New Data on Illinois' Digital Divide; How Illinois Communities Can Take Advantage of Federal Consolidated Appropriations Act Funding

Illinois Broadband Affordability Study

Last June, the Illinois General Assembly directed the state's Broadband Advisory Council (BAC) to study various questions related to broadband access and affordability, including cost estimates for:

- Universal broadband access where existing broadband infrastructure is insufficient;
- Universal free or affordable broadband service for all residents; and
- Free or affordable broadband service for those in poverty.

The BAC worked with nationally-respected researchers to respond to the questions and the affordability study was delivered to the General Assembly in late December. The findings suggest that Illinois is on the right path with its comprehensive approach to eliminating the digital divide, but much work remains:

Sizable "Homework Gap." According to the 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) over 285,000 Illinois households with school-aged children lack at-home wireline broadband service. This presents an urgent priority given the pandemic and reliance upon full-time remote learning.

Lack of Home Computers. The same ACS data indicates that over 1.1 million Illinois households do not have at-home access to a desktop or laptop computer.

The study is the beginning of a timely and comprehensive conversation about broadband access, adoption, and affordability in Illinois. While the cost for free broadband service for all might be considered aspirational or even prohibitive, universal broadband access is well within the realm of doable – in terms of programmatic capacity, scope, and cost.

For instance, the study confirms that the $400 million devoted to Connect Illinois grants is within the estimated range of what is needed to ensure universal broadband access throughout the state. Moreover, the study identifies gaps in equitable access to computers and broadband that the Pritzker Administration has worked to address via initiatives such as our Illinois Connected Communities program, Broadband READY program, Digital Navigator program, and the recently announced Connect Illinois Computer Equity Network.

The researchers recommend that Illinois:

- Continue to offer competitive matching grants
- Support development of affordable network alternatives for Illinois residents
- Establish a state digital inclusion coordinator
- Fund partnerships for digital inclusion
- Increase public awareness of affordability programs
- Improve the pipeline of computing devices

For those looking for further statistics about internet and technology adoption in Illinois, we highly recommend reading through the study.

View the Affordability Study

Federal Update: Broadband Provisions in the Consolidated Appropriations Act

On December 27, President Donald Trump signed the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021. Among other provisions, the bill contains a variety of broadband funding commitments that may provide states with opportunities to enhance their efforts at expanding broadband connectivity. Illinois is poised to take action.

Here are some early insights that may be of particular interest to communities around Illinois.

Digital Equity and Inclusion: The law includes an unprecedented acknowledgment of the need for ubiquitous digital inclusion and digital literacy. For the first time, there are financial resources being made available in support of that goal. Most notable is the **Emergency Broadband Benefit Fund**, a $3.2 billion commitment in which Congress has tasked the Federal Communications Commission to create a monthly discount on broadband internet access service for low-income households.

Under the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program, broadband providers will be reimbursed up to $50/month per low-income household served ($75/month if the household is on Tribal land). The providers can also be reimbursed up to $100 for providing the household with a connected device (desktop, laptop, or tablet computer) if the household contributes $10-$50 for the device. (Households are only eligible for one device.)

A household is eligible, regardless of whether it currently receives Lifeline support or has any past or present arrearages with a broadband provider, if someone in the household:

- Is eligible to participate in the FCC's Lifeline program
- Is eligible for the Free or Reduced Lunch/School Breakfast
- Has experienced COVID-related loss of income
- Has received a Federal Pell Grant

Congress created the program to be temporary — lasting just six months after the COVID crisis ends.

On January 4, the FCC released a [Public Notice](#) asking for comment on how to best implement this new program, which Congress expects to be up and running in the next two months. Both the State of Illinois Broadband Office and the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society plan to file comments.

For more details, see the Benton Institute's [Creating (Finally) an Emergency Broadband Benefit](#).

The Connecting Minority Communities Pilot Program: The program will be administered by the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration. Up to $285 million is available to support bringing minority communities online. Allowable uses of the funding include devices, purchase of broadband service (not construction of networks), and digital literacy and adoption activities. Eligible applicants are Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and other minority-serving institutions.

Opportunities for Illinois communities — Determine whether the community has a qualifying institution in its region, connect with appropriate staff at a qualifying institution, participate in program design to reach unserved individuals and households in their qualifying area, and/or offer to recruit staff and volunteers to execute program elements.

Education — Distance Learning: The law authorizes $81.8 billion in education relief funds, with some of that money authorized to address student broadband access and connectivity gaps. This explicit support is the first time there has been universal acknowledgment of the needs and benefits of making sure every K-12 student has connectivity and a device at their home.

Opportunities for Illinois communities — The inclusion of this allowance can serve as a prompt for communities to have discussions with schools in their area about what is being done to identify students in need, what students need to put them on par with their connected peers, and what the district's plans are to systematize the process of making sure all K-12 students have connectivity at home every school year.

Adoption and Use – Federal Communications Commission COVID-19 Telehealth Program: This successful program already provided $200 million from the CARES Act to local healthcare providers to aid in the implementation of telehealth and connected care tools for serving patients remotely. Illinois providers received close to $3 million in awards from the first round. $250 million in additional funds have been allocated to this program.

Opportunities for Illinois communities — Think about what healthcare institutions and organizations might be good candidates to apply for this second round of funding.

Infrastructure Funding: Broadband Infrastructure Development Grants, through the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration, sets aside $300 million for broadband infrastructure projects in primarily rural areas that do not conflict with areas already funded through other state or federal sources. Eligible applicants are partnerships between the state or political subdivision and providers of fixed broadband service.

Community Connect Grants: The law allocates $35 million to the U.S. Department of Agriculture for the existing Community Connects Grants program to provide broadband assistance in economically-challenged areas where service does not already exist.

Opportunities for Illinois communities — For a nationwide program, this is a small amount of funding with "poverty" and "unserved" qualifications that are difficult to meet. But if an Illinois community believes it has an area that is a good candidate for this program, they should review program details.

A webinar discussing federal funding opportunities available to Illinois communities has been planned for Friday, January 22 at noon. Registration should be posted here in the near future.

Spotlight on Illinois Connected Communities

Over the next several newsletters, we will be highlighting communities participating in the first cohort of the Illinois Connected Communities (ICC) program. ICC is a year-long program comprising best practice curriculum, expert consultation, and a state grant of up to $15,000 to assist communities in creating a broadband strategic plan to improve broadband access, adoption, and/or use.

The Illinois Office of Broadband is currently accepting grant applications for ICC Round 2. The **application deadline is January 25, 2021**. *View the Notice of Funding Opportunity, review a Past Informational Webinar, or Register for our January 14 Webinar here.*

ICC in Chicago: South Shore & McKinley Park

In this edition, we highlight two Chicago neighborhoods participating in the Illinois Connected Communities program: South Shore and McKinley Park. When we first imagined the ICC Program, we did not anticipate that urban neighborhoods would be interested in applying. But the energy and commitment exhibited by these two communities have opened the door to future neighborhood applicants.

The **South Shore** neighborhood has a strong team that is well supported by the Neighborhood Network Alliance, a local area non-profit organization. As a majority of South Shore residents live in multi-family dwelling units, improving broadband connectivity and provider choice in these buildings is a priority.

South Shore has been implementing a community survey to measure broadband adoption. On top of the challenges of reaching people who do not currently have access to broadband, the COVID-19 pandemic has made in person social gatherings impossible. But South Shore has taken the innovative approach of setting up tables at the local grocery market to meet people where they are. Their next step to gather information will be a series of listening sessions with non-profits, businesses, and residents.

With a desire to increase awareness of the importance of broadband connectivity and use, the South Shore team is creating a documentary video that highlights the struggle that many residents face when trying to participate in the online world.

South Shore is also exploring co-hosting a computer distribution event in partnership with PCs for People.
McKinley Park is another Chicago neighborhood participant, located in the city's southwest side. The McKinley Park Development Council (MPDC) formed in 2017 with the goal of fostering just and sustainable development, while not falling prey to the injustices of gentrification. The ICC steering team is a diverse collection of resident volunteers increasingly enthusiastic about opportunities to make a real difference in the neighborhood by making sure that all residents can get online with quality, affordable internet. MPDC will soon launch a community survey.

ICC community coach, Bill Coleman, just made a connection between City of Chicago digital equity staff and the steering teams of South Shore and McKinley Park so that these two neighborhoods can be involved in the wider efforts initiated by the City and Chicago Public Schools. These emerging partnerships will help to ensure that these neighborhoods will have accurate and timely information and a clear pathway to program resources-- a real force multiplier for these resident initiatives.

Introducing Robbie McBeath

Robbie McBeath joined the Benton Institute in late 2014 as a Writing Associate, helping Benton produce its daily Headlines email news service. He currently serves as Benton's Outreach Manager, responsible for digital marketing and communications and program outreach. He is assisting Bill Coleman with the Illinois Connected Communities program. Robbie recently wrote [Connectivity in the Time of COVID](), which tracks the top 10 most important digital divide stories from 2020.

Previously, Robbie interned at the Federal Communications Commission and served as an AmeriCorps VISTA with the Open Media Foundation in Denver, Colorado. Elsewhere, Robbie works on campaign finance reform, nonviolent communication, and jazz piano. Robbie graduated in 2013 from the University of Illinois with a degree in Media Studies, and grew up across the street from Fermilab in Batavia, Illinois.

News and Resources

Jan 8 | [USDA Invests $1.6 million to deploy a fiber-to-the-premises network in Adams County, Illinois]() (USDA)
Dec 21 | [FCC's Rural Digital Opportunity Fund Auction Was Supposed to Significantly Reduce America's Rural Broadband Gap]() (Benton Institute)
Dec 18 | [Broadband Lessons Learned in 2020](), a year-end publications review from Benton Institute Executive Director Adrianne Furniss

Looking for more broadband policy news? The Benton Institute for Broadband & Society offers a free, reliable, and non-partisan daily digest that curates and distributes news related to universal broadband. You can subscribe to this service here to learn how broadband delivers opportunities and strengthens communities.

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