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**Subject:** Introducing the Illinois ARPA Accelerator

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# Introducing the *Illinois ARPA Accelerator*

## A New Resource for Communities Considering How to Use Federal American Rescue Plan Act Funding for Broadband

The \$400 million *Connect Illinois Broadband Grant Program* and emerging federal broadband funding streams create a historic opportunity for community-driven broadband expansion throughout Illinois. To ensure the best possible outcomes for these infrastructure programs, communities need to do the work necessary to set appropriate visions, gather critical information about their local marketplace and technology options, set appropriate goals, develop public-private partnerships, and obtain financing. Of course, these are no small tasks, and not all communities are prepared to go down this road alone. But the promise of reliable, high-performance, affordable broadband is an unprecedented opportunity too good to pass up.

With local governments across Illinois considering use of state and federal funds for broadband, such as Local Fiscal Recovery Fund dollars available through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society is leveraging philanthropic support to collaborate with the Illinois Office of Broadband and University of Illinois Extension on new engagement devoted to community-led broadband infrastructure expansion that positions local governments to succeed. The forthcoming *Illinois ARPA Accelerator* opportunity will engage an initial cohort of qualifying local governments with focused, in-depth preparation over a 14-week period beginning January 2022.

The *Illinois ARPA Accelerator* collaboration will provide a platform for local governments to build a community broadband team, gather essential information, determine acceptable community roles,

identify broadband provider partners, and plan for broadband infrastructure projects.

To learn more about the opportunity and begin preparation in advance of an anticipated December 13 application deadline, visit <https://extension.illinois.edu/lge/community-broadband-development>.

## **Webinar Series to Highlight Broadband Application Process, Planning, and Preparation**

The Illinois Office of Broadband and University of Illinois Extension are hosting a four-part program designed to introduce local government leaders and staff to a key component of the community-driven broadband expansion process: integration of broadband consultant support.

Join the Illinois Office of Broadband and those most familiar with recent broadband expansion through public-private partnerships to discuss various topics, such as the role of a broadband consultant, successful community approaches, preview of Connect Illinois Round 3 funding, and current and pending federal funding opportunities.

Friday, November 5 | Broadband 101

Friday, November 12 | Approaches + Partnerships

Friday, November 19 | Next Steps

Friday, December 3 | Connect Illinois Rd 3

These webinars will provide a knowledge base for local government teams who might apply for, and participate in, the *Illinois ARPA Accelerator Program*.

Each session will run from 12–1pm. Please mark your calendars and [register here](#).

## **Connect Illinois | Digital Equity + Inclusion**

In recognition of the recent Digital Inclusion Week, Illinois Broadband Connections is taking this opportunity to outline the digital inclusion and equity work of the Illinois Office of Broadband.

The Connect Illinois program launched in 2019, pairing the then-largest state matching grant program for broadband expansion—the \$400 million Connect Illinois Broadband Grant Program—with an appropriately ambitious commitment to digital equity and inclusion.

The State of Illinois introduced complementary programming to pair with its historic capital investment that, combined, seeks to address the three important aspects of digital equity: affordable in-home broadband service, access to personal computers, and digital literacy training and ongoing technical support. Over time, this approach has grown to include programs emphasizing community education, planning and capacity building, as well as regional engagement.

## **Expanding Universal Access | Connect Illinois**

With at least \$400 million available for broadband deployment grants targeting areas of greatest need, Connect Illinois is an equity-driven infrastructure program, first and foremost. Challenges tied to population sparsity, geography, or low take rate continue to stand as barriers to broadband ubiquity. In particular, Connect Illinois seeks to address disparities in broadband access and adoption in rural regions and black and brown communities across the state. Understandably, private investment has doubled down on relatively profitable service territories, growing the broadband access gap as a result. Connect Illinois funding will address this market failure and recalibrate the business case for new deployments, connecting communities and individual consumers with scalable service throughout the state.

## **Building Local Broadband Capacity | Illinois Connected Communities Program**

The Illinois Connected Communities (ICC) Grant Program began in 2020 to help drive community education, planning, and capacity building for advances in broadband access, adoption, and utilization. The ICC program recognizes that communities need to be prepared to take advantage of historic state and federal funding opportunities and could benefit from a focus on complementary aspects of the digital divide, such as broadband adoption or utilization. Whatever a community's focus—and however prepared a community may be to set a broadband vision and take steps toward realizing that vision—the ICC program is designed to build a strategic action plan around one or more aspects of an integrated broadband strategy.

## **Driving Access, Adoption, and Utilization | Broadband Regional Engagement for Adoption + Digital Equity (READY) Program**

The Broadband Regional Engagement for Adoption + Digital Equity (READY) Grant Program debuted in early 2021. READY seeks to provide a roadmap to eliminating the digital divide through regional collaboration for equitable advances in the areas of broadband access, adoption, and utilization. The Broadband READY Grant Program supports a qualified regional entity—such as a community and economic development organization, regional planning council, or institution of higher education—in each of the state's 10 economic development regions.

## **Getting Devices to Families in Need | Computer Equity Network**

The Connect Illinois Computer Equity Network launched in 2020 and addresses a key contributing factor to the digital divide: the lack of at-home connected computing devices. Over 1.1 million Illinois households lack at-home desktop or laptop computers. The goal is simple: to put upgraded devices into the homes of as many qualifying Illinois families as possible through regular community distribution events across the state.

Through a first-of-its-kind statewide collaboration, the Computer Equity Network is committed to hosting collection and redistribution events in all 102 Illinois counties. National non-profit PCs for People is coordinating the Computer Equity Network, and serving Illinois with a standardized process for refurbishment, distribution, and impact tracking through two hubs in the Metro East and Cook County Chicago Southland regions. The network provides refurbished computers, internet service, and tech support to thousands of people in Illinois with a goal of reaching at least 10,000 households annually.

## **Strengthening Digital Literacy & Skills | Digital Navigator Program**

Digital Navigators serve as critical community “experts” to provide assistance for local residents needing improved digital literacy skills and know-how. Digital Navigators work with community organizations and residents directly to address the full digital inclusion process, ranging from at-home broadband connectivity to computer use to digital skills. Working with the Illinois Office of Broadband and program partners through a train-the-trainer model, Digital Navigators assess community digital literacy gaps and provide competent guidance towards resources and program development that is suitable for the community and its residents.

Interested in learning more about broadband connectivity efforts in Illinois? Read the IL Office of Broadband report here:

[Connect Illinois | Digital Equity + Inclusion](#)

## **Reconnecting with Connect Illinois: Updates from Round 1 Grant Recipients**

With an imminent announcement regarding the Connect Illinois Round 2 grantee cohort and Round 3 application window, we continue to check in on the progress of Round 1 grantees.

### **Wabash Communications Co-op**

In June 2020, it was announced that Wabash Communications Co-op would receive a grant of over \$1.5 million for middle-mile and last-mile deployment with 24 miles of fiber-optic cable to reach over 650 unserved households, businesses, farms, and community anchor institutions in parts of Clay County.



The co-op is located in Louisville, Illinois, located 100 miles straight east of St. Louis. By receiving Connect Illinois Round 1 grant money, Wabash has been busy at work expanding its fiber footprint into Clay City and Sailor Springs.

Without the Connect Illinois money, Adair said, the broadband needs in those regions would go unmet, as the population density is not high enough to deliver a return on investment in broadband network deployment. In the rural areas outside of the villages, where there are only a handful of houses every few square miles, grants have to cover 75-90% of the cost. “These grants are helping rural people, and rural villages to get what they need.”

All Wabash subscribers receive gig-speed service. Adair extolled the benefits of fiber connections, saying it is the ultimate way to connect. There are “fewer issues related to latency, line-of-sight, and capacity limitations” compared to other technologies, he said.

Wabash has been delivering gig speeds to its customers since around 2016. Adair said the company had been offering fiber before, but increased to gig speeds because it realized that provided the best customer experience. Faster speeds “actually gets them off of the network quicker, because if you’re just delivering five or ten Mbps, they’re tying up other parts of the network. So, when we raise the speeds, people get their stuff done in several seconds and they’re off the network. Gig speeds free up our network and benefit everyone.” With fiber, Adair said, the company now can provide 10 Gbps to the home, if a customer wants it.

The main fiber installation is nearing completion in Clay City and Wabash will be spending the next several months splicing fiber and doing direct home installations.

As for the years ahead, Adair said he will be talking with his board about applying for Connect Illinois Round 3 funds, as the company makes decisions about where to further its fiber reach.

Interested in applying for Connect Illinois Round 3 funding? Updated information can be found here: [Connect Illinois Broadband Grants](#)

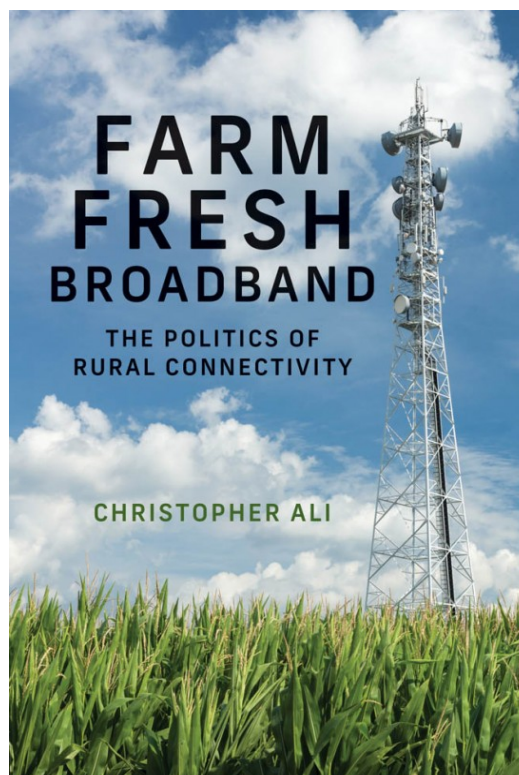
## **New Publication on Rural Broadband**

Former Benton Institute Faculty Research Fellow Dr. Christopher Ali has published *Farm Fresh Broadband: The Politics of Rural Connectivity*. The book is an analysis of the failure of U.S. broadband policy to solve the rural/urban digital divide and suggests the necessity for a new national rural broadband plan. Ali examines how broadband policies are enacted and implemented, explores business models for broadband providers, surveys the technologies of rural broadband, and offers case studies of broadband use in the rural Midwest.

Ali argues that rural broadband policy is both broken and incomplete: broken because it lacks

coordinated federal leadership and incomplete because it fails to recognize the important roles of communities, cooperatives, and local providers in broadband access. He proposes democratizing policy architecture for rural broadband, modeling it after the wiring of rural America for electricity and telephony. Subsidies should be equalized, not just going to big companies. The result would be a multistakeholder system, guided by thoughtful public policy and funded by public and private support.

Last week, Benton Institute for Broadband & Society Executive Director Adrienne Furniss introduced Ali who spoke at the Blandin Foundation's Annual Broadband Conference.



[Session Notes & Recording](#)

## Upcoming Webinars

- The National Telecommunications and Information Administration is holding a [series of webinars](#) on its broadband programs (Broadband Infrastructure, Tribal Broadband Connectivity, and Connecting Minority Communities) through October.

## News

Oct 22 | [USDA Secretary Vilsack Announces \\$1.15 Billion Rural Broadband Infrastructure Investments During Tours in Illinois](#) (USDA)

Oct 22 | [Philadelphia and the Digital Divide: Substantial Progress Since 2019, but Work Still to be Done](#) (Benton Institute)

Oct 15 | [The Digital Divide is Real—And It's Sexist](#) (Benton Institute)

Oct 12 | [Consolidated Communications Gigabit Fiber Internet Coming to More Illinois Locations](#) (Consolidated Communications)

## Resources

[Illinois Office of Broadband Homepage](#)  
[Broadband READY NOFO \(11/8 Deadline\)](#)  
[Connect Illinois Computer Equity Network](#)  
[NTIA Broadband Infrastructure Program – Request for Information](#)  
[NTIA Connecting Minority Communities](#)  
[Emergency Broadband Benefit Program \(FCC\)](#)  
See Fiscal Recovery Funds by: [State](#) | [County](#) | [City](#)  
[Developing Broadband Leadership Webinar Series](#)  
[Illinois Broadband Map](#)  
[Illinois Broadband Lab](#)

For questions, email [broadband@illinois.gov](mailto:broadband@illinois.gov)

Looking for more broadband policy news? The Benton Institute for Broadband & Society offers a free, reliable, and non-partisan daily digest that curates and distributes news related to universal broadband. You can [subscribe to this service here](#) to learn how broadband delivers opportunities and strengthens communities.

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