

Digital Equity Capacity Kickstarter Program

The Digital Equity Capacity Kickstarter (DECK) program represented an integral and strategic component of the State of Illinois's Connect Illinois vision and commitment to broadband access, adoption, and use—all through the lens of digital equity and inclusion. 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 (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



Gads Hill Center



Coalition for a Better Chinese American Community Senior Smart Phone Class



Illinois
Department of Commerce
& Economic Opportunity
OFFICE OF BROADBAND



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 were distributed and nearly 4000 individuals received one on one support through the funded organizations.

Funding brought resources across Illinois, including down state Illinois and rural communities, suburban Cook and Lake counties, and Chicago’s South and West side, covering 7 of Illinois’ 10 economic development regions.

Key populations served include:

- Latine and Hispanic communities
- Black and African American families
- Asian and Chinese American communities
- Immigrant and refugee populations
- Youth and young adults
- Seniors
- Low income and under-resourced households
- Justice-involved individuals
- English language learners
- Job seekers
- Patients with digital barriers
- K-12 students needing mental health support
- Entrepreneurs and small business owners



Wave 1

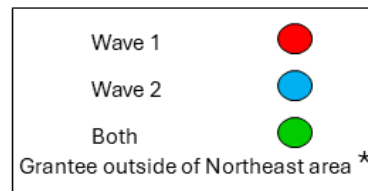
- Center for Changing Lives
- Chicago Urban League
- Coalition for a Better Chinese American Community
- Gads Hill Center
- Growing Home
- McLean County*
- Metropolitan Family Services
- North Lawndale Employment Network
- Northwest Side Housing Center
- scaleLIT
- Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP)
- TCA Health, Inc. NFP
- Teague Int. Corporation d/b/a The Trep School*
- The Center: Resources for Teaching and Learning
- Touch Gift Foundation
- Women’s Business Development Center

Wave 2

- Asian Human Services DBA Trellus
- Board of Trustees of Western Illinois University*
- Carlinville Public Library*
- Chicago Public Library
- ConnectWaukegan NFP
- Digital Leaders Now
- Howard Area Community Center
- Law And The Fam LLC d/b/a Legit Pathways Academy
- Partnership for a Connected Illinois, Inc. *
- Pathlights Human Services
- Phalanx Family Services
- Region 1 Joint Planning Commission
- Southwestern Illinois College*
- St Augustine College

Both

- Association House of Chicago
- Erie Family Health Centers
- The quilt Corporation NFP Inc
- YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago



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

“One student came up to the teacher with an email, unsure whether it was a scam. The student’s husband had just passed away and she was cancelling several accounts, and the email was relevant to her recent online activities. We pulled it up together and decided it was a really good scam. If she hadn’t taken the class, she would have clicked on it.”

-Pathlights

“The computer lab gets daily use – devices were from 2017 until DECK grant allowed an upgrade to all computers – doubling the number of people they can serve. One highlight is the computers also have touch screen – very popular among clients, especially older populations who have a hard time utilizing a mouse. For some people coming from places where computers weren’t common but smart phones were, touch screen at the very beginning helps transition folks to using keyboard and mouse. This is helpful so folks aren’t left behind from the start.”

-Trellus

“We are seeing an increase in digital skills training and checking devices out at West Englewood and Mabel Manning. We also use the laptops at community job fairs for on-the-spot resume assistance. They are not only helpful for trainings but also for browsing book catalogs, learning new services, workshops, and training our staff for teaching.”

-Chicago Public Library

“Parents often end up delaying their care because they didn’t get their specialty referral in the mail. After we help set them up with MyChart and explaining where they can find referrals, they said it really helps them take control of their healthcare. They also report being very happy with MyChart because they can keep track and schedule all their young children in one place, especially those with special needs and chronic conditions.”

-Erie Family Health 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

“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

“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 Program



Phalanx Class Completion

Grantees also shared how digital equity funding helped them advance their organization's mission:

“DECK is a great opportunity to expand possibility of patrons being able to take classes and one on one sessions; every library is now able to lead digital skills topics through expanding reach... Definitely meeting our digital equity goals and serving everyone in Chicago”.

-Kat, Chicago Public Library

“Digital Equity is tied to everything we do. We serve people all over Chicago with a strong immigrant and refugee focus. It is about digital literacy and also cultural literacy. To get a decent paying job, digital literacy is the foundation. Job application is also about networking, social capital, and cultural awareness.”

-Mandy, Trellus

“The importance of digital equity work being done may not seem significant as food and housing resources, but it is just as essential and important due to the digital gap in our society for people of all ages to get connected and use the internet. There is a lot of people in our community lacking this access.”

-Nancy, United Palatine Coalition

“Digital equity is important for professional development and social development. So many people come here wanting workforce development due to the current economy. Digital literacy plays a big role in professional development. We need to focus on making sure everyone has access to digital resources.”

-Jason White, Pathlights

“With digital literacy classes and internet access, our seniors can access more resources and information. It creates a space for them to learn new skills, connect with multi-generational neighbors in the Chinese community and beyond. This program helps break barriers and help them get involved in the community frequently. This also helps CACBC promote their activities because now they know how to get digital event information.”

-Yonggang Xiao, Coalition for A Better Chinese American Community (CACBC)

Digital Equity Capacity Kickstarter Community of Practice

The Illinois [State Digital Equity Plan](#) details a vision for digital equity, goals for realizing this vision, and the data used to inform it. The report also shares the strategy for achieving digital equity, including establishing a digital equity source of truth, leading statewide programming and university partnerships, executing a statewide digital equity program, conducting ongoing stakeholder outreach and engagement, and **supporting and sustaining a digital equity community of practice.**

In implementation of this strategy, the Illinois Office of Broadband established the **DECK Community of Practice**, a way to foster partnerships and collaboration between all DECK grantees. The Community of Practice created a space for grantees to convene on a regular basis and share their knowledge and resources to expand impact and advance digital equity practices.

Initiated in March 2024, the DECK Community of Practice (DECK Community) was designed to bring over 30 digital equity partners, specifically DECK grantees, together to share best practices, build linkages across industries, and inform and advance future digital equity endeavors. DECK Community concluded in June 2025 after monthly or twice-monthly meetings where cohort members shared their DECK projects, learned from each other's success, challenges and best practices, received support from the IOB team, and connected and collaborated with one another.

DECK Community also incorporated polls, surveys, and breakout sessions to collect feedback, empower stakeholder connections, and offer deep dives into specific topics of interest, such as outreach strategies and digital learning curricula. This inaugural cohort has laid a valuable foundation for future cohorts of communities of practice in broadband access and digital equity work in Illinois.



Erie Health



Trellus



Phalanx Computer Class

Project Summaries

Association House of Chicago | Digital Skill Building, Navigation, and Use (ACP Outreach)

Location: Greater Humboldt Park

Association House of Chicago has an established history of supporting immigrant communities on Chicago's West Side, expanding its mission to provide comprehensive programming in English and Spanish, and promoting health and wellness and creating opportunities for education and economic advancement. Through the DECK program, Association House sought to enhance its digital literacy and skills #TechReady program by hiring a digital navigator, promoting enrollment in the ACP Program, and expanding access to its community technology centers.

Center for Changing Lives | Digital Skill Building, Navigation, and Use (ACP Outreach)

Location: Northwest/Southeast Chicago

Center for Changing Lives (CCL) is committed to offering bilingual (English/Spanish) outreach and education for the ACP program through its Northwest and Southeast Chicago offices, focusing on increasing internet connectivity and digital skills to its target populations including low-income Black and Latinx households and the Spanish-speaking immigrant population. The DECK award enabled CCL to expand its Resource Development Coaching and enhance its function as a one stop service center on skills training and financial education for low-income and Spanish-speaking members of the community.

The Center: Resources for Teaching & Learning | Digital Skill Building, Navigation, and Use (ACP Outreach)

Location: Hoffman Estates, Palatine, Rolling Meadows

The Center: Resources for Teaching and Learning acted as the fiscal agent for the United Palatine Coalition (UPC) to enhance digital equity efforts in Palatine, Rolling Meadows, Hoffman Estates, Arlington Heights, and Inverness. The initiative supported UPC's bilingual community navigator and focused on expanding outreach and awareness to ACP-eligible households. The funding helped UPC build on the digital equity work that was developed by its participation in the Illinois Connected Communities program.

Chicago Urban League | Digital Skill Building, Navigation, and Use + Community Tech Center

Location: South/Southwest Chicago

Founded in 1916, the Chicago Urban League works to achieve equity for Black families and communities through social and economic empowerment. Its Youth Services Center led the initiative, serving young people ages 11 to 24 through a digital literacy program and community technology center access. The digital literacy program offered basic and advanced classes on software, web navigation, and online workforce development tools that together with the community tech center will enable families to use the Internet to find resources and employment opportunities for all members of a household.

Coalition for a Better Chinese American Community | Digital Skill Building, Navigation, and Use (ACP Outreach)

Location: Chinatown

The Coalition for a Better Chinese American Community (CBCAC) works with Asian and Asian American residents on digital literacy issues in Chicago. Mandarin and Cantonese-speaking staff members offer one-on-one help and community workshops. The DECK opportunity enabled CBCAC to continue and expand its ACP outreach and enrollment programming, helping to reach many Chinatown-area residents—especially the elderly—and assisting them in navigating technology and language barriers.

ConnectLakeCounty/Connect Waukegan NFP | Community Technology Center, Digital Skill Building Location: Lake County

ConnectLakeCounty, formerly ConnectWaukegan NFP, is dedicated to bridging the digital divide in Lake County, IL. Established in 2020 to address the growing need for digital equity, ConnectLakeCounty has already made significant strides in helping over 900 residents access essential technology and support. Their latest initiative aimed to enhance mobility and outreach by investing in a mobile unit—equipped with devices, hotspots, and a generator—to bring digital literacy resources directly to underserved communities. This mobile unit facilitated ACP enrollment, provided free or low-cost devices, and offered digital skills workshops in familiar, accessible locations such as libraries, schools, and community centers. To further support their mission, ConnectLakeCounty also hired a full-time Digital Program Manager and an additional Digital Navigator to expand their services and build a comprehensive digital skills database.

Digital Leaders Now (LatinX DLN) | Digital Skill Building, Navigation, and Use (ACP Outreach)

Location: Effingham, Fairmont, Mattoon, Summit

A distinguished and effective former Illinois Connected Communities participant, Digital Leaders Now (LatinX DLN) is a leading organization uplifting Latinx voices in technology-related policies and growing Latino representation in STEM-related careers and entrepreneurship. LatinX DLN's main hub in Summit, along with its presence in West Lawn, Garfield Ridge, Pilsen, Little Village, Mattoon, Effingham, and Fairmont City/East St. Louis, enables the organization to reach several large Hispanic population centers across the state. LatinX DLN offered bilingual in-person and virtual digital literacy and tech workforce training and continued its work co-hosting community events to provide outreach and training on ACP and other affordable broadband opportunities.

Howard Area Community Center | Outreach, Digital Skill Building

Location: Chicago

Howard Area Community Center (HACC) is committed to advancing digital equity in Rogers Park and the surrounding communities by targeting two critical populations: English language learners/immigrants and formerly incarcerated individuals. HACC hired a full-time Digital Navigator to drive local outreach, increase enrollment in low-cost broadband programs, and enhance digital skill-building. HACC's extensive history of serving over 8,000 clients annually through programs such as Adult Education and the Fresh Start Workforce Program underscores its dedication to supporting these vulnerable groups. By expanding digital literacy resources and providing access to technology through a newly outfitted computer lab, HACC delivered digital literacy classes to 350 students, with 60% achieving certification, and offered technology access to 500 community members. Utilizing the Northstar Digital Literacy Curriculum, the project addressed essential computer and software skills and support personal and professional development. This initiative aligns with HACC's mission to stabilize lives and foster community integration through crucial digital skills and resources.

Law and the Fam | Digital Skills Building

Location: Danville and Chicago

Law and The Fam LLC is committed to securing economic justice across Illinois through accessible legal technical assistance programs, specializing in business law and highly regulated industries. The organization established a Digital Equity Incubator and Fellowship Program for young adults aged 18 to 25 within our Legit Pathways Academy. This program addressed the impacts of the war on drugs, COVID-19, mass incarceration, and opportunity gaps by recruiting from our existing pipeline of LPA Fellows, primarily from Chicago's West Side and South Side neighborhoods. With the grant, the fellows received training, mentorship, and coaching to build professional digital toolkits, including creating Career and Business Technology Plans, assessing and enhancing their online presence, and developing Digital Investment and ROI Proposals. LPA partnered with other organizations aligned with DECK's mission to create equitable opportunities and close the digital divide for young adults at risk of being excluded from the digital economy.

McLean County | Access Expansion Feasibility Study

Location: McLean County

As a previous Accelerate Illinois program participant, McLean County has been building capacity and leadership toward the goal of universal broadband access throughout the county. Planning and engagement has continued through the countywide stakeholder group, Accelerate Access McLean County, and this grant supported a feasibility study to access options for achieving universal access, including but not limited to formal engagement with broadband service providers to assess the county's preferred path for leveraging federal, state, and local resources toward universal access in alignment with county needs and goals.

Metropolitan Family Services | Digital Skill Building, Navigation, and Use + Community Tech Center Location: Calumet

North Lawndale Employment Network (NLEN) is a place-based, non-profit workforce development organization with a mission to increase the earning potential of the North Lawndale community and surrounding neighborhoods on Chicago's West Side. Through a state-of-the-art workforce development facility in the heart of North Lawndale, NLEN offered job readiness and occupational skills training, coaching and career pathway development, and wraparound support, including free digital literacy training and access to a community technology center.

Northwest Side Housing Center | Digital Skill Building, Navigation, and Use Location: Belmont Cragin Northwest Side

The Housing Center (Northwest Center) built upon its nationally recognized digital equity initiatives in Belmont Cragin, the fastest-growing Latinx neighborhood in Chicago. Their 1:1 computer basics course curriculum provided digital literacy education and hands-on experience with side-by-side support. Northwest Center used the funding to support digital literacy coaches, monthly workshops, and ACP application assistance for community residents.

Partnership for a Connected IL | Feasibility Study, Digital Skill Building Location: Springfield

Partnership for a Connected Illinois (PCI) aimed to enhance K-12 schools' ability to support mental health through digital and teletherapy resources, addressing validated barriers such as digital access and equity challenges. The program tackled these issues at three levels: addressing the overarching societal challenge, focusing on equitable broadband access to digital mental health resources, and implementing community-specific pilots for scalable and equitable statewide adoption. Funding supported the identification and implementation of pilots in selected counties, with results guiding broader adoption across Illinois. The project met DECK priorities by building digital skills, expanding access, and overcoming broadband and device access barriers.

Pathlights Human Services | Community Tech Center, Digital Skill Building Location: Palos Heights

Pathlights aimed to address the significant issue of internet underuse among older adults, which affects their ability to reduce loneliness, manage finances, and access telehealth services. Recognizing this need, Pathlights developed the TechWise program to improve digital literacy among seniors. The program included increasing access through a marketing campaign, referrals for affordable internet connections, and provision of low-cost devices through partnerships with AT&T, Comcast, and PCs for People. TechWise featured a six-part technology instruction series for adults aged 60 and older, focusing on building digital skills through small, supportive classes. The program included a student screener to tailor instruction, a resource directory, and comprehensive technology courses covering basics, troubleshooting, online security, social media, and more. The successful pilot demonstrated high satisfaction and effectiveness, with participants achieving their goals and forming new connections.

Phalanx Public Library |Community Technology Center, Digital Skill Building

Location: Chicago

Phalanx has established a community technology center in Chicago, supported by the SGA Broadband grant and the Chicago Connected program, to address the technological and economic needs of the community. The center's outreach and enrollment campaign for the Affordable Connectivity Program included one-on-one engagement, social media content, print ads, email marketing, newsletters, and distribution of flyers at community events. To address affordability, Phalanx collaborated with the Chicago Device Pledge to provide refurbished devices to low-income families. Impact was measured through both quantitative and qualitative data, including curriculum completion rates, program effectiveness, ACP outreach efforts, and improvements in digital equity. The goal was for participants to achieve proficiency in digital skills, secure internet access, and reduce inequities, ultimately improving their quality of life.

Region 1 Joint Planning Committee | Feasibility Study

Location: Rockford

The R1 Planning Council, focused on enhancing quality of life and economic development in Northern Illinois, is dedicated to extending broadband access in alignment with its Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) goal. This initiative sought to address broadband service gaps in rural areas of Winnebago and Boone Counties, which are crucial for local business growth, education, and access to governmental and job search services. The program supported this effort by funding a consultant to map existing broadband infrastructure, identify service gaps, and collaborate with public and private stakeholders to prioritize expansion. The project created a comprehensive map of current infrastructure and assess the feasibility of expanding broadband to underserved areas. The plan detailed associated costs, timelines, business models, and funding mechanisms, building on previous planning efforts. The selected consultant worked with R1 and stakeholders to develop a strategic plan, providing guidance on funding opportunities, partnerships, and service to rural areas. This approach paved the way for broadband infrastructure expansion, increasing access and strengthening regional economic resilience.

ScaleLit | Digital Skill Building, Navigation, and Use

Location: Cook County

scaleLIT, a nonprofit literacy and workforce development organization headquartered in Chicago, deploys digital equity strategies through its Northstar Digital Literacy training platform and the Illinois Digital Learning Lab. With this grant, scaleLIT leveraged its current role as the One-Stop Operator for the Local Workforce Innovation Area 7 in Cook County to support its Career Pathway Navigators in increasing outreach and enrollment in the ACP program. Additionally, scaleLIT integrated digital literacy training alongside career pathway support in 10 American Job Centers across Cook County.

Southwestern Illinois College | Digital Skills Building Location: Belleville

The mission and vision of Southwestern Illinois College - Adult Education and Literacy (SWIC-AEL) focus on providing lifelong learning by ensuring access to educational services for all individuals. SWIC-AEL aimed to address the state's skills gap through digital literacy, contextualized adult education, and supportive services, helping adult learners meet their literacy and English language needs, enter the workforce, and pursue post-secondary education or self-sufficient employment.

St Augustine College | Community Tech Center, Digital Skill Building

Location: Little Village and South Lawndale

St. Augustine College sought to address digital inequities through infrastructure investments, affordable broadband connections, devices, and digital literacy training in Little Village and South Lawndale. The college and its partners provided laptops and broadband subscriptions at no cost, with no expectation of return. The primary goal was to offer broadband education, awareness, training, access, equipment, and support to communities with significant gaps in digital inclusion. Designed for long-term impact, the project aimed to advance digital skills assessment and training beyond the initial period, with findings and resources shared to contribute to the broader discussion on digital access and equity.

TCA Health | Digital Skill Building, Navigation, and Use (Telehealth) + Community Tech Center

Location: Chatham, Riverdale

As a federally qualified health center, TCA Health (TCA) believes digital inequity is a social determinant of health, and more specifically, digital determinants of health are a subset of social determinants of health. TCA established two Kickstarter Computer Technology Centers—in Chicago's southside neighborhoods of Riverdale and Chatham—where residents battle tremendous structural and social barriers, health disparities, and racial inequities. These community technology centers operated within TCA's Employment & Training Department, increasing patient telehealth opportunities.

The Trep School | Digital Skill Building, Navigation, and Use (ACP Outreach) + Community Tech Center

Location: Danville, Vermilion County

Teague International Corporation (The Trep School) created the Trep Digital Incubator to train, develop, and coach entrepreneurs in the City of Danville and wider Vermilion County to compete in Illinois' digital economy. With goals to develop a dedicated community technology center inside of its Soar Space Business Center, the Trep School offered specialized technology trainings and recruit digital navigators to address the technology needs of business.