



# Amidst a Winter Freeze, Broadband Programs are Heating Up

## Illinois Broadband Advisory Council

On February 17, the [Illinois Broadband Advisory Council](#) held its first regular meeting of 2021. Following updates from the Illinois Office of Broadband on the progress of its Connect Illinois Broadband Grant Program and Digital Equity programming, the group heard presentations from:

- Illinois State Board of Education on remote learning,
- Illinois Health and Hospital Association on telehealth, and
- AARP Illinois about "[Disrupt Disparities: Challenges & Solutions for 50+ Illinoisians of Color](#)" — a collaborative effort with Advancing Justice, Chicago Urban League, and the Resurrection Project around how racial disparities keep people from living longer, healthier, and more productive lives.

The Advisory Council also reviewed various federal broadband funding opportunities included in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, signed into law in late December. For its part, the Illinois Office of Broadband is poised to help the state, its residents, and various stakeholder organizations benefit from these still-in-formation federal funding opportunities. After all, it will take an 'all hands on deck' approach -- including sufficient, supportive, and sustained federal investment -- to eliminate the digital divide.



Finally, the Advisory Council discussed reconstituting its working groups to provide a deeper examination and wider public discussion of key broadband topics. The Advisory Council was created by statute in 2018. Gov. J.B. Pritzker appointed its members in 2019 with five working groups -- access, economic development, education, infrastructure &

technology, and telehealth -- formed to support the creation of the Illinois Office of Broadband, the Connect Illinois Broadband Grant Program, and the state's Broadband Strategic Plan. The agenda for the next Advisory Council meeting, to be held on May 12, will include additional discussion of the working group model, as well as updates on the state's year-long broadband mapping work.

## Update on the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program

In the Consolidated Appropriations Act, Congress tasked the Federal Communications Commission with creating the Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) program, a monthly discount on broadband internet access service for low-income households.

The FCC hosted a [roundtable](#) on Feb 12 featuring two discussions: one on consumer outreach and enrollment and the other on broadband provider participation and consumer choice. In addition, the FCC's Feb 17 open meeting featured a [staff presentation](#) on the program, providing an update and timeline for implementation.

The Benton Institute for Broadband & Society and State of Illinois Office of Broadband each filed another round of comments in the FCC proceeding. Benton's [reply comments](#) stressed the enormity of the FCC's task, providing estimates of tens of millions of eligible households living in poverty either before or due to the pandemic. The Benton Institute also noted that at least a million new unemployment claims have been filed each week since March 2020, a trend that is not expected to abate any time soon. All of these households are eligible for the new emergency broadband benefit.

Many digital inclusion advocates are highlighting the need for community-based outreach to ensure more families across the country can benefit from the program. The Illinois Office of Broadband [encouraged](#) the FCC to leverage the resources of state broadband authorities to promote awareness and educate eligible consumers about the new benefit, including by providing financial support for these outreach efforts.

With so many families in need, the \$3.2 billion that Congress allocated for the emergency broadband benefit isn't anticipated to last long. Some of the discussion has focused on how best to transition support for low-income families, and for those who have suffered pandemic-related income losses, in the months after EBB funds expire.

The FCC is required to promulgate rules within 60 days of enactment of the Act, so the FCC should announce final details this week.

See the Benton Institute's  
[Creating \(Finally\) an Emergency Broadband Benefit](#).

## Connect Illinois Computer Equity Network Distribution Events

The State of Illinois joined PCs for People and officials from Cahokia, Belleville, and East St. Louis Public Libraries to [announce](#) February distribution events.

On February 6, eighty families received a newly refurbished computer and hotspot through the Cahokia Library's event.

"The impact that the State of Illinois, PC's for People and the library generated for the community is uplifting, as this initiative is providing computer devices to enhance digital access for those in need," said Curtis McCall Jr., Mayor of Cahokia. "Today's event connected area families with the tools necessary to help with schoolwork, doctor's appointments and just staying connected with today's pandemic's challenges."

East St. Louis Public Library hosted a February 13 event and the Belleville Public Library held its event on February 20.

These area events were coordinated through the Computer Equity Network — a joint initiative led by Governor Pritzker, the Illinois Office of Broadband, PCs for People, and local leaders — to help close the digital divide for the estimated 1.1 million Illinois households that do not have at-home access to a desktop or laptop computer.

Upcoming distribution events include Feb 25 at the Martinsville Public Library, Feb 27 at the Power of Change Christian Church in Cahokia, and March 3 at the Casey Township Library.

"Addressing the digital divide now couldn't be more urgent as residents across our state and here in the Metro East community continue to face barriers to school, work and in their everyday lives as a result of lack of access to working computers," said Illinois Sen. Christopher Belt (D-Centreville). "Thanks to the leadership of Governor Pritzker and PCs for People - and through the hard work of our local libraries and municipalities who are coordinating events like these - the Computer Equity Network is expanding access to devices that will provide internet access and make a difference in the lives of thousands of residents in our area."

Curious about upcoming curbside events? Want to host your own? Visit [PCsforPeople.Org/Illinois](https://PCsforPeople.Org/Illinois) to learn how individuals can make donations or recycle computers, how businesses can start their own recycling process, and how nonprofits can partner with PCs for People to host a donation drive or distribution event.

[PCs for People Illinois](https://PCsforPeople.Org/Illinois)

## Schmit Bits

Illinois Office of Broadband Director Matt Schmit participated in Parts 2 and 3 of the Telehealth Series:

- [The COVID-19 Telehealth Sea Change and New Opportunities](#) (Feb 12). Matt joined Nancy Kaszak, Director of the Illinois Telehealth Initiative of the Partnership for a Connected Illinois; and
- [The Value of Telehealth to Rural Economies](#) (Feb 17). Matt joined Dr. Adee Athiyaman with the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs at Western Illinois University, who spoke about the significance and societal value of telemedicine, and differences in telehealth preferences between metro and nonmetro populations.

Matt hosted a kickoff session for the **Broadband Regional Engagement for Adoption + Digital Equity (READY) Program** (Feb 19). The program will engage regional stakeholders to establish baseline measures on broadband access,

adoption, and utilization that will complement the state's broadband infrastructure mapping. Combined, these resources will provide a much more complete picture of the current broadband landscape in Illinois, allowing for a more sophisticated approach to integrating programming, targeting resources, and replicating best practices. Matt made note of the special partnerships that have led to rollout of the program, including contributions from the Illinois Office of Broadband, the Illinois Innovation Network, and the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society.

Roberto Gallardo, Director of the Purdue Center for Regional Development, emphasized the coordination at the state level in addressing access, adoption, and use of broadband technologies that enables wide-reaching, effective partnerships across the state to help bridge the digital divide. It is this comprehensive, holistic approach that sets Illinois apart.

## ICC Spotlight

*Over the past several newsletters, we have been 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.*

*Illinois Connected Communities applicants included school districts, nonprofit and economic development organizations, urban neighborhood associations, rural planning committees, and more.*

## Park Forest-Chicago Heights School District

The Park Forest-Chicago Heights school district estimates that some 30% of area residents do not have home internet service. Comcast has a large presence in the area and the company says it has invested \$250,000 in community network improvements.

The school district hopes to work with the internet service provider to increase awareness and adoption of Comcast's service opportunities for low-income families. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the school has provided Wi-Fi hotspots to some families to ensure that kids can get their schoolwork done and is hoping to increase the number of hotspots and the availability of free Wi-Fi across the district.

The school district is working to engage college students from Prairie State College and Governors State University in digital equity programs.

## News and Resources

Feb 22 | [Cooperatives: The Unsung Heroes of Broadband](#) (Benton Institute)

Feb 19 | [Broadband Solutions to Pandemic Problems](#) (Benton Institute)

Feb 19 | [Development Council Launches Broadband Survey for Connected Communities Program](#) (McKinley Park News)

Feb 16 | ['It's just not right': Chicago area seniors deal with digital divide when making vaccine appointments](#) (WGN)

Feb 16 | [Illinois receives 'A' in R Street Institute Broadband Scorecard](#) (R Street Institute)

Feb 15 | [Shawnee Communications Gets Connect Illinois Funding for \\$22 Million Broadband Project](#) (telecompetitor)

Feb 11 | [Education advocacy group \*Raise Your Hand for Illinois\* calls for increasing spending on remote learning for CPS students](#) (Block Club Chicago)

Feb 10 | [Wisper ISP in Mascoutah, IL, Adds Satellite Internet to Service Offerings](#) (telecompetitor)

Feb 10 | [i3 Broadband Missouri Expansion Plans Include 10 Gbps Service, Including Into Illinois](#) (telecompetitor)

Feb 10 | [Learning About High Tech/Small Town & The Mercer County Internet Initiative](#) (WRMJ)

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.