

# Digital Equity in Tribal Communities

A guide that shares effective digital inclusion practices in Tribal communities

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## DEFINING DIGITAL EQUITY



### Digital Equity and Digital Inclusion

**Digital equity is the goal** of the Digital Equity Act Programs and the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Programs. The term Digital Equity means “the condition in which individuals and communities have the information technology capacity that is needed for full participation in the society and economy of the United States.”<sup>1</sup>

**Digital inclusion** refers to the **activities** “necessary to ensure that all individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, have access to and use of Information and Communication Technologies.”<sup>2</sup> Investing in digital inclusion includes providing **Internet access**, teaching **digital skills**, and providing **devices**.

## DIGITAL EQUITY OUTCOMES

**Investing in broadband infrastructure and digital inclusion** provides significant positive impacts, specifically in terms of health, employment, education, essential services, and civic participation. In addition, these investments can empower Tribal communities through aiding economic development, preserving traditional practices, and facilitating inter/intra-government coordination.

The positive impacts of investing in infrastructure & digital inclusion include:



### Health

- Control & maintenance of Tribal electronic health records
- Access to preventative and/or specialty care via telehealth
- Self-determination to tailor one’s healthcare by identifying culturally specific needs



### Essential Services

- Emergency communications during natural disasters
- Digitizing Tribal records
- Access to information on environmental news and impacts



### Employment

- Virtual workforce job training & deployment
- Ability to work from home
- Access to information about job opportunities



### Civic Engagement

- Inter/intra-government coordination
- Cultural preservation through online forums
- Participation in online meetings and gatherings



### Education

- Remote learning
- Language revitalization through online resources
- Staying connected to cultural practices for those who no longer live in the community

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## DIGITAL INCLUSION EXAMPLES WITHIN TRIBAL COMMUNITITES

### NTIA Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program

#### Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) Broadband Use and Adoption Consortium



To reduce barriers to Internet use among Native Alaskans, this project provides **broadband-enabled devices, Internet subsidies, digital skills training, and workforce training** to participants. The project also seeks to improve health outcomes by providing Internet access to Tribal communities. AFN provides Alaska Tribal healthcare partners with equipment and training to provide telehealth services to members of Tribal communities.<sup>3</sup>

#### Bridging the Digital Divide: Supporting job growth, telehealth, and household connectivity for Upper Mattaponi Citizens



To improve Tribal citizens' access to **telehealth, remote education**, and other modern **economic development activities** that promote job growth and household connectivity for the Upper Mattaponi community, this Broadband Use and Adoption project will provide **affordable Internet services** through payment assistance programming as well as provide citizens in need with laptops.<sup>4</sup>

#### Hoopla Valley Tribe Broadband Infrastructure Deployment Project



To aid workforce development, the Hoopa Valley Tribe's Broadband Infrastructure Deployment project will **provide training** for Hoopa Tribal Members to be Internet technicians, lineman and fiber splicers. The project will also **install fiber and wireless** to 1,045 unserved Tribal households.<sup>5</sup>

#### Investments in Telehealth



The Blackfeet Tribe used funding from Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) to provide mental health support via telehealth in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Citizens of the community had the option to work with an expert in cultural practices, who utilizes traditional methods such as medicine bags, meditation, and grounding (or coping) skills.<sup>6</sup>

#### Tribal Libraries and E-Rate



Forming two separate consortia, Tribal libraries and schools in six pueblos aggregated their demand for broadband and built two Tribally-owned and operated, 60-mile fiber-optic networks, with funding from the Federal Communications Commission E-rate program.<sup>7</sup>

#### Cayuse Native Solutions & Digital Navigators



Cayuse Native Solutions, with funding from the National Digital Inclusion Alliance, now has a Digital Navigator leading a three-year Digital Inclusion program to boost digital skills and technology in the Umatilla Indian Reservation community.<sup>8</sup>





# Stories of Digital Equity in Tribal Communities



The impact of high-speed Internet on the Osage Nation funded through the Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program (TBCP)



*Click on the image to play audio.*

“We received a TBCP grant. And the grant has meant and will continue to mean so much to the Osage Nation. It started us on the path of providing technology and in my mind, enhancing our sovereignty as the Osage Nation. Our chief, Chief Standing Bear, said numerous times that this was a game changer because what it does is, when you look at the history of economic development in the United States, they built cities on coastal waters, and then on rivers and waterways, and then they built them on railroads, then they built them on highways. And that was because they were all interconnected. This is the next interconnection. This is what’s going to allow us as the Osage people to move forward. It’s going to give us the capability of providing connectivity between our generations, with our elders, our ancestors, on down to our descendants. It’s going to help us with our culture, our language, and it’s going to help us with allowing us to learn through virtual reality and other ways how to do something like finger weaving and ribbon work and things like that for us that the technology and the language that binds us as a community.”

*- Dr. James Trumbly, Osage Nation*

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# Stories of Digital Equity in Tribal Communities

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Building broadband infrastructure as a mechanism for economic development for the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe in the Northeastern United States



Mohawk Networks started out as an idea in the mid-2000s to provide reliable Internet access to everyone in the community. It took close to a decade to determine the best project plan and to secure funding. This was one of the first fiber networks to be built by a Native Nation using funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA).

Mohawk Networks uses both Fiber-to-the-Home and fixed wireless to connect everyone in the community.

Allyson Mitchell, General Manager at Mohawk Networks, described how it took a couple years to build out the fiber network, stringing about 70 miles of fiber along poles throughout the community. They made sure the anchor institutions, such as government buildings, were connected first, but the network was built methodically from one side of the community to the other. It cost approximately \$15 million to build, but by 2015, the fiber network was completed and fully operational.

At the same time that the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe was planning for the fiber network, there was another project in the works to address the digital divide in the community.

Connectivity is only one piece of the equation; devices are also important. In 2010, a Broadband Technology Opportunity Program grant brought 60 public computers to key places throughout Akwesasne, including the Boys & Girls Club, the Cultural Center, and the Office of the Aging's Senior Center. With this project, everyone can access the Internet, even if they do not have a home connection through Mohawk Networks.

Now that Mohawk Networks' fiber network is complete, the network can be extended out to new homes as they are built. But there is also a fixed wireless option available. Mohawk Networks' fixed wireless network is a separate project that ensures connectivity for rural areas, and the flat terrain makes it easy to reach everyone with high-quality Internet access.

The fixed wireless can even reach off-territory, and Mohawk Networks offers service in parts of Franklin and Lewis Counties. Mohawk Networks is one of the few Native Nations' networks providing Internet access beyond the borders of its reservation. This is an opportunity for economic development that serves both the Tribe and neighboring non-Tribal towns with high-quality Internet access.<sup>9</sup>

This is an excerpt from *Building Indigenous Future Zones: Four Tribal Broadband Case Studies* used with permission from author H Trostle.



# Digital Equity in Tribal Communities

## Citations



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