seniors still may not be able to afford access. The Committee recommends that a program similar to Comcast's "Internet Essentials" for low-income children be created to offer affordable access to cell phones, Internet, and email.

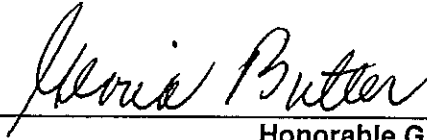
Respectfully Submitted,

Bridging the Digital Divide in Aging Communities Study Committee



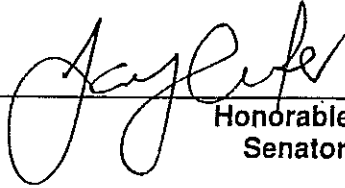
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