



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



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The Illinois Broadband Connections newsletter will return on January 11, 2021.

Happy Holidays!

Illinois Launches New Statewide Computer Equity Network, Calls for Donations to Meet Ambitious Goals

On December 16, Governor JB Pritzker and Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle [announced](#) a first of its kind statewide initiative to expand digital access for low-income households in Illinois. Through a unique partnership with PCs for People and other community partners, the [Connect Illinois Computer Equity Network](#) will help put refurbished computer equipment and low-cost internet service into the hands of Illinois households in need. To be eligible, residents' income must be below 200% of the poverty level or they must be enrolled in an income-based government assistance program, such as free and reduced lunch, Medicaid, or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

"Long before we had ever heard of COVID-19, I set the ambitious goal of bringing broadband, digital infrastructure to every corner of Illinois by 2024 through a program called Connect Illinois," Gov. Pritzker said. While the state is well on its way to making broadband accessible to every Illinoisan, "the ability to plug into broadband means nothing when you don't have a device to start with," Pritzker said.

"The pandemic has laid bare the tremendous inequities in our communities, including access to technology and digital accessibility. This is particularly important during a time when residents are dependent on technology for remote work and education," said Cook County President Preckwinkle.

While initial investments by the state and its corporate partners are paving the way to collect, refurbish, and deploy 20,000 devices, the need is much greater -- with **an estimated 1.1 million households in Illinois without a computer at home**. "Everyone is invited to donate their outdated computers, too" Gov. Pritzker added. PCs for People will provide secure data wiping of all donated items.

Gov. Pritzker is calling on Illinois's public, private, and philanthropic partners to make their devices available for donation. Colleges and other institutions of higher education that are upgrading equipment can donate their older computers will be likely donors. Counties, cities, or even small towns are also encouraged to partner with local businesses to recycle equipment during an update cycle.

The statewide network will include two central warehouse locations – one in southern Cook County and the other in the Metro East Region near St. Louis. Each centralized warehouse location will receive, refurbish, and redistribute computers for use by low-income households around the state. The network will also expand digital literacy programming and contribute to workforce development. While the Metro East hub has been active since September, a new lease agreement with Cook County, and \$250,000 in seed funding from the United Jewish Fund, will allow PCs for People and the state to launch the second warehouse center in January 2021.

For more information on the Connect Illinois Computer Equity Network and how to recycle technology or to apply for an upgraded device, please visit:

[Connect Illinois Computer Equity Network](#)

Further Reading

[State Launches Program to Close Digital Divide, Calls for Donations](#) (WTTW)

[New initiative to provide 20,000 free computers to Illinois families to help bridge digital divide during pandemic](#)
(Chicago Sun-Times)

[Illinois solicits device donations for Computer Equity Network](#) (Capitol News Illinois)

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 Here](#).

Leadership Council Southwest Illinois

Engaging a nine-county region in the Metro East area to improve broadband access, adoption, and use is a big lift. The Leadership Council's Dr. Ronda Sauget is using the Illinois Connected Communities program as an organizing vehicle to recruit participation from the region's businesses, educational institutions, Scott Air Force Base, social service agencies, the technology sector, and more.

The Leadership Council has already achieved impressive results, joining a group of partners, including the Urban League of Greater St. Louis and the Girl Scouts of Southern Illinois, to attract PCs for People to the Metro East region. The Leadership Council helped PCs for People locate a quality building in which to operate and is urging regional public and private partners to recycle their computers for refurbishing and distribution to those in need.

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the critical need for quality broadband infrastructure and services throughout the region. The Leadership Council is gathering and analyzing information including consumer and business surveys and broadband mapping. The Leadership Council is launching a series of broadband presentations to raise awareness and will be facilitating conversations via broadband summits with government officials and internet service providers over the coming months.

Mattoon

Mattoon, a community of 18,000, is located in south-central Illinois and is home to the headquarters of internet service provider Consolidated Communications. With the Mattoon School District taking the lead in the Illinois Connected Community effort, the community set a goal to have 100 Mbps/100 Mbps symmetrical broadband service throughout the community.

Digital inequities, magnified by the pandemic, are a top concern of the steering team, so efforts are focused around broadband affordability and digital skills training. The steering committee is exploring a partnership with Eastern Illinois University and seeking to receive an Illinois Broadband READY grant to develop a digital skills training circuit in local schools and libraries.

Mattoon has a strong history of active citizen engagement showcased by the [Mattoon in Motion](#) initiative, a community-focused, volunteer-run, networked-governance organization. The Illinois Connected Community steering team is now a formal committee of Mattoon in Motion, ensuring that the broadband work will reach deep into the community.

Mattoon in Motion developed a business innovation incubator and technology hub known as [Elevate CCIC, Inc.](#) Mattoon plans to use Elevate CCIC as a platform for promoting smart use of technology, and would like the organization to participate in the Illinois Digital Navigator program. "We believe that this program, which seeks to engage applicants to identify and close digital equity gaps, is the next step to creating an equitable environment for our area," said Carlos Ortega, Director of Elevate CCIC.

Introducing Sandeep Taxali



Sandeep Taxali is the new strategy and technology advisor at the Illinois Office of Broadband. For over 20 years in the telecommunications industry and public sector, Taxali has designed and implemented strategies, policies, and programs for mission-critical initiatives.

As a consultant to the Illinois Office of Broadband, Taxali's responsibilities include program design, application review, and special projects to further advance the objectives of Connect Illinois -- including technology trials.

Prior to his work in Illinois, Sandeep served as Director of Public-Private Partnerships at OneWeb and as a Senior Policy Analyst and Broadband Program Specialist at the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA). While at NTIA, he worked to launch a \$3.5 billion grant program that deployed over 115,000 new and upgraded network miles of middle-mile infrastructure and connected over 25,000 community anchor institutions across rural America. The program funded 120 public-private partnerships with co-investments from

industry, state/local governments, and non-governmental organizations. He provided technical assistance to state and local governments and international institutions, such as the World Bank. Formerly, he led industry and economic analysis for high-profile proceedings at the Federal Communications Commission.

Taxali holds MBA and MPP degrees. He was born in Oak Park, Illinois, and attended schools in the western suburbs of Chicago.

News and Resources

Dec 18 | [Broadband Lessons Learned in 2020](#) (Benton Institute)

Dec 14 | [The Broadband Mapping Flaw that's Harming Education and Healthcare](#) (Benton Institute)

Dec 11 | [Illinois to launch volunteer program for digital literacy training](#) (StateScoop); [Illinois Partners with NDIA, Commits to Digital Equity](#) (National Digital Inclusion Alliance)

Dec 11 | [How Not to Close the Digital Divide -- Part 1,421](#) (Benton Institute)

Dec 10 | [Digital Tools & Learning: Looking at Census Pulse Data & Homework Gap During COVID-19](#) (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.

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