NEXT CENTURY CITIES

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The Ohio State Flag
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CASE STUDY

The Ohio Case Study

Corian Zacher, Next Century Cities’ Policy Counsel for State and Local Initiatives and lead researcher, described why studying Ohio’s work on digital access, adoption, and equity is important and the potential impact of the state initiatives:

“Ohio is well-known for innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurship. Across the state, community leaders have stepped up to make sure that those attributes are present in efforts to bridge the digital divide.

“By centering community voices in broadband solutions, the State of Ohio will be able to provide more robust support for cities, counties, towns, and regional authorities with varying connectivity needs. They are envisioning new pathways to connect residents today and for decades into the future. A collaborative spirit will help to improve the effectiveness of statewide strategies to get everyone online.”

The City of Fairlawn’s broadband expansion efforts are also highlighted in the report. Its Public Services Director, Ernie Staten, added:

“There’s no limit to what we’re accomplishing here. If the state were to open up and realize what’s going on in these communities, embrace that, and allow for funding for communities, we could change digital outcomes across the entire state of Ohio.”

Next Century Cities has been working closely with local officials and community leaders in Ohio to address its digital divide. Read more about letters submitted to Governor Mike DeWine, the Ohio House Finance Committee, and the Ohio Senate Finance Committee on June 14, 2021, regarding proposed prohibitions on municipal networks.

Review The Ohio Case Study report with updated hyperlinks here. Read the blog post by Corian Zacher here.
A few months ago, we asked local officials to help the Federal Communication Commission develop the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program. NCC’s member municipalities highlighted the importance of helping low-income households maintain broadband Internet services and what their communities needed to see in program rules. We also created a webpage to ensure that local and state and officials could learn about effective ways to promote enrollment. Today, over one million residents are receiving much-needed assistance with their broadband bills.

Tell us how it’s making an impact in your community. Share testimonials, articles, press releases, social media posts, etc. with us via info@nextcenturycities.org.
CALIFORNIA | On July 20th, 2021, Governor Newsom signed legislation that will make $6 billion available for broadband deployment statewide over the next several years. Next Century Cities will host a member briefing on Thursday, September 16th at 2:00 p.m. ET/11:00 a.m. PT to discuss the legislation and opportunities for local governments. California member municipalities will receive a direct invite. Others should contact Corian Zacher, NCC’s policy counsel for state and local initiatives, at corian@nextcenturycities.org for additional information.

OHIO | The Ohio Department of Development opened an online portal for its Residential Broadband Expansion Grant that includes application instructions and program details. The grant is available to internet service providers to support deployment projects in unserved and underserved areas.
On July 20th and 21st, 2021, Next Century Cities held its first-ever virtual conference. The two-day event kicked off with an academic pre-conference in which presenters shared current research, covering a wide range of topics that impact the broadband landscape.

Through his research, Mike Conlow of Blue State Digital suggested using data from the Census American Community Survey for broadband adoption analysis. He argues that Census American Community Survey data is currently the most accurate indicator of adoption and connectivity in communities across the United States. Conlow reviewed why the current data sets used to determine access and adoption paint an inaccurate picture of the state of connectivity nationwide.

Darrah Blackwater, an Indigenous Law and Policy Fellow at the University of Arizona, shared her research on the digital divide in Indigenous communities and the importance of spectrum sovereignty for Native Nations. She concluded her presentation with specific recommendations for fostering broadband allyship with Native communities.

Continue reading about the inaugural Academic Pre-conference here.
The Struggle For High-Speed, Affordable, and Reliable Broadband Must Be One That Promotes Digital Equity, Social Justice, and Democracy

By Francella Ochillo

Jonathan Paz is a Ward 9 City Councilor in Waltham, Massachusetts. Boston born and Waltham raised, his engagement with and deep focus on Waltham’s working classes provides him with a critical understanding of the role that equitable broadband access and adoption can play in residents’ economic and social well-being.

On July 21st, 2021, Councilor Paz provided keynote remarks at Next Century Cities’ virtual conference. He described the City of Waltham as a blue-collar city with a sizable population of Central American and Ugandan immigrants. Approximately 50% of its student population needs support with English language learning. Addressing digital inequities competes with other local priorities related to expanding affordable housing options and improving food security.

"THERE NEEDS TO BE A COMMUNITY LED EFFORT, AND WE NEED COMMUNITY EDUCATION AND LEADERSHIP AS TO HOW BROADBAND WORKS."

During the COVID-19 pandemic, at least 10% of Waltham students did not have Internet access. Thanks to a multi-year public-private partnership, school administrators and City leadership were able to distribute hundreds of new hotspots and Chromebooks to students in need. However, as Councilor Paz cautioned, Waltham’s connectivity needs go beyond education. "We had our seniors who didn’t have access to technology. They don’t even know how to, you know, navigate Internet Explorer." The city needed a broader, more ambitious solution to its digital divide.

Councilor Paz championed efforts to deploy public Wi-Fi networks, creating a Digital Commons across several key points across the city from points of public transit to our playgrounds." For low-income residents, local officials evaluated whether mesh networks should be used on public housing properties. Additionally, Councilor Paz led the four-month campaign to explore whether the City should invest in a municipal broadband network.

Read more about Councilor Paz’s speech and call-to-action for advocates and local leaders.
ADVOCATES, COMMUNITY LEADERS, & PHILANTHROPIC PARTNERS ARE WORKING TO CHANGE CONNECTIVITY OUTCOMES IN TEXAS

States have played a significant role in supporting communities as they work to build out new networks and upgrade existing broadband infrastructure. Many states use a state broadband office to centralize efforts. Until the Texas Legislature passed House Bill 5, Texas was one of the few states that lacked a statewide broadband plan.

New legislation will improve broadband access and adoption in urban and rural communities alike. Nonprofits, public interest advocates, community leaders, and philanthropic partners were working behind the scenes to make broadband a legislative priority.

During Next Century Cities’ 2021 Virtual Conference, Dr. Kelty Garbee of the Texas Rural Funders moderated a discussion with Kassandra Huhn of the Borderplex Alliance and Lonnie Hunt of the Deep East Texas Council of Governments. The conversation highlighted how communities in Deep East Texas, an eleven county region covering 9,413 square miles, and El Paso-Juarez, the Borderplex region between Mexico and the United States, have forged new partnerships, determined broadband needs, and pursued ways to connect their communities.

Continue reading about the work that Texas advocates are doing to connect residents.
Ohio communities face numerous connectivity challenges related to both broadband access and adoption. The problems are not unique to rural or urban areas. Local governments across the state are using a variety of innovative models to fill infrastructure gaps in their communities while simultaneously working to ensure that residents have the tools they need to participate in the 21st Century economy.

During NCC’s virtual conference on July 21st, 2021, we had an opportunity to showcase how local leadership can impact broadband outcomes across a state. Montgomery County Commissioner Debbie Lieberman and Ernie Staten, Public Service Director for the City of Fairlawn, discussed their communities’ pandemic response and larger goals to connect Ohio residents.
Through alliances with leadership in local government both in and outside of Ohio, their leadership encourages other municipalities to explore community-based connectivity solutions.

In the words of Commissioner Lieberman, “As the world went into total isolation, home access to technology and reliable internet connections really went from being a luxury to a necessity.”

According to Ernie Staten, “The pandemic really showed a lot here in Fairlawn, so we were lucky we were already connected. We were already doing the work that I think everyone wants to see happen throughout all of these networks. What came out of it was that it just showed how important it was to have a really strong network and a fiber-optic network where the incumbents are not doing anything like that.”

As the world went into total isolation, home access to technology and reliable internet connections really went from being a luxury to a necessity.

Montgomery County Commissioner
Debbie Lieberman

Get more community-level insights in the full discussion here or read the full transcript.

Additional Resources:
- Broadband Task Force: High-Speed Internet is Essential for All Counties
- Montgomery County Digital Equity Presentation
- Next Century Cities’ Members Oppose Proposals to Prohibit Municipal Broadband Options in Ohio
- Next Century Cities Raises Importance of Community Partnerships with Cuyahoga County, Ohio
Detroit, Michigan, the largest city in the state of Michigan, is well-known for being home to Motown Music as well as the hub for American automobile production. However, as the world has been forced to go online, Detroit has gained notoriety for its vast digital divide.

Joshua Edmonds, Detroit’s Digital Inclusion Director, joined NCC’s Brittany-Rae Gregory for a fireside chat on the relationships forged between public and private entities across the city. The session was part of Next Century Cities’ 2021 virtual conference aimed at finding ways to connect every community in the U.S. to affordable, robust broadband.

The discussion opened with details on how the City of Detroit has leveraged public and private partnerships to address deficiencies in broadband access and adoption rates among residents. Edmonds also described how Connect 313, a consortium of local leaders, nonprofits, community advocates, and private stakeholders, is working to tackle various aspects of Detroit’s digital divide.

Detroit’s methodologies can be used to improve collaboration strategies in other municipalities. Edmonds offered sage advice for other local officials seeking to forge partnerships and bring attention to community broadband connectivity needs. “We need to be collaboratively minded, and we need to standardize what we’re doing...”

Read more about Edmonds’ advice on developing public-private partnerships and community-informed decision making.
In March of 2020, local officials from California to Virginia led an unexpected and unprecedented switch to life-from-home as the COVID-19 pandemic raged across the United States. Overnight, schools, public meetings, and city services switched to remote capabilities.

For local leaders, one goal remained paramount: a continuity of services for every resident, regardless of connectivity status. However, millions of Americans nationwide and thousands within their communities were struggling with fast, affordable, and reliable broadband access.

Next Century Cities hosted a virtual session entitled, “What We Learned from COVID Must Be Used to Inform Universal Broadband Strategies,” part of a larger discussion on ways to connect every community in the U.S. to broadband. Two local leaders joined us to highlight their work and underscored the importance of learning from the pandemic while crafting plans for the future.

The panel, moderated by NCC’s Lukas Pietrzak, featured Mayor Mary Casillas Salas of Chula Vista, California, and County Administrator Garry Larrowe of Botetourt County, Virginia. These two leaders hail from opposite sides of the country but stay in pursuit of the same goal for universal broadband adoption.

Learn more about the work in Chula Vista and Botetourt County here.
NTIA IS PROMOTING FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR COMMUNITIES ON THE WRONG SIDE OF THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

BY RYAN JOHNSTON

One of the largest barriers that communities face in accelerating broadband deployment or launching adoption programs is the lack of funding. Local officials are oftentimes unaware of all of the funding opportunities that are available to them or lack the capacity to navigate the process. What’s more, communities in need may not find out about new federal or state funding in time to apply.

At Next Century Cities’ 2021 Conference, Ryan Johnston, policy counsel for federal programs, sat down with Gilbert Resendez, Broadband Program Specialist at the National Telecommunications Information Administration’s ("NTIA") BroadbandUSA Program, to discuss potential funding opportunities for communities nationwide. Resendez highlighted five specific funding opportunities that are currently, or will soon be, available to the public.

- **Broadband Infrastructure Deployment Grants** (accepting applications through Aug. 17, 2021);
- **Connecting Minority Communities Pilot Program** (application window is anticipated to open mid-August);
- **Tribal Broadband Connectivity Grants Program** (accepting applications through Sept. 1, 2021);
- **State and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund**; and
- **Capital Projects Fund**.

Additionally, Resendez discussed eligibility and submission requirements in order to be considered for a grant. Local officials may find NTIA’s **Indicators of Broadband Need Map** useful. It is a publicly available digital map that displays key indicators of broadband needs across the country.

[Learn more](#) about NTIA’s available resources for residents and local leaders.
In Austin, Texas, local leaders tap into community knowledge and expertise through their groundbreaking Leadership Austin fellowship program.

On July 21st, 2021, Next Century Cities hosted a virtual conference featuring local leadership from California, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Ohio, South Dakota, Texas, and Virginia. During the session, Building Sustainable Solutions for Digital Inclusion in Equity Post the COVID-19 Pandemic, we were joined by Rondella Hawkins, Director of the City of Austin, Office of Telecommunications and Regulatory Affairs (TARA), and Khotan Harmon, a Digital Inclusion Fellow with the Leadership Austin program.

Harmon introduced the fellowship program to conference attendees and explored the many benefits of designing and implementing similar programs in other municipalities.

In her position as a Leadership Fellow, Harmon brings outside and fresh perspectives to the TARA team. Also a small business owner, she helps inform city leadership about the surrounding community's needs, especially on topics that may be blindspots for municipal administration. Harmon is uniquely positioned to help expand municipal officials' networks and highlight connectivity needs among populations that may not be included in broadband program discussions.

Read more about the benefit of incorporating external viewpoints into local broadband strategies.
IMAGINING A BOLD, CONNECTED FUTURE WITH THE ADVOCATES WHO ARE WORKING TO EXPAND DIGITAL OPPORTUNITIES

BY MEDVIS JACKSON

A bold, connected future is possible when we embrace new ideas, support innovative processes, and develop effective partnerships. Those are several of the core takeaways from the July 21st Next Century Cities panel discussion on how ubiquitous broadband could positively impact communities across the United States.

Next Century Cities hosted a virtual conference on July 20th and 21st, 2021. The panel discussion, What Would Ubiquitous Broadband Enable, featured four amazing community leaders:

- Aaron Brumley serves as the IT Coordinator at the Lawrence Public Library. Until recently, he supervised a public service department dedicated to serving community technology needs.
- Tia Price, the Director of the Baltimore Digital Equity Coalition, brings individuals and organizations together to advance digital equity and bridging the digital divide.
- Chris Wood is the Executive Director of LGBT Tech, an organization that develops programs and resources that support LGBTQ+ communities and works to educate organizations and policymakers.
- Darrah Blackwater is a tech policy advocate, law school graduate, and citizen of the Navajo Nation. She is using research to raise awareness about how the digital divide impacts indigenous populations living both on and off of Tribal lands. She also participates in grassroots community broadband projects.

Continue reading about the ways that these community leaders are addressing digital inclusion locally and nationally.
A glimmer of bright silver light shone from within the COVID-19 pandemic - advancements in telehealth technology. Additionally, necessity became the mother of invention regarding how we reach populations in need of telehealth services, a goal that requires creative partnerships.

Billions of dollars in grant money has been earmarked for broadband programs and other digital technologies. Funding is flowing from just about every federal agency. How do we ensure that populations on the wrong side of the digital divide get access to those resources?

In an effort to reach COVID-19 vaccination goals, the Biden Administration partnered with barbershops and hair salons in African American communities to facilitate pop-up vaccination sites. Success is motivating shop owners to do more, such as incorporating telehealth to transform the health of their community.

For hypertension screening, for example, shops can take customers’ blood pressures digitally. The healthcare provider takes that data through telehealth and recommends treatment when necessary or advisable. Shops can then decide on additional telehealth services they want to provide based on the cost of providing healthcare services and level of risk incurred.

Read more about libraries and their potential for expanding telehealth opportunities here.
In Case You Missed It

Champaign County, Illinois, Issues RFQ for Broadband Plan Consultant Services | Champaign County is seeking proposals from qualified firms interested in creating a sustainable, broadband master plan for the entire county to address existing digital inequities and barriers to access, adoption, and utilization of robust broadband by all residents, businesses, and institutions. The RFQ can be found here.

City of Portland’s Office for Community Technology is recruiting for a Digital Equity Coordinator. | The Digital Equity Coordinator works in collaboration with representatives from Multnomah County and Multnomah County Library, the Digital Inclusion Network, and other community partners to develop and advance collective community efforts to close the digital divide for Black, Indigenous, and Latinx residents, people with disabilities, and seniors in Multnomah County. Applications should be submitted here by August 16, 2021.

New Report: How Lobbying and Political Influence By Broadband Gatekeepers Has Shaped The Digital Divide | In partnership with the Communications Workers of America, Common Cause recently released “Broadband Gatekeepers: How ISP Lobbying and Political Influence Shapes the Digital Divide,” examining lobbying and political spending by the largest Internet Service Providers and their trade associations and industry practices have contributed to gaps in connectivity.

Community Technology Network (CTN) is hiring an Executive Managing Director. | Community Tech Network is currently seeking a dynamic, passionate, and collaborative Executive Managing Director to co-lead the organization at a pivotal point in its history. Learn more about the application process, position, and organization here.

Libraries Without Borders US is hiring a new Executive Director. | LWB US is seeking an Executive Director (ED) committed to scaling up their existing programs, developing new programs, leading their team, and fundraising. The ED will have overall strategic and operational responsibility for LWB US’s staff, programs, expansion, and execution of its mission. Learn more about the position here.
In Case You Missed It

NTIA Provides Updates to Broadband Infrastructure Programs | Staff from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration ('NTIA') hosted a series of Broadband Infrastructure Program webinars to help prospective applicants understand the agency’s current grant opportunities and ensure high-quality applications.

The NTIA also has recently published its third set of FAQs regarding the Broadband Infrastructure Program. It details some of the most commonly asked questions from prospective applicants regarding eligibility, other broadband funding programs and eligible service areas, application requirements/process, and post-award requirements. Subsequent FAQ sets will be published periodically throughout the application window. Additional reminders:

- **Grant applications must be received by 11:59 p.m. EDT on August 17, 2021.**
- All applicants must have current registrations in the System for Award Management (SAM.gov) and Grants.gov, keeping in mind the SAM.gov registration process typically takes 3-5 business days but could take more than 3 weeks.
- All applications must be submitted electronically via [www.Grants.gov](http://www.Grants.gov). Complete applications or portions of applications submitted by mail, email, or FAX will not be accepted.

Cybersecurity Workforce Development Training Pilot Notice of Funding | The United States Department of Homeland Security's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), Cyber Defense Education & Training (CDET) seeks to award a new cooperative agreement for a pilot titled “Cybersecurity Workforce Development and Training Pilot for Underserved Communities.” The deadline for submissions is August 25, 2021. Learn more about the application process and parameters [here](#).

Michigan Moonshot Webinar Series: Federal and Statewide Grant Opportunities | Chris Barnes, the Grants Development Consultant for Grants Office, LLC, will present the latest federal and state grant opportunities that can be leveraged to assist in broadband expansion efforts in your community. Register for the talk [here](#).

Public Knowledge Opens Equal Justice Works (EJW) Fellowship Application for 2022-2024 Term | Public Knowledge encourages rising third-year law students and others who qualify to submit an application for an EJW fellowship with Public Knowledge as a host. Interested applicants should fill out and submit [this form](#). Public Knowledge will prioritize applications received before August 16, 2021.

Empowering Youth, Exploring Justice 2021 Town Hall | The EYEJ Youth Council will host their annual town hall themed, 'End the Digital Divide Through the Power of Voting' on August 20, 2021. The 2021 Town Hall will be showcasing a diverse set of young people united together to continue the message in the sense of urgency of closing the Digital Divide combined with voting power. Register to attend [here](#).
The Next Century Cities staff will be taking a summer break from our regularly scheduled publications. During the next three weeks, we will recharge in preparation for an ambitious fall agenda. Our Member Bulletin and Monthly Newsletter will return in September.

As always, if you have news to share, please reach out to our communications director, Brittany-Rae Gregory via email at brittany-rae@nextcenturycities.org.