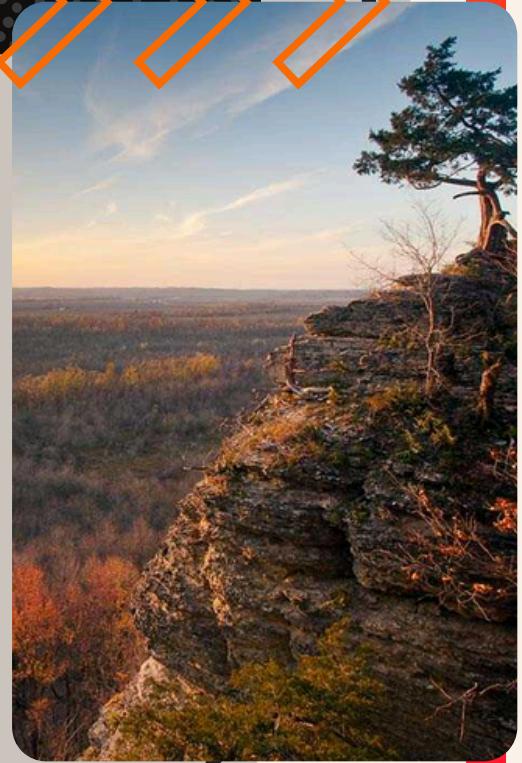
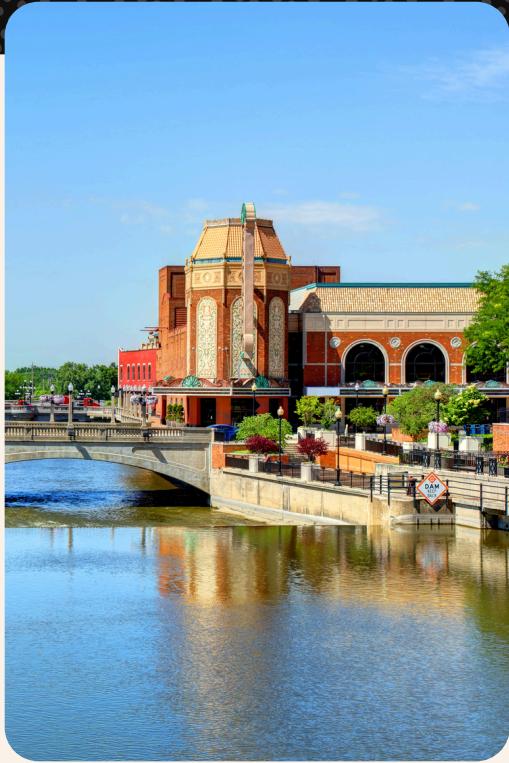


Broadband Advisory Council

2025 Legislative Report



• • • • •

Table of Contents



<u>Introduction</u>	3
<u>Letter from the Chair</u>	4
<u>Letter from the Illinois Office of Broadband Director</u>	5
<u>Broadband Advisory Council</u>	6
<u>The Illinois Broadband Team</u>	7
<u>Broadband Infrastructure</u>	9
Connect Illinois	10
Permitting and Policy	11
Broadband Access, Equity, and Deployment (BEAD) Program	12
<u>Digital Equity and Inclusion</u>	16
Digital Equity Programming	17
Impact of Digital Equity Act Cancellation	16
Digital Equity Capacity Kickstarter (DECK) Grant Program	19
Broadband Regional Engagement for Adoption and Digital Equity (READY)	21
Illinois Tech Reuse Network	23
Broadband Breakthrough	24
<u>Community Engagement</u>	25
<u>Looking Ahead for 2026</u>	26
Appendix I: Connect Illinois Project Map	27
Appendix II: Broadband Breakthrough Cohort Map	28



Left: IOB Broadband Policy Manager Shawna Taets participates in a permitting roundtable, Lake Wildwood, IL



Right: IBL Assistant Director for Broadband Programming & Engagement Robbie McBeath and IOB Community Engagement Manager Alicia Ross tour the QTS Data Center, Chicago, IL

Introduction



Connecting every Illinoian with high-speed, reliable broadband service has always been a destination at the end of a narrow dirt road, beset with potholes, roadblocks and detours. Thousands of hands have worked to clear, level, and pave the way, widening the lanes and painting lines, leaving behind signs for others to follow.

While 2024 was a year of preparation, 2025 has been a year of intense implementation, moving forward through unexpected challenges. Despite these, the Illinois Broadband Team remains focused on the three pillars of broadband that form the foundation of their work:

Access: Improved broadband infrastructure and device access, particularly on an individual or residential basis

Adoption: Increased subscription to broadband service and device ownership at affordable pricing

Use: Increased use of internet-based tools to increase health, happiness, and well-being across Illinois

The following report summarizes the work of the Illinois Office of Broadband (IOB) and the Illinois Broadband Lab (IBL), advised by the Broadband Advisory Council, as Illinois strives to build ubiquitous broadband infrastructure and achieve digital equity for every resident of Illinois.



Left: Former IBL staff member Visiting Assistant Director for Digital Equity, Inclusion, and Navigation Aneta Lee presents at Normal Public Library during a Community Convening, Normal, IL

Middle: IOB and IBL staff visit Silo Communications, a Connect Illinois Grantee, Winnebago, IL

Right: IOB staff pose with BAC Chair Anne Slaughter, NDIA Digital Equity Champion Kyla Williams-Tate, and other Illinois broadband champions at Net Inclusion, Wild Horse Pass, AZ

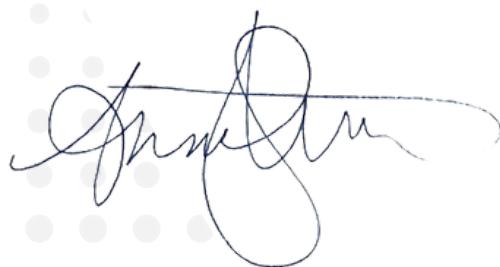
Letter From the Chair

I'd like to begin by celebrating the dividends of Governor Pritzker's Connect Illinois initiative highlighted throughout this report. Today Illinois has more households with high-speed broadband and affordable devices, students with access to resources, individuals equipped to find jobs and modernize businesses, opportunities for rural residents, and community anchor institutions demonstrating tangible impact. We create boundless opportunities by ensuring everyone has access to broadband, devices, and skills to use them successfully.

Connect Illinois also planted the seeds for the talented team entrusted with this work. In a challenging and chaotic year for public service, Devon and her team at the Office of Broadband demonstrated inspiring persistence in accomplishing the essential work of broadband expansion while nurturing their vast community of stakeholders.

IDEA applicants and Broadband READY partners worked hard this year on plans to expand digital equity throughout Illinois. Whether their plans proceeded on alternate paths or await new paths, the work has enduring value. Digital literacy and digital equity remain essential in a modern democratic society, despite the lost opportunity of Digital Equity Act funding to address even a fraction of the needs.

Amidst the challenges, the Broadband Advisory Council is entering 2026 bolstered by shared priorities and a spirit of collaboration. We look forward to welcoming several new members, with gratitude to the Governor's Office for their partnership in ensuring a strong roster. It's an honor to be in community with my fellow Council members, and to be of service supporting the Office of Broadband's work improving the lives of Illinois residents.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Anne Slaughter".

Anne Slaughter
Broadband Advisory Council Chair
Director of Technology Services
Reaching Across Illinois Library
System

Letter From the Illinois Office of Broadband

The calendar year began with long-awaited milestones: From the release of historic digital equity resources to fund the implementation of an ambitious five-year plan, to the launch of the first application round for the \$1 billion Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program.

When the Digital Equity Act was terminated on May 9 and BEAD Program was restructured on June 6, the entire Illinois broadband community was forced to pivot -- quickly. I won't sugarcoat how difficult this was for the people who comprise the Illinois Broadband Team. The second half of 2025 was riddled with uncertainty – in funding, program outcomes, and our ability to make an impact on an issue about which we care deeply.

However, it was the Illinois Broadband Team's unwavering commitment to achieving universal connectivity and digital equity that enabled us to move ahead with grit and determination, despite the unexpected challenges.

Within a matter of weeks, we swiftly revised the BEAD application materials and guidelines, launched a new process, and ultimately received a record-breaking 400 applications from a diverse set of local, regional, and national providers proposing to cover 100% of eligible locations in the state using more than \$600 million in private investment. 60% of these providers are based right here in Illinois.

We also grew creative in our pursuit of low-to-no cost digital equity solutions. This ranged from creating a streamlined process for donating retired devices to be refurbished and distributed to households in need, to modernizing and promoting the Eliminating the Digital Divide Fund through a new marketing campaign. Our team complemented this work with on-going community engagement, deepening relationships with local champions, and raising awareness about the role the Office can play in addressing day-to-day digital access challenges.

In 2025, the IOB also initiated the Broadband Permitting and Policy Team, created to tackle tough deployment challenges and foster a positive, streamlined experience for internet service providers building in Illinois. Finally, Connect Illinois Round 3 began seeing results, and now more than 13,400 households have broadband service available to them.

As we embark on 2026, I'd like to extend my deep gratitude to my Illinois Office of Broadband and Illinois Broadband Lab colleagues for their commitment and sacrifice over this last year, and to the entire broadband and digital equity community. I can't wait to see what we achieve together in the year to come.



Devon Braunstein

**Devon
Braunstein**
Deputy Director,
Illinois Office of
Broadband

The Broadband Advisory Council

Created through Public Act 100-833, the Broadband Advisory Council (BAC) is charged with removing barriers and fostering collaboration to expand broadband access, adoption, and utilization. In particular, the BAC serves to guide the creation, implementation, and effectiveness of the increasingly comprehensive Connect Illinois program – which balances the need for improved broadband access through infrastructure investment with complementary programming promoting broadband adoption and utilization, all through the lens of digital equity and inclusion.

In announcing the BAC, Governor J.B. Pritzker identified three main outcomes to center the council's work:

Telehealth: Expand access to telehealth across the State of Illinois, which will provide additional healthcare options to communities in rural and urban Illinois alike, ranging from primary care to expanded treatment opportunities in areas such as mental health and opioid addiction.

Education: Increase broadband access – both for in-classroom learning and remote learning at home throughout Illinois to ensure students have the tools they need to succeed.

Economic Development: Expand economic development and opportunity in urban and rural communities throughout Illinois. This investment will support the growth of Illinois' agriculture economy and information technology sector and will help to modernize transportation and support the development of entrepreneurs and small business owners.

Anne Slaughter continues to serve as chair of the board and has worked closely with IOB staff in order to ensure the membership is active and engaged, representing an array of interests and communities within the Illinois broadband ecosystem.

October's regular meeting included a group discussion regarding upcoming priorities for 2026, including robust asset mapping, infrastructure for community anchor institutions, digital skill building for vulnerable populations, AI challenges, changes to the federal E-Rate program, and intellectual freedom.

2025 Meetings of the Broadband Advisory Council

Regular Meeting: January 15, 2025

Regular Meeting: April 16, 2025

Regular Meeting: July 16, 2025

Regular Meeting: October 8, 2025

Find all BAC meeting minutes at

<https://dceo.illinois.gov/broadband/meetingsmaterials.html>



The Illinois Broadband Team

Illinois Office of Broadband (IOB)

Created in September 2019, the IOB is housed within the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO), the state's largest grant-making authority. As a primary charge, it is responsible for administering the Connect Illinois grant program. The IOB also develops and administers related programming – such as in the areas of community planning and capacity building, regional engagement, and digital equity and inclusion. Community Engagement Managers also travel the state to deliver programming, support partners, and gather information about the needs of communities.

The IOB administers the Connect Illinois grant program, leverages a modest Eliminating the Digital Divide Fund balance to support complementary programming, and maintains several procured contracts – including for recurring broadband mapping, intergovernmental collaboration with the University of Illinois System, and consultant support.

To add value to IOB programming, leverage existing resources, and enhance capacity, the IOB maintains strategic collaborations with the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, Heartland Forward, the Illinois Innovation Network, University of Illinois Extension Services, and many non-profit organizations dedicated to distributing refurbished devices.

In 2025, IOB expanded to include a permitting and policy arm. Shawna Taets leads as the Broadband Policy Manager, and Broadband Permitting & Policy Coordinators Stephanie Schnaufer and Sania Erwin oversee programming and policies that support broadband deployment across the state.



IOB and IBL staff along with many other Illinois digital equity champions, NDIA Net Inclusion, Wild Horse Pass, AZ

The Illinois Broadband Team

Illinois Broadband Lab (IBL)

The Illinois Broadband Lab collaboration within the University of Illinois System contributes experience and expertise in critical areas such as: mapping and data, programmatic support, outreach, and communications, among many other spheres. Together, the IOB and IBL unite twenty dedicated full-time staff members.

This year, Charity Freeman joined the Illinois Broadband Lab as its Visiting Senior Director for Broadband. Freeman's expertise in computer science education, with deep expertise in digital literacy and technology integration, and a career spanning K-12 classrooms, higher education, and statewide policy initiatives all make her a strong leader in the world of broadband and digital inclusion scholarship.



Top Left: IOB and IBL staff along with Benton Institute and Tech STL staff at Tech STL Summit, Wedge Innovation Center, Alton, IL

Lower Left: IOB and IBL staff attend opening day of the Illinois State Fair, Springfield, IL

Top Right: IOB and IBL staff learn about Crown Castle's microtrenching operations, Downers Grove, IL

Lower Right: IOB and IBL staff finish a staff strategy retreat with dinner, Springfield, IL



Broadband Advisory Council

Broadband Infrastructure



Broadband infrastructure consists of the technology and systems that physically bring internet access to homes and businesses.

Fiber optic cable networks comprise all middle mile infrastructure, carrying robust network capacity across the country and across Illinois counties. Last mile infrastructure, the networks that deliver internet directly to homes and businesses, can consist of fiber optic cable, fixed wireless towers, low earth orbit satellite networks and more.

Each technology has its benefits and challenges, but the diverse geography of Illinois, as well as the unique needs in each community make a combination of deployment strategies necessary to serve every location with high-quality broadband.

As Illinois embarks on the implementation of Connect Illinois Round 4, the BEAD Program, the IOB is preparing to tackle and mitigate on-the-ground deployment challenges, including permitting, local coordination, and more. The IOB's new Policy and Permitting Team has met those challenges with aplomb and is collaborating with local governments and service providers to meet the moment.



Connect Illinois

Perhaps the biggest infrastructure challenge of our time is that of universal broadband availability. In the tradition of the original Rural Electrification Act passed by Congress in 1936, making broadband internet available to all has become a government priority. State and federal programs are working together in order to fill in access gaps left in marginalized, rural, and topographically challenging communities after private investment failed to serve them. Both President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama added broadband stipulations to the original act in 2008 and 2014 respectively, calling for a comprehensive broadband strategy, state and federal loans or grants to support expansion, and even a pilot of a rural gigabit network. While these projects have evolved and changed in the decade since, Illinois remains dedicated to serving all residents with fast, reliable, and affordable broadband service.

Connect Illinois is the state's landmark equity-focused broadband infrastructure program targeting areas in the greatest need of internet service. By addressing market failures where private investment has favored profitable areas, the program aims to bridge the broadband access gap. Competitive grants drive public-private investment exceeding \$1 billion in Illinois alone, and support robust high-speed infrastructure. With a community-driven approach, Connect Illinois fosters collaboration, promotes affordability, and aligns with the state's five-year economic plan to advance broadband equity and innovation statewide.

In addition to competitive grants, the Connect Illinois program included \$20 million for upgrades to the 100 GB Illinois Century Network, the state's existing 2,000-mile open access institutional fiber network serving over 3,400 K-12, higher education, and library locations across the state. Importantly, this funding provides a secure K-12 Broadband Network available at no cost for all Illinois K-12 public schools.

The fourth round of Connect Illinois is supported by the federal Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program, resources allocated through the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA). The implementation of the BEAD Program will move Connect Illinois closer to its goal of ubiquitous and robust broadband access for all homes, businesses, and community anchor institutions throughout the state. Investment in broadband access will support telehealth, education, economic development, and precision agriculture efforts statewide, supporting communities well into the future.

To date, Connect Illinois has awarded \$387+ million to 27 internet service providers, connected more than 13,400 households, and anticipates connecting as many as 46,000 locations over three waves of funding and 80 projects.

Permitting and Policy

Legislation & Policy Education

2025 saw significant changes to the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program and Digital Equity Act (DEA) programs. On May 9 the IOB received notice of the cancellation of the \$23.7 million Illinois was set to receive through the Digital Equity Capacity Grant. The IOB worked to educate federal congressional offices and Senator Duckworth issued a press release in response.

The IOB also met with Illinois' federal lawmakers to discuss BEAD progress and priorities, ensuring that lawmakers were prepared to ask questions during relevant hearings and appointments. On June 6, NTIA released the BEAD Restructuring Policy Notice, pausing Illinois' BEAD process and reconfiguring it as outlined in the following section.

At the state level, the IOB, DCEO, and Governor's Office collaborated to reform the Eliminate the Digital Divide Act through the passage of Public Act 104-0283, allowing the IOB to use the Eliminating the Digital Divide Fund (EDDF) for a wider array of digital equity programs.

Documenting Permitting Processes in Illinois

The IOB Permitting and Policy Team conducted significant permitting research throughout 2025 to support current and future broadband grant recipients. This research involved 11 focus groups to collect perspectives from electric cooperatives, internet service providers, broadband contractors, municipal leaders, and utilities. The process involved numerous meetings with the aforementioned partners plus state agencies, community colleges, labor unions, broadband skill certification programs, and various associations.

This work informed the first draft of the Broadband in Illinois Starter Guide, capturing an overview of all necessary broadband permits in Illinois, providing direct support for current grantees, and the creation of a slate of potential programs to ensure the process of marking the ground to indicate underground facilities, also known as locates, happen efficiently and accurately for upcoming broadband projects.

Dig Once

Additionally, the Permitting & Policy Team led the development of the Dig Once rules. Building upon the extensive research and collaboration with the Illinois Department of Transportation, Illinois State Tollway Highway Authority, Illinois Commerce Commission, and JULIE One Call System in 2024, the IOB created an initial draft of rules and collected feedback from 22 stakeholders including villages, industry associations, individual broadband providers, and utilities, followed by six additional meetings to gather further information. Feedback was then considered and integrated into a second draft. As a next step, the IOB will submit the Dig Once rules to the Joint Committee on Administrative Rules (JCAR) as a part of the rulemaking process.



Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program

What is BEAD?

The Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program provides \$42.45 billion to expand high-speed internet access by funding planning and infrastructure deployment in all 50 states, Washington D.C., Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. This program is part of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) and is administered by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA). 2019 Census data shows that 78% of all Illinoisans fall under one or more of the identified populations that experience greater than average inequity related to broadband access. NTIA has allocated \$1.04 billion to fund the BEAD-funded Round 4 of Connect Illinois.

Illinois Office of Broadband staff began preparing for the BEAD program in 2023 with the 5-Year Action Plan, and drafting BEAD Initial Proposals 1 and 2. Work continued in 2024 and 2025 to fulfill the initial BEAD requirements while adjusting to a rapid restructuring of the program.

Challenge Process and Project Area Unit Selection

Illinois was required to facilitate a public challenge process of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) map representing all unserved and underserved broadband serviceable locations (BSLs) in the state. In 2024, the IOB encouraged residents and internet service providers (ISPs) alike to engage with the map and determine if it correctly reflected the availability of service and broadband speeds for their homes, businesses, and community anchor institutions. Then, eligible challengers, including units of local government, internet service providers, and non-profit organizations, could submit challenges along with evidence through a designated portal. Illinois offered an opportunity for challenged providers to submit rebuttals, and finally adjudicated all challenges and rebuttals to reach a final set of locations eligible to be connected through the BEAD program. Illinois received over 190,000 challenges, representing a robust response from community members and organizations.



Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program

Wave 1 Launch

Through a Pre-Qualification Phase, the IOB invited prospective BEAD applicants to submit materials ahead of the sub-grantee selection process to demonstrate their qualifications for the program. Forty-one entities participated, which helped to streamline the application process.

Illinois initially planned for a three-wave application period, with Wave 1 accepting applications from January 23 to February 26, 2025. Wave 1 focused on proposals using fiber, with Wave 2 set to accept proposals from all eligible technologies, and an optional Wave 3 to fill in the gaps and ensure every location was claimed.

Illinois saw great interest from Wave 1, receiving 238 applications, covering 86% of eligible locations, and 85% of hard-to-serve project area units. Following an evaluation and scoring period, Illinois preliminary selected 137 proposals covering just under 60% of the state with fiber, including more than \$500 million in private match.

Benefit of the Bargain Round

On June 6, 2025, the NTIA released a policy notice restructuring the BEAD program, which made significant changes to the program rules, eligibility, timeline, and scoring rubric. Wave 1 preliminary awards were rescinded, and the Wave 2 Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) canceled. Illinois then worked quickly to adapt the program to adhere to the requirements of the Benefit of the Bargain (BotB) Round, and launched a new application window, which accepted proposals from July 1-18. NTIA expedited the deadline for submission of Illinois' Final Proposal to be September 4, just 45 business days after the program restructuring.

Many of the changes to the scoring rubric prioritized speed of implementation and low project costs. Illinois also was required to refine and reduce its list of eligible community anchor institutions, and low earth orbit (LEO) satellite shifted from being considered an "alternative technology" to a technology on par with fiber and fixed wireless.

Provisional Awards, Final Proposal

Illinois published its Final Proposal on September 30, following an NTIA-approved extension. Explore the BEAD preliminary awardee map at <https://www.illinoisbead.org/>



Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program

What's Next

NTIA committed to reviewing and approving Illinois' Final Proposal within 90 days of submission, by the end of December 2025. Once approved, Illinois has six months to execute grant agreements with awardees. Projects will then begin with National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) permitting, along with design and engineering. Learn more about Illinois' BEAD program at <https://dceo.illinois.gov/broadband/bead.html>

Illinois BEAD Timeline

-  **Five-Year Action Plan | Aug 2023**
-  **Initial Proposal | Submitted Dec 2023**
-  **Challenge Process | Feb-Jul 2024**
-  **Request for Input | May-Jun 2024**
-  **Pre-Qualification Process | Jun-Aug 2024**
-  **Wave 1 Application Period | Jan-Feb 2025**
-  **Benefit of the Bargain Round | July 2025**
-  **Provisional Awardees Announced | September 2025**
-  **Final Proposal | September 2025**
-  **Contracts and Implementation | 2026**



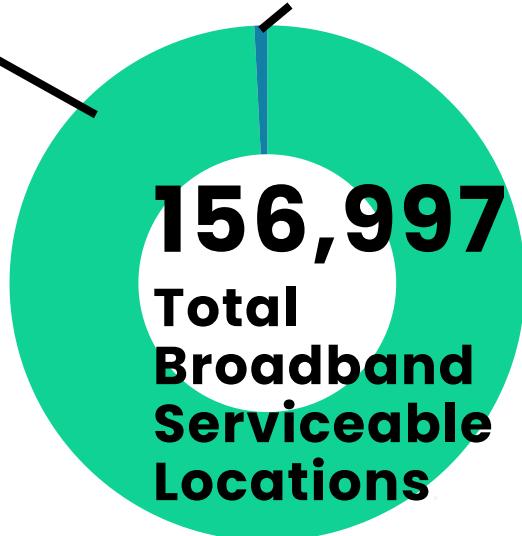
Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program

By the Numbers

155,734
Households
and
Businesses

1,263
Community
Anchor
Institutions

23
Total Provisional
Awardees

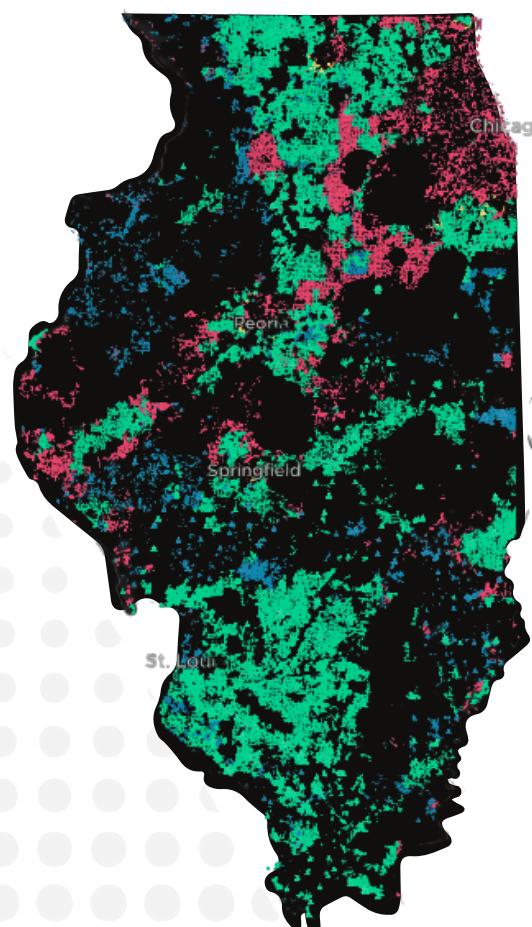
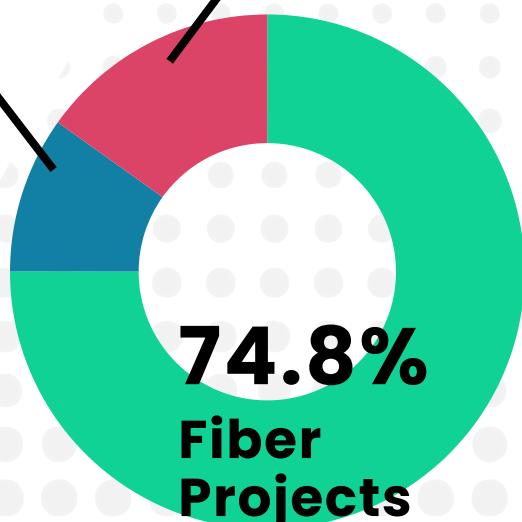


238
Total Projects

\$6,100
Average cost per
connection

9.8%
Wireless
Projects

15.1%
LEO Satellite
Projects



Broadband Advisory Council

Digital Equity and Inclusion



Across the globe, it is undeniable that universal high-speed internet service is essential for connecting to local and global communities and resources. To take full advantage of available health, education, economic development, and finance tools, all Illinois residents must have affordable access to high-speed internet and be able to use the internet safely and effectively.

Digital Equity is an outcome. It is the state where all Illinoisans have access to the quality and affordable broadband, devices, and skills they need to participate in Illinois' modern economy and thrive. Community members with the greatest barriers are empowered towards civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services.

It is also a process. It is how Illinois strives to do business, by prioritizing access and opportunities for groups that have the greatest need and who are most impacted by digital inequities.



Digital Equity Programming

2025 was slated to be a landmark year for digital equity programming. The work of the previous years, as well as the deep connections made with communities across the state, allowed the IOB to craft programs targeted toward specific needs.

Much of this work was funded and informed by the Digital Equity Act (DEA), part of the IIJA, and administered by NTIA, like the BEAD program. Illinois received an initial allocation of \$23.7 million for digital inclusion planning and programming, out of an expected \$40 million, to implement digital equity initiatives through 2030.

The Illinois State Digital Equity Plan (SDEP) formed the roadmap for that work, incorporating community feedback from a 54-stop listening tour in 2023 as well as data and mapping that illustrated the many access gaps for vulnerable populations.

Termination of Digital Equity Act Funds

On May 9, all states and territories received a letter from the federal government terminating funds allocated through the DEA's Digital Equity Capacity Grant. All ongoing and anticipated digital equity programming came to a halt, as even appropriated funds were withdrawn by the federal government.

Governor Pritzker responded with a press release¹ and fourteen congresspeople including Senator Duckworth, Senator Durbin, and Representative Budzinski released a letter² denouncing the decision, all noting the critical need for broadband access and equity. Attorney General Raoul, along with a coalition of 21 attorneys general, filed a lawsuit³ against the Trump administration's use of a single clause in the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) regulations, stating that agencies may terminate an award of federal funding if it "no longer effectuates ... agency priorities."



IOB Community Engagement Manager Hillary Rains testifies to the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Veterans Affairs to stress the importance of telehealth access for rural veterans in Illinois. Urbana-Champaign, IL

¹ [Trump Administration Terminates Digital Equity Program](#)

² [Letter to Lutnick re Digital Equity Act funds in Illinois- Signed](#)

³ [Attorney General Raoul Files Lawsuit Challenging Illegal Attempts to Terminate Critical Federal Funding](#)

Digital Equity Programming

Impact of DEA Cancellation

The termination of DEA funds halted almost all planned digital equity and inclusion programming at the state level, including:

Illinois Regional Hubs Program

The planned program, designed to complement the READY program, would designate a community organization as a resource center and convening entity for the regional digital equity ecosystem, including funding for its programming efforts. The pilot program would offer resources to 10-12 recipients, at least one in each economic development region.

Digital Source of Truth and Data Gathering

To support the implementation steps stated in the SDEP, IBL staff worked to build a Digital Source of Truth containing data regarding the state of broadband access, adoption, and use across the state. The data gathering and dashboard construction efforts were paused with the cancellation of funding.

Illinois Digital Equity Capacity (IDEC) Grant Program

Between gathering stakeholder input, creating grant materials, promoting the program, assisting applicants, and organizing and scoring two rounds of applications, IOB and IBL staff spent hundreds of hours working to make the IDEC Grant Program a reality. The program would have directly funded organizations to implement digital equity programming tailored to their needs.

Though only about \$13 million of Illinois' initial DEA funds were available for this program, 261 applications requested more than \$130 million. Organizations serving low-income households, racial and ethnic minorities, and aging individuals made up the majority of applicants. The overwhelming response to the program demonstrates that organizations are in dire need of digital equity support.

What's Next

As federal funding for equity-based programming is on increasingly uncertain ground, the IOB turned its attention to reviving the Eliminating the Digital Divide Fund (EDDF). After modernizing the 24-year-old fund through legislative updates, the IOB will use the EDDF to fill the funding gap for digital equity and inclusion programming across the state. Learn more about the EDDF at <https://dceo.illinois.gov/broadband/eliminating-the-digital-divide-fund.html>



Digital Equity Capacity Kickstarter Grant Program (DECK)

The Digital Equity Capacity Kickstarter (DECK) grant program represents an integral and strategic component of the state of Illinois' Connect Illinois vision and commitment to broadband access, adoption, and use, all through the lens of digital equity and inclusion. The program was meant to serve as a pilot program with learnings informing the terminated IDEC program.

DECK supports expansion of broadband access, adoption, and use initiatives among broadband and digital equity stakeholders, such as community-based organizations, libraries, and local government, creating and fostering Illinois' digital equity ecosystem. The state made over \$2 million in awards across two waves in 2023 and 2024, funding programs across 34 organizations in seven out of the 10 economic development regions.

Awarded projects cover one or more of the following categories focused on access, adoption, and use:

- **Outreach and Adoption**, including support for the now discontinued federal Affordable Connectivity Program awareness and enrollment
- **Digital Skill Building**, Navigation and Use, including digital literacy programming
- **Community Technology Center Access**, providing a physical space with internet access and computing devices
- **Access Expansion Feasibility**, preparing local governments to play a role in community-led broadband expansion

The State Digital Equity Plan identified communities of practice as a way to implement change and build digital equity ecosystems across the state. To this end, the DECK Community met one-to-two times per month, creating a space for the DECK cohort to share their DECK projects, learn from each other's successes, challenges and best practices, receive support from IOB staff and connect and collaborated with one another. As the two-year DECK program concludes, the DECK Community held their final meeting on June 10, 2025.

The DECK Community also incorporated polls, surveys, and breakout sessions to obtain feedback, empower stakeholder connections, and facilitate deep dives into specific topics of interest, such as outreach strategies and digital learning curricula. This inaugural cohort has laid valuable foundation for future cohorts of community of practice in broadband access and digital equity work in Illinois. Learn more about DECK at <https://dceo.illinois.gov/broadband/deck-communities-of-practice.html>

Digital Equity Capacity Kickstarter Grant Program (DECK)

From December 2023 until December 2025, DECK grantees hosted more than 5,100 digital skills training classes, participated in more than 1,100 community outreach events, reaching over 62,000 people. More than 1,400 devices have been distributed and nearly 4000 individuals have received one on one support through the funded organizations.

Organizations and participants shared their successes and challenges with the IOB, including:

"Prior to the program, one participant's experience with computers was clocking in and out at work, and she often needed assistance due to fear of making mistakes. After participating in a digital skills program, she was able to independently plan and book an all-inclusive family trip to Mexico. She returned feeling proud and empowered."

-The Northwest Center

"Irma, a single mother working in retail, felt stuck in her job with limited opportunities for advancement largely because she lacked digital skills. After taking a free basic computer class, she expanded her digital job skills, earning her a raise and promotion."

-The United Palatine Coalition

"One parent was able to use the digital skills she learned to operate her business via Excel, accounting applications and emails. They noted that they are now able to 'learn to shop online and use sheets for the income and create a budget for the business', and that they 'learn a new thing' every day."

-Gads Hill Center

"Mrs. Wu, a 75-year-old participant sent her first-ever text message after personalized instruction."

-The Coalition for a Better Chinese American Community

"One participant shared that 'Technology has affected everything. Within my previous job, I had to constantly ask for help and or have a colleague complete the task. I started feeling bad that I didn't know how to do my work, so I started learning little by little. When I had to clock in using a touch screen, I realized that I had to start my journey of learning how to use technology...I feel more confident, when something new comes my way, I no longer approach it with fear, I take it as a learning opportunity to grow. I feel capable in handling things on my own now.'"

-The Southwest Organizing Project

Broadband Regional Engagement for Adoption and Digital Equity (READY)

Throughout 2025, the Broadband Regional Engagement for Adoption + Digital Equity (READY) program continued direct and regional digital inclusion programming led by university partners to advance digital inclusion across Illinois, with participation from all 10 of Illinois' Economic Development Regions. This progress occurred despite significant funding reductions and programmatic disruptions as a result of the termination of Illinois' Digital Equity Capacity Grant.

READY teams demonstrated resilience and adaptability, revising plans and strategies multiple times to align with new fiscal realities. Regional teams maintained momentum by convening monthly—both as a statewide cohort and through one-on-one engagements—and collaborating with key digital inclusion partners in their communities. In some cases, this required leveraging external funding sources to sustain critical initiatives or communicating the financial and programmatic impacts of abrupt funding cuts to stakeholders.

Program Overview

The READY program provides funding to higher education institutions and qualified regional entities to advance inclusive broadband access, adoption, and utilization across Illinois. The program is structured to identify current digital inequities as well as next steps in creating a digital inclusion ecosystem through regional collaboration and university partnerships, and seeks to provide scalable solutions for increasing digital opportunity across all 10 Illinois economic development regions.

Originally designed as a regional program to assist with the launch of Governor Pritzker's Connect Illinois initiative, the program has evolved to be the foundational framework for regional digital inclusion engagement efforts led by the IBL. The program emphasizes university collaboration, leveraging campus resources and partnerships to support implementation of Illinois' digital inclusion efforts. In 2024, the READY program structure was reframed to approach regional digital inclusion work through two key initiatives:

University as READY Partner – Part 1: Digital Inclusion Impact Project

- Implementing a specific digital inclusion impact project that furthers specific Illinois digital inclusion objectives.
- Enrolling a Graduate Assistant or other University Staff to assist with project implementation & digital navigation.

University as READY Partner – Part 2: Regional Convener-Collaborator

- Serving as a Regional Convener-Collaborator for one of Illinois' ten economic development regions to bring key stakeholders together, create open communication channels between the IOB and IBL, and track and contribute to the region's digital inclusion ecosystem.



Broadband Regional Engagement for Adoption and Digital Equity (READY)

2025 Program Highlights and Successes

- CSU hosted the READY25: Digital Communities in Action Conference July 10-11, to engage with digital experts and further expand digital skills and accessibility to community members from the region. Programming also included direct Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math (STEAM) family programming and equipped 33 families with a device.
- NIU partnered with Region 1 Planning Council to deploy advanced broadband surveying and participate in local meetings for the four regional counties to identify broadband access gaps and coordinate infrastructure initiatives with the federal BEAD program.
- UIUC hosted three regional convening events to celebrate the Spring '25 Digital Navigator cohort, issued certifications of completion, and engaged in outreach for further work.
- SIU held community three community meetings across the Southern Region in April to share information about digital literacy offerings at libraries and prepare community members for IDEC funding.
- SIUE held a Community Collaboration Lab in Alton on June 12 focused on "Digital Access in Alton", hearing from residents and local leaders to identify strategies to close access gaps.

Learn more about READY at <https://broadband.uillinois.edu/broadband-ready/>



Broadband **READY**

**Broadband Regional Engagement for Adoption +
Digital Equity (READY)**



ILLINOIS
BROADBAND
LAB



Illinois
Department of Commerce
& Economic Opportunity
OFFICE OF BROADBAND
J.B. Pritzker, Governor



ILLINOIS
INNOVATION
NETWORK



UNIVERSITY
OF ILLINOIS
SYSTEM



Illinois Tech Reuse Network

To fully achieve digital equity, both home internet connection and a device to connect to the internet are essential. However, currently, 20% of Illinoisans still do not have a computer at home. 10% only have a smartphone, which limits their ability to fill important forms, access full websites, complete schoolwork, and more. With the substantial cost of new devices, software, and necessary accessories, many families are priced out of this vital piece of broadband connectivity.

One way to address this need is to collect and refurbish retired devices and make them available at a low cost. Many companies nationwide provide these services, but may only serve a certain area, or have specific criteria for purchasers. Those eligible for participation often are not aware of the opportunity to obtain a device. The IOB founded the Computer Equity Network in 2022, bringing together Illinois refurbishers and connecting them with community organizations that seek to distribute devices to their clients.

In 2025, the three participating organizations distributed more than 10,600 devices to families in need, and collected 971,610 lbs of equipment to be refurbished.

As the network has grown, offerings now include internet hotspots and access to digital skills programming to more comprehensively fill access gaps in vulnerable communities.

Now, to more intentionally increase the supply of affordable devices, the Computer Equity Network is launching a new initiative to promote and streamline device donations, called the Illinois Tech Reuse Network.

The Illinois Tech Reuse Network encourages organizations, businesses, local governments, and individuals to donate their used computers so that they can be refurbished and distributed directly to communities. Learn more about the Illinois Tech Reuse Network at <https://dceo.illinois.gov/broadband/tech-reuse-network.html>



Illinois
Department of Commerce
& Economic Opportunity
OFFICE OF BROADBAND



Illinois
Tech Reuse
Network

Broadband Breakthrough

Between February–May, 2025, the Illinois Broadband Lab supported the Broadband Breakthrough program’s fourth cohort, taking seven more Illinois counties—Fulton, Lake, Macoupin, Marshall, McHenry, Montgomery, and Pike County—through this community engagement and broadband planning program.

The Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, IBL, IOB, University of Illinois Extension, Illinois State University, and new program partner, Reid Consulting Group (RCG), worked closely with county teams to explain the broadband planning process, deliver data, and administer a county wide broadband survey.

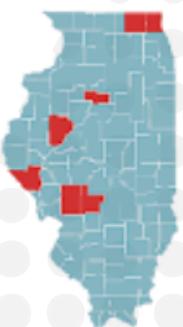
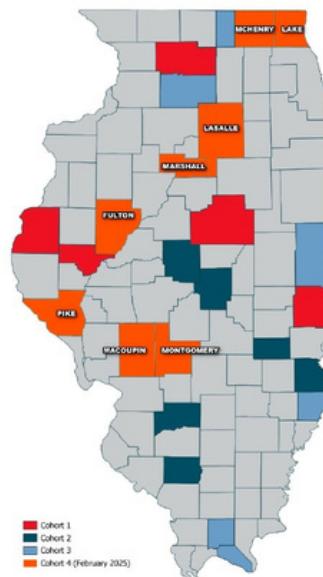
The Broadband Breakthrough program combines education and technical assistance to community leaders to support efforts to create partnerships with broadband providers. Broadband Breakthrough’s goal is to help rural farming counties and communities in Illinois understand the value of improved broadband access—and the resources, tools, and work required to get better broadband and chart a path for increasing digital opportunity

With RCG’s technical expertise and the Benton Institute’s well-tested broadband planning curriculum and leadership, cohort 4 of Broadband Breakthrough condensed the original 16-week program to a 12-week program with an increased focus on individualized county-level support. Several new elements were added to the traditional Broadband Breakthrough program.

Program leads accomplished a variety of activities and goals, including outreach, preparation for deployment, analysis of survey results, maps, and data, matchmaking with internet service providers, and more.

Cohort 4 focused specifically on preparing rural counties for the BEAD program, and despite the many changes to the program, participants were still well-positioned to continue to improve access in their areas. Each county also received data and resources specific to their needs, as well as ongoing support from the program leaders and IOB staff.

Learn more about Broadband Breakthrough at
<https://www.benton.org/broadband-breakthrough>



BROADBAND BREAKTHROUGH



BENTON
INSTITUTE
for BROADBAND
& SOCIETY



Illinois Extension
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN



REID
CONSULTING GROUP



Broadband Advisory Council

Community Engagement



Community Engagement is the core of broadband expansion and digital equity work. Illinois Broadband Team staff not only inform community members about state grant and programming opportunities, but they also become familiar with the local broadband and digital equity ecosystems that work to close divides and drive inclusion. They do this both virtually and in-person, with staff traveling over 1,000 miles across Illinois in 2025 alone, with other travel across the country for various networking, learning, and engagement opportunities.

Community engagement is led by the IOB's three Community Engagement Managers and is complemented by the work of the Permitting and Policy Team and leadership.

Though the termination of DEA funds presented significant challenges to equity and inclusion programming, IOB and IBL staff continued to connect with infrastructure providers, attend programming with partners and providers, and continue to serve the people of Illinois.

Looking Ahead at 2026

Despite the twists and turns of 2025, the road toward universal broadband equity and access continues. The Illinois Broadband Team and its many partners and stakeholders look forward to what 2026 has in store:

- The Broadband Advisory Council will begin the year with a refreshed and engaged membership, along with timely priorities that will continue to prioritize solving access gaps for vulnerable populations.
- Many Connect Illinois Round 3 projects will conclude construction, connecting up to 46,000 homes, businesses, and community anchor institutions.
- The BEAD program will execute grant agreements and begin project implementation, with construction starting as early as the second half of 2026, and progressing toward connecting 157,000+ locations by 2030.
- The Eliminating the Digital Divide Fund (EDDF) will ramp up promotion of donation opportunities to support digital equity and inclusion programming.
- The Illinois Tech Reuse Network will launch across the state, connecting device refurbishers with a network of organizations with devices to donate, as well as with communities in need of refurbished devices.
- The Illinois Broadband Lab will continue to facilitate progress toward digital equity through the READY program and university participants in all 10 regions.
- The Policy and Permitting Team will launch the Broadband in Illinois Starter Guide and formalize rules around the Dig Once policy. They will also host permitting and easement roundtables and engage in broadband workforce development events as infrastructure installation speeds across the state.

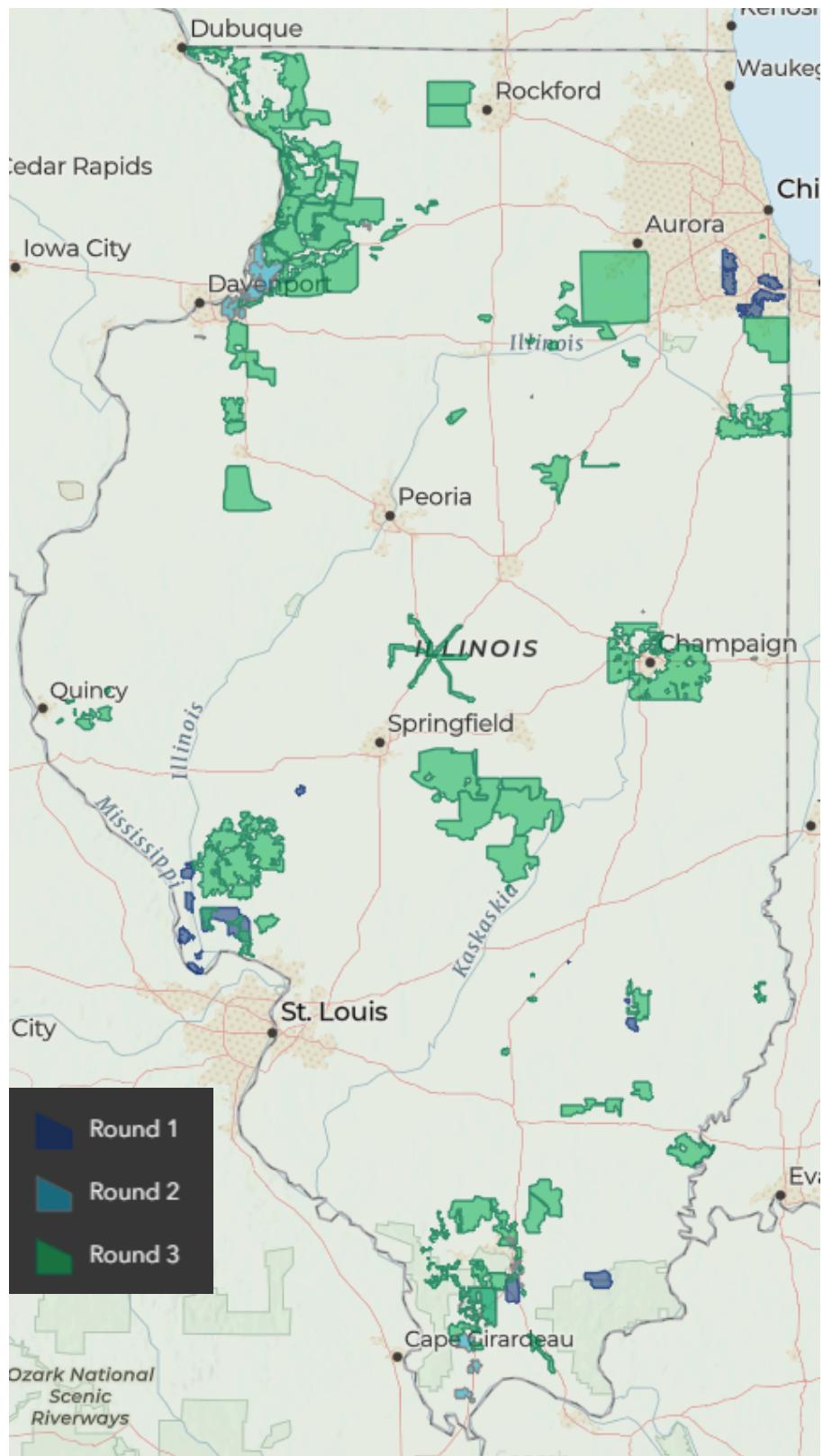
In this uncertain time, one thing is certain: The Illinois Office of Broadband and Illinois Broadband Lab will continue to work to close access and equity gaps and help all communities thrive, and the Broadband Advisory Council will continue to use its diverse and engaged membership to support their work.

Broadband access is not a luxury. It is essential, as vital to everyday living as water, electricity, and home heating. The work that the Illinois Broadband Team has accomplished in 2025 will serve to bring Illinois one step closer to universal broadband access, adoption, and use for every resident of Illinois.



Appendix 1

Connect Illinois Project Map



Explore more on the [Illinois Broadband Map](#)



Appendix 2

Broadband Breakthrough Cohort Map

