



**Illinois  
Department of Commerce  
& Economic Opportunity**  
**OFFICE OF BROADBAND**  
JB Pritzker, Governor



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## Illinois' Digital Equity Push

### Illinois Announces New Digital Equity Package

Governor J.B. Pritzker and the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) Office of Broadband [announced](#) a new digital equity package, designed to help communities identify and address existing broadband equity gaps.

Illinois is directing an initial \$500,000 in state dollars, joining \$250,000 in non-state funds, to community-based and regional actors to address inequalities and gaps in coverage that may not be solved simply by the growth of local broadband networks. The complementary grants and programming will promote regional broadband equity evaluation and engagement, community broadband planning and capacity building, and aid in the creation of the nation's first integrated statewide network for improving digital equity and inclusion – namely, by addressing gaps in household access to computing devices, low-cost internet connectivity, and digital literacy skills.

The Pritzker administration will work alongside public, private, nonprofit, and philanthropic partners to raise additional capital and awareness of the digital equity challenges facing communities.

Application windows for two Notices of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) and one Notice of Collaboration Opportunity (NOCO) are now open:

#### **Broadband READY Grants - \$250,000**

A collaborative effort between the Illinois Office of Broadband and the Illinois Innovation Network, the Broadband Regional Engagement for Adoption + Digital Equity (READY) grants will award qualified regional organizations up to \$50,000 to identify current digital inequities. The goal is for community and economic development organizations, educational institutions, local leaders, and other related stakeholders to create regional digital inclusion ecosystems to address scalable solutions for broadband adoption and utilization in such pressing areas as telehealth and remote learning. The Illinois Innovation Network — a group of public universities and community colleges that works with government agencies, businesses, and community organizations to improve the state economy, will contribute \$100,000 to support the effort — which will establish a framework

for future broadband projects so regions can compete for grants whether from Connect Illinois or from federal programs.

[Broadband READY Grants | Click Here for the NOFO](#)

## **Illinois Connected Communities Grants - \$150,000**

The Illinois Connected Communities (ICC) program will be awarding a second round of funding as part of the digital equity package. Local communities will receive up to \$15,000 in grants to undertake community-based broadband planning and capacity building. A match from philanthropic entities will underwrite the cost of expert consultative services and access to best practice curriculum around broadband access, adoption, and utilization. The ICC program is a partnership of the Illinois Office of Broadband and the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society.

The first round of grants went to 12 organizations in July 2020. The communities spent their funds on a variety of uses, including data gathering and organizing. The program assists inclusive community steering teams representing governments, schools, businesses, residents, nonprofits, and other community organizations with the creation of broadband strategic plans that advance community development and well-being.

[ICC Grants | Click Here for the NOFO](#)

## **Digital Navigator Collaboration**

The Digital Navigator Collaboration between the Illinois Office of Broadband, the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA), and PCs for People will provide 20 communities or organizations with digital equity training valued at \$100,000.

Digital navigators will be volunteers or staff from social service agencies, libraries, and health care centers that can offer remote and in-person guidance to members of their communities. Qualified applicants will receive training on how to assist residents.

A cohort of qualified participants will be provided with expert training as well as the opportunity to work directly with project partners on resource establishment and digital equity mapping.

[Digital Navigator Collaboration | Click Here for the NOCO](#)

These new plans to spearhead digital equity for Illinois build on Governor Pritzker's bold Connect Illinois program, a \$420 million investment to bring universal access throughout the state by 2024.

You can [watch a webinar](#) on the digital equity package, or see the [presentation slides here](#).

## New Benton Institute Report on Digital Equity

How are digital inclusion coalitions across the country responding during the COVID-19 pandemic?

# Growing Healthy Digital Equity Ecosystems During COVID-19 and Beyond

Colin Rhinesmith and Susan Kennedy  
Published by the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society  
November 2020

On November 18, the Benton Institute published a new report, [Growing Healthy Digital Equity Ecosystems During COVID-19 and Beyond](#), which presents findings from a survey of individuals representing a diverse group of organizations across the United States that have self-identified as being part of either a formal, informal, or emerging digital inclusion coalition.

Colin Rhinesmith and Susan Kennedy, both of the Community Informatics Lab in the Simmons University School of Library and Information Science, conducted the study to better understand the role these coalitions have played in supporting what they are calling "digital equity ecosystems" in their communities during the challenges of the pandemic.

[Read the Report](#)

Rhinesmith and Kennedy define *Digital Equity Ecosystems* as "interactions between individuals, populations, communities, and their larger sociotechnical environments that all play a role in shaping the digital inclusion work in local communities to promote more equitable access to technology and social and racial justice."

This way of thinking about digital inequalities can also assist researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in seeing the creative and innovative community-based solutions that have emerged in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The report's main findings:

1. Digital inclusion coalitions established before the pandemic have responded to COVID-19 by focusing their efforts on information and resource sharing, networking, data collection, raising awareness about digital inequality, and developing new tactics to promote digital equity.
2. The pandemic has introduced several new challenges for digital inclusion coalitions and has magnified a number of existing challenges.
3. Digital inclusion coalitions are finding ways to creatively solve problems to address their communities' digital needs.
4. Cities, counties, states, and national organizations have also played key roles in supporting local digital equity ecosystems.

Communities and organizations in Illinois that are mentioned in the report include Brown County Broadband for All, the Leadership Council Southwestern Illinois, Mercer Foundation for Health, Palatine School District, United Palatine Coalition, and Webster University.

In a [blog post](#) accompanying the report, Rhinesmith and Kennedy detail how the incoming Biden administration can connect its economic recovery agenda to its work to promote racial equity. Rhinesmith and Kennedy also offer four actionable steps policymakers can take to bring this agenda to fruition.

## **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.*

### **Village of Flanagan**

The Village of Flanagan, about 30 miles north of Bloomington in north central Illinois, currently has limited options for quality broadband connectivity. A vast majority of the area is classified as "unserved." Even in the small blocks considered "served" by the Federal Communications Commission, businesses and residents cannot truly experience 25Mbps/3Mbps service. In reality, Flanagan's 1,000+ residents live in a community unserved by broadband.

The priority for [Connect Flanagan](#) is increasing broadband access. The steering team, led by Martin Kudla, is looking to bring access of at least 100Mbps/100Mbps throughout the

community. A community survey and discussions with prospective internet service providers are underway.



Once Flanagan makes progress toward the access goal, the team plans to work with the local schools and the public library on strategies for adoption, including equipping students and residents with devices and providing training. Notably, a quarter of the village's residents are seniors, who would benefit enormously from increased broadband adoption and use. In addition to schools and libraries, the steering team plans to work with the religious community to help expand digital literacy and establish a remote presence with nursing home residents, needed now more than ever due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Housing Authority of Champaign County**

The Housing Authority of Champaign County (HACC) is working hard to provide housing for some of the area's most vulnerable members. HACC's services extend far beyond housing; the agency offers a variety of programs to individuals, families, and senior citizens to build successful lives. HACC would like to help its clients connect to the internet for work, education, job training services, health care, and social interconnection.

Like many communities across the state, the pandemic has painfully exposed the challenges for those who are digitally excluded. Within Champaign-Urbana, there is a lack of affordable broadband access for HACC clients. For those living outside Champaign-Urbana, access itself is the challenge, as there may only be one or no internet service providers delivering high-quality internet. About 30% of the HACC community does not have daily access to the internet.

During the pandemic, many jobs and most job training have moved online. Lack of technology access and skills hampers clients' ability to improve their economic outlook and quality of life. Adding to the challenge, most of HACC's clients live in scattered-site housing, thereby increasing the difficulty of creating a unitary and effective program to address the connectivity challenge.

Importantly, the steering team wants their clients to have access to affordable broadband service and the necessary devices and skills to make effective use of these connections.

With the help of Illini Science Policy Fellow [Diamond Ruffin](#), HACC is in the process of distributing a survey to clients to better understand the current situation with availability, affordability, and digital skills. The process itself is slowed by the digital divide, as reaching unserved clients entails pen and paper and other forms of outreach. HACC will also be partnering with internet service

providers and local organizations to help market digital equity subscription packages, train staff and volunteers as digital navigators, and work on a variety of other strategies to remove barriers to clients gaining access to broadband services.

## Introducing Danna MacKenzie



Danna MacKenzie is consulting with the Illinois Office of Broadband on Connect Illinois, the comprehensive initiative that the state has undertaken to implement its unique standard-setting approach to tackling broadband gaps from all sides.

She previously served as the executive director of Minnesota's Office of Broadband Development, where she successfully built and operationalized several state broadband initiatives, including a large, multi-year broadband infrastructure grant program.

Danna now works independently on broadband projects across the country and has worked with a number of states, individual broadband providers, and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration on digital inclusion and broadband grant projects.

Her background is diverse and tilts towards the technical side; from building an early dial-up ISP, to community technology capacity building, to the creation of a county GIS system, to leading a successful effort to bring fiber-to-the-home to a very rural county on the Canadian border. While she will gladly talk tech all day long, ask her about her favorite travel trailer stops in North America when you meet her.

## News and Resources

Nov 18 | [Illinois Pushes for Digital Equity with New Broadband Investments](#) (Capitol News Illinois)

Nov 17 | [The Online Learning Equity Gap: Innovative Solutions to Connect All Students at Home](#) (Open Technology Institute)

Nov 16 | [Seizing the Moment](#) (Benton Institute)

Nov 16 | [Midwest schools scramble as COVID-19 surge sweeps region](#) (WiscNews)

Nov 13 | [The FirstNet Network Expands Across Illinois to Advance Public Safety Communications Capabilities](#) (First Responder Network Authority)

Nov 13 | [What Will the Next FCC Look Like?](#) (Benton Institute)

Nov 12 | [The Politics of Good Enough: Broadband in Rural America](#) (Benton Institute)

Oct 29 | [Broadband for America Now](#) (Benton Institute)

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.

Illinois Broadband Connections

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