Statewide Listening Tour Crosses the Finish Line!
Draft State Plans to Incorporate Findings, Invite Public Comment

During March to June this year, the Illinois Broadband Lab hosted over 50 listening sessions and town hall meetings throughout over 20 communities to better understand the challenges residents face in accessing reliable internet services. The Lab designed the listening tour to gather feedback from residents, community-based organizations, and local officials to inform the *Connect Illinois Broadband* and *Digital Equity Planning* Initiatives, which focus on maximizing the federal Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funding Illinois receives for broadband infrastructure and digital equity.

Here is an overview of the cities we visited, the number of residents, local organizations and government leaders who participated, and the number of community leaders from around the state who helped us to pull this off:

Broadband stakeholder listening session overview
Sessions were held across the state from March to June 2023

Residents
24 in-person listening sessions[1]
- On average, 17 attendees per session

2 webinars
- On average, 10 attendees per session

Local Organizations & Non-Profits
22 in-person listening sessions[1]
- On average, 19 attendees per session

2 webinars[2]
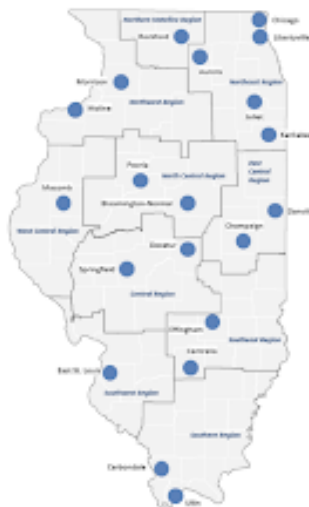- On average, 10 attendees per session

Local Government
19 in-person listening sessions
- On average, 18 attendees per session

2 webinars
- On average, 8 attendees per session

Internet Service Providers
1 webinar
- 32 attendees

[1] Includes 18 combined resident and local organization sessions
[2] Includes the follow-up session with the Northwest Center Digital Coaches

1256 attendees
1168 for in-person sessions
88 for virtual sessions

40+ organizations represented

54 listening sessions[1]
20 cities visited

76 stakeholders convened for event coordination

What We Heard During Listening Tour

Throughout the tour, it quickly became evident that residents and community-based organizations in rural and urban areas face barriers to digital equity and continue to grapple with limited access to reliable internet. Affordability of both internet subscriptions and devices (e.g., computers, tablets) emerged as a pervasive issue affecting urban and rural residents, preventing many Illinoisans from having sustained access to reliable internet at home.

"I receive the ACP subsidy, but the cost of my subscription is still high for me. And the cost of a computer or iPad on top of that is too expensive, so I just use my phone for what I need. The cost of devices is very important, and the subsidies don't help much with that."
— Participant from City of Chicago Residents session, May 10, 2023

City of Chicago, Northeast Region, local organization session, April 19, 2023

Residents from Chicago—notably those living in high-density, residential buildings—voiced concerns regarding bandwidth limitations, citing service that is regularly interrupted and can significantly disrupt daily activities such as streaming and the completion of online assignments. In addition, several residents and non-profits emphasized the need for:
  • Accessible digital learning opportunities that can help build knowledge on cyber security and privacy to mitigate the risks of online scamming and phishing;
   • Programming in multiple languages with specific training for learners of all ages;
   • Digital skills programs that connect learners directly to job training / upskilling programs; and
   • More capacity for digital learning programs.

In suburban and rural areas, affordability gaps were paired with gaps in access to quality, reliable, high-speed broadband. In some areas residents told us they only had access to dated technologies, which

didn't offer speeds high enough for more than one person to work online at a time. In more rural areas, the tour consistently heard feedback that some residents have access to only one provider offering fixed wireless or satellite technologies, but the service, while better than nothing, is generally unreliable and/or too expensive:

"We only have a single provider in this entire community … [and] we only have consistent internet we can rely on when it's a nice weather day. When it's cloudy or raining, you would be lucky to have any connection. And on top of that, the provider is very expensive – many of my neighbors go without an internet subscription at all because they feel it's not worth it."

— Participant from Decatur Residents session, April 25, 2023

Effingham, Southeast Region, residents and local organization session, March 22, 2023

The listening sessions also highlighted the adverse impacts of these barriers on residents and community-based organizations. Participants shared stories of students struggling with remote learning and homework due to unreliable internet, and remote workers noted the constraints that poor connections can place on their primary sources of income. Many participants recounted visiting public Wi-Fi access points, such as local libraries or fast-food restaurants, for their daily internet needs—underlining the essential need for reliable and affordable at-home internet for many Illinoisans today.

Many local businesses shared the daily challenges they face providing services to residents due to unreliable internet which they depend on to run their businesses. Many farmers emphasized the inability to leverage precision farming technologies due to a lack of reliable internet access—decreasing their productivity and efficiency. Small businesses shared how weak and unreliable internet can delay their responses to customer requests—leading to adverse impacts to business operations and customer service quality. Further, representatives of internet service providers relayed that local regulations and municipal zoning laws can slow down the buildout of high-speed infrastructure in underserved areas, highlighting the need for further collaboration between municipalities and providers.

Looking ahead and next steps

The Illinois Broadband Lab now will draw upon the insights gathered during the listening tour to build the plans that will enable Illinois to access and implement funding from the BEAD and Digital Equity Act programs. Our goal is to partner state and local leaders, digital equity experts and practitioners, service providers and other interested parties to drive initiatives that address the unique challenges faced by communities to close the digital divide throughout our state.

The active participation and passionate input we received from residents, local organizations, and officials, which shed light on the urgent need for improved connectivity, inspired Lab personnel and tour organizers. Stay tuned to this newsletter for updates on the progress we all make towards a more connected and digitally inclusive Illinois – including an opportunity to provide comment on the resulting plans for federal BEAD and Digital Equity funding.

Illinois Broadband Lab Summer Webinar Series

The Illinois Broadband Lab and University Extension—in collaboration with the Illinois Office of Broadband, University of Illinois System, and the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society—will host webinar series on Thursdays at noon throughout July and August 2023. The Summer Webinar Series will help communities and internet service providers across the state learn about best practices and available grant opportunities for how to increase broadband access, adoption, and application. The series will bring together guest experts, helpful resources, and new tools and initiatives for those just getting into the *Connect Illinois* conversation, as well as detailed assistance for those looking to learn more about grant opportunities and next steps on their broadband projects and goals.

The schedule integrates two tracks, which combine detailed guidance on how to apply for and manage an Illinois Office of Broadband grant (Track A) with helpful insight and information on broadband infrastructure and digital equity (Track B):

Track A: Guidance for Grant Applications and Grant Management
Audience: Intended for providers and other entities who are looking to take their specific broadband projects to the next level and apply for Connect Illinois or other Illinois Office of Broadband grant opportunities:
July 13 – The Notice of Funding Opportunity & Application Requirements
July 20 – Procurement and the Grant Accountability & Transparency Act (GATA)
Aug 3 – Prevailing Wage & the Illinois Works Apprenticeship Program
Aug 17 – Business Enterprise Program & Environmental Review

Track B: Broadband and Digital Equity Education and Opportunities
Audience: Designed for local leaders, community stakeholders, and the general public who are looking to learn how to increase broadband access, adoption, and application in their communities:
July 27 – The Community Role in Broadband Development
Aug 10 – Broadband Technologies Overview
Aug 24 – Broadband Funding, Partnerships & Project Development
Aug 31 – Adoption, Affordability & Digital Inclusion

[Register for the Summer Webinar Series](#)

NOFO is Live for the Digital Equity Capacity Kickstarter Grant!

The [Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) for the Digital Equity Capacity Kickstart (DECK) program](#) is now available! As discussed in [previous editions of the newsletter](#), the DECK program provides an opportunity for community-based organizations, nonprofits, political subdivisions, public libraries, and public schools to apply for up to $50,000 in project-specific grant support to assist with:
  • Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) outreach and broadband adoption;
  • Digital skill building, online navigation, and use;
  • Community technology centers; and
  • Broadband access expansion feasibility studies.

The [NOFO landing page](#) includes supplemental information, the application, a budget template, disclosure forms, and more.

On July 6, Illinois Office of Broadband Director Matt Schmit gave a webinar about the NOFO.

[View the Recording](#)

[July 6 DECK slides](#)

Connect Illinois Round 3 Update

The June 30 deadline for new *Connect Illinois* applications and initial mapping review feedback inspired a flurry of activity. We received an additional 65 applications—bringing the Round 3 total to 175 applications seeking well over $1 billion in grant support! Similarly, over 150 mapping review challenges have been submitted. The Office of Broadband has begun assessing this feedback and engaging relevant applicants, incumbent providers, and community stakeholders.

The [Illinois Broadband Map](#) currently includes all proposals received between January 2022 and May 1, 2023, under the three program categories: broadband access, broadband innovation, and urban broadband. This layer of the map will be updated in the coming weeks to include all 175 Round 3 applications (distinguished by submission window), thus beginning a new wave of mapping review. As current merit and mapping review ramps up and then concludes, the Office of Broadband anticipates a steady stream of Round 3 grant award announcements. Of course, none of this will occur until all parties participating in the mapping review process have had an opportunity to engage directly with and hear back from the Office of Broadband.

The next quarterly window deadline for Round 3 applications is set for October 2. Additional deadlines and updates for the mapping review process will be available on the *[Connect Illinois](#)* [website](#) and in future newsletter editions.

Further Resources:
[Illinois Broadband Map](#)
[Connect Illinois Rd3 Mapping Review](#)
[FCC National Broadband Map](#)
[FCC Funding Map](#)

ACP Enrollment Performance Tool AMA Webinar — July 19

Benton Institute for Broadband & Society Senior Fellow John Horrigan and Civic Nation Director of Campaigns Elena Saltzman will participate in an **Ask Me Anything (AMA) on July 19 on the Affordable Connectivity Program Enrollment Performance Tool** and how to best focus ACP outreach and enrollment efforts in your community.

The [ACP Enrollment Performance Tool](#) allows you to see how ACP sign-ups are going at a zip code level, and compare the actual number of ACP enrollees to the predicted enrollment for the area. The performance metric can help broadband planners and digital equity practitioners target enrollment efforts where they are most needed. The Benton Institute is currently updating the tool to include more recent data and add additional information on how much money has been claimed in each zip code.

The webinar will be livestreamed on Youtube and Twitter. John and Elena will discuss how to use the performance tool for your ACP work (drawing on lessons from Civic Nation's ACP Pilot Report) and answer questions submitted prior to the event as well as during a live Q&A.

Please submit your questions [here](#) and RSVP at the button below.

[RSVP for ACP Performance Tool AMA July 19](#)

Digital Equity Capacity Kickstarter Program NOFO Published

In the previous edition of the newsletter, we announced the Digital Equity Capacity Kickstarter (DECK) Grant Program, an opportunity for community-based organizations, nonprofits, political subdivisions, public libraries, and public schools to apply for up to $50,000 in project-specific grant support to assist with:

   • Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) outreach and broadband adoption;

   • Digital skill building, online navigation, and use;

   • Community technology centers; and

   • Broadband access expansion feasibility studies.

On June 2, Illinois Office of Broadband Director Matt Schmit led a webinar describing the program. "We want to make sure that a year from now, we are in a good position to take full advantage of competitive grant dollars coming to Illinois from the federal Digital Equity Act," Schmit said in describing the program.

The NOFO will be posted here soon.

DECK Slides

Introducing Aneta Thomas Lee

Visiting Assistant Director — Digital Equity, Inclusion & Navigation

Aneta (pronounced like Anita) Thomas Lee is an altruistic, forward-thinking leader and a staunch advocate for community empowerment. Aneta serves as a champion for the cause of digital equity and inclusion in every setting she finds herself in. Her journey began in 2015 when she was selected to the inaugural Digital Inclusion Fellowship sponsored by Google Fiber and managed by the Nonprofit Technology Network (NTEN). Since that initial service, she has had the opportunity to work for and partner with a variety of organizations and industries—including Google, EveryoneOn, Inspiredu of Atlanta,

the Rainbow PUSH Coalition, and the Microsoft Airband Initiative to name a few.

Before joining Illinois Broadband Lab, Aneta completed service as an Executive Fellow focused on digital equity with FUSE Corps in the City of Birmingham's Mayor's Office.

Aneta is a native of Metro Atlanta, Georgia. She spent her childhood in New Orleans, Louisiana, where her family heritage lies. She is a graduate of Clayton State University in Morrow, Georgia with Bachelor of Science degrees in Psychology and Human Services. Aneta says that travel feeds her soul, and she feels blessed to be able to experience so many great states, cities and countries around the world (with many more to come). Aneta's greatest achievement is serving as a Jedi Master to her two padawans: young Jedi Isaiah—who is currently serving our country in the US Army—and a young padawan, Joya.

News & Articles

July 5 | GigFire buys Rural Comm in Illinois (Press release)
June 27 | The Affordable Connectivity Program and Rural America (Benton Institute)

Resources

Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) Consumer FAQ
FCC Outreach Toolkit for ACP
Illinois Office of Broadband Homepage
Connect Illinois Computer Equity Network
Developing Broadband Leadership Webinar Series
Illinois Broadband Map
Illinois Broadband Lab

For questions, email broadband@illinois.gov.

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