

# Serving Rural Communities



A guide that shares effective digital inclusion practices in serving rural communities

## OVERVIEW

People who live in rural areas are one of the eight Covered Populations defined in the [State Digital Equity Planning Grant Notice of Funding Opportunity \(NOFO\)](#).<sup>1</sup> According to the NOFO, a “rural area” means any area other than (1) A city or town that has a population of greater than 50,000 inhabitants; (2) Any urbanized area contiguous and adjacent to a city or town that has a population of greater than 50,000 inhabitants; and (3) In the case of a grant or direct loan, a city, town, or incorporated area that has a population of greater than 20,000 inhabitants.

**20.1%**



Of the population lives in rural communities in the U.S and PR according to the U.S. Census Bureau.<sup>2</sup>

**46.7%**



Of all people living in rural areas are in the Census-defined South region<sup>3</sup>

**54%**



Of Native American & Alaska Native people live in rural areas<sup>4</sup>

## DIGITAL EQUITY OUTCOMES

In the State Digital Equity Plans, States must present measurable objectives for documenting and promoting digital inclusion for each Covered Population in that State. These measurable objectives should impact and interact with the State’s equity outcomes named in NOFO Section IV.C.1.b.i.3. Examples of investments in digital inclusion that align with the [equity outcomes](#)<sup>5</sup> are listed below.

Digital Equity Outcomes	Digital Inclusion Activities
 <b>Health</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ability to participate in video/streaming telehealth visits to avoid travel and stress of distance to health facilities</li><li>• Reduced social isolation and improvements in mental health</li></ul>
 <b>Essential Services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ability to pay bills and apply for benefit programs online</li><li>• Improved disaster resiliency that require digital skills (i.e., applying for aid and getting connected with disaster relief organizations)</li></ul>
 <b>Employment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Opportunity to start a business and increases in entrepreneurial endeavors for women</li><li>• Precision agriculture to improve agricultural productivity, efficiency, and sustainability and decrease food insecurity</li><li>• Access and ability to apply to remote job opportunities</li></ul>
 <b>Education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Improved access to educational opportunities including AI, 3D printing, coding, STEM, etc.</li><li>• Improved distance learning opportunities for post-secondary and adult learners</li></ul>
 <b>Civic &amp; Social Engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Increased access to voting information (polling locations, absentee ballots, early voting)</li><li>• Learn digital skills for mis-/dis-information</li><li>• Participating in the U.S. Census to better inform government of rural needs</li></ul>



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## GETTING STARTED

As a Covered Population, rural populations experience unique barriers to digital equity such as lower broadband speeds, fewer/farther public digital resources including libraries and non-profits, and increased time and costs for transportation to access such resources.

Identifying a digital equity approach that serves rural populations in your state starts with:

### U.S. Department of Agriculture Resources

➤ [e-Connectivity Toolkit](#)<sup>6</sup>

A guide that contains broadband resources for rural America such as grants, loans, organizations, and a resource matrix.

➤ [Resource Guide for Rural Workforce Development](#)<sup>7</sup>

A U.S Department of Agriculture resource guide outlines programs and services that support rural workforce development.

➤ [Distance Learning and Telemedicine \(DLT\) Program](#)<sup>8</sup>

This competitive grant program helps rural communities use advanced telecommunications technology to connect to each other - and the world - overcoming the effects of remoteness and low population density. This page contains a [map](#) of the most recent grant receipts.

➤ [Rural Partners Network](#)<sup>9</sup>

The Rural Partners Network (RPN) is an all-of-government program that helps rural communities find resources and funding to create jobs, build infrastructure, and support long-term economic stability on their own terms.

! Some rural areas may also qualify as [BEAD high-cost locations](#)<sup>10</sup> as defined by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration. Households in BEAD high-cost areas are eligible for an increased [Affordable Connectivity Program](#)<sup>11</sup> subsidy of \$75. ISPs serving the high-cost area must be approved by the FCC to offer the enhanced ACP benefit.

## Understanding the Rural Digital Divide

### [Rural Imperatives in Broadband Adoption and Digital Inclusion](#)<sup>12</sup>



NTCA–The Rural Broadband Association report explores broadband adoption rates among various demographics, presents benefits of broadband adoption within the context of various use sectors, and suggests an analytical construct for promoting greater broadband adoption and digital inclusion in rural spaces.



### [Rural Communities & Digital Device Ownership](#)<sup>13</sup>

This brief from Digitunity aims to raise awareness of the complexities of device ownership of rural communities and proposes recommendations to consider.



### [Rural Data Explorer](#)<sup>14</sup> and [Am I Rural? Tool](#)<sup>15</sup>

The Rural Health Information Hub includes tools that can filter for data for different indicators (i.e., health disparities, health workforce, demographics) nationally and state-wide and determine whether a specific location is considered rural.



### [Twice Invisible: Understanding Rural Native America](#)<sup>16</sup>

This research note by the First Nations Development Institute provides key statistics for rural Native Americans and Alaska Natives and details the unique implications of these figures for Tribal Entities.



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INTERNET  
FOR ALL

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## Identifying Rural Areas and Partner Organizations

 [Rural Health Resources for States](#)<sup>17</sup> | [Rural Health Resources for Tribal Entities](#)<sup>18</sup>

The Rural Health Information Hub's State Guides includes information, resources, organizations, tools, news, program examples, and more for each state and Tribal health.

 [College Partners Directory](#)<sup>19</sup>

The National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) in partnership with Land-Grant University (LGU) System holds a directory of land-grant universities.

 [National Registry of Cooperative Extension Programs](#)<sup>20</sup>

The Extension Foundation uses a registry tool supported in part by New Technologies for Ag Extension grant that contains projects, programs, or curriculum for extensions nationwide.

## Leveraging toolkits and guides for rural communities

 [Rural Community Health Toolkit](#)<sup>21</sup>

The Rural Health Information Hub provides a toolkit on how to start, implement and evaluate a rural community health program.

 [Rural America Placemaking Toolkit](#)<sup>22</sup>

The Rural America Placemaking Toolkit is a resource guide that contains information on what is placemaking, placemaking activities, projects, and success stories across rural America. It also includes a directory of organizations that provide placemaking technical assistance.

 [A Regional Multistate Collaboration Toolkit](#)<sup>23</sup>

The Appalachian Regional Initiative for Stronger Economies (ARISE) toolkit provides case studies, insights and takeaways from Practitioners, and resources that can be leveraged to build successful initiatives.

## Leveraging Existing Examples

 [Grow South Dakota](#)<sup>24</sup>

Grow South Dakota's Digital Literacy program offers individuals free options to renew or expand their knowledge of the digital world. There are multiple courses to fit a variety of needs including a one-on-one basis, if preferred.

 [NC State Extension Digital Skills Training Programs](#)<sup>25</sup>

NC State Extension received a \$1.33 million grant from the North Carolina Department of Information Technology to expand its digital skills training programs, including placing full-time digital skills educators in county offices across the state. 80% of North Carolina counties are considered rural or rural in character.<sup>26</sup> ([North Carolina](#))

 [Purple Mai'a](#)<sup>27</sup>

The Purple Mai'a Foundation, a Hawaiian technology education nonprofit, has a number of youth education (Kaikaina), innovation (Mālama), and workforce development (Hiapo) programs for Native Hawaiians. Their work is grounded in culturally specific Native Hawaiian values and ancestral technologies.

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## Digital Navigators Help Oklahoma Residents Break Through 'Digital Divide'

One individual came into the Okemah, Oklahoma, library because he needed help learning how to post items like homemade crafts and fresh produce to the Facebook marketplace. In Pauls Valley, a woman said she was no longer afraid to use her phone and its many functions. Both visits took place during sessions with digital navigators at libraries in rural communities across Oklahoma.

A partnership between Oklahoma State University and AARP Oklahoma has made reaching rural residents and sharing information and knowledge about digital connectivity easier with the help of digital navigators. These are trained local residents who have been selected to help people learn digital literacy. It can mean everything from how to access Broadband Internet to setting up a Facebook account to how to get an email address and receive email.

As more business and more life takes place online, and the pandemic continues to change how organizations go about sharing information through online spaces, learning how to navigate the Internet is critical to remaining in communication with loved ones, to be able to apply for jobs, and more.

“We had the idea that we would go into rural places that were struggling with connectivity, and partner with their rural libraries, to give them hotspot devices to help them with the connectivity situation,” said Brian Whitacre, a professor of Agricultural Economics and Extension Specialist for Rural Economic Development Oklahoma State University Extension, in a zoom interview.

At the end of 2021, the entities were able to pilot the digital navigator programs at five rural locations: Haskell, Blackwell, Okemah, Davis and Pauls Valley.

“Our issues are making sure older Oklahomans and Americans are able to use telehealth, and they can connect with their loved ones for preventing isolation, but also their job opportunities. If you don’t have high speed internet, you can’t apply for jobs, you can’t connect with your loved ones far away,” Sean Voskuhl, AARP Oklahoma State Director, told *The Daily Yonder*. In rural parts of Oklahoma, the rate of availability for Broadband is behind the national average, Whitacre noted.

“In our rural areas, we’re very far behind the national average in terms of what’s available to us. And of course, that does translate to who actually has connectivity in their house, who can afford to pay for connection,” he said. “And so what I think this program is more focused on is improving that adoption rate, getting people to have actual connectivity in their house. There is some other work in the state going on. It’s trying to get at this availability question. And, of course, there’s money coming down from the federal government for infrastructure investment as well.”

Both Voskuhl and Whitacre noted the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), which replaces the Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) program. The ACP provides \$30 per month to eligible households. The amount remains at \$75 for households on Tribal lands.

Though the pilot program between OSU and AARP ended at the end of 2021, both men said they believe there will be possibilities for collaboration and work in this field going forward, particularly with the Digital Equity Act, a provision of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. The Digital Equity Act will provide \$2.75 billion over five years to promote digital equity, literacy, and inclusion initiatives at the local, state and national levels.

For libraries, this could mean offering skills classes in digital literacy to community members and adopting workforce advancement programs, among other things.

“I hope it’s a blueprint for not only Oklahoma but other states too,” said Voskuhl.

*This story was written by Kristi Eaton and originally published in *The Daily Yonder* under a creative commons license and follows *The Daily Yonder’s* republishing guidelines.<sup>29</sup>*

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Closing the digital and economic divides in rural America



Staunton, VA sits at the crossroads of two interstates, 81 and 64, which carry traffic north and south through the center of the valley and east across the Piedmont to Virginia's state capitol, Richmond. With a 2017 population of nearly 25,000, Staunton is the first stop on my 10-city tour to investigate the effects of being digitally invisible in a highly connected, global society. This photo essay confirms that rural areas like Staunton are in critical need of high-speed broadband networks for economic and talent development, especially as access to technology has become the lever to avert the expected outcomes of poverty and social isolation, at least for vulnerable populations.

Digital exclusion comes with costs. Rural residents are at risk of being marginalized in an information-rich economy where digital transactions and commercial sharing services are becoming more relevant.

Already facing diminished life chances, people with lower incomes, people of color, the elderly, and foreign-born migrants in rural areas run the risk of being on the wrong side of the digital divide that further exacerbates their economic, social, and political marginalization.

While Congress has recently called for increased funding earmarked for rural broadband infrastructure, Staunton businesses, entrepreneurs, and residents must work with what they have now. It's expensive to bring high-speed broadband networks to rural America and the private sector has not been fully incentivized to accelerate deployment, especially in areas where the return on investment is not as obvious.

This is where the personal stories of Staunton residents reveal the real costs of not being online.

With her artistic tattoos and bright eyes under wide-rimmed glasses, Staunton resident Chris Cain is a bit more optimistic about why rural areas need faster and more resilient high-speed broadband networks. She founded the Staunton Innovation Hub (iHub), a new co-working space for small businesses and entrepreneurs that is currently under construction. A former resident of Richmond and a graduate of Virginia Commonwealth University, she has spent her career helping low-income women become successful entrepreneurs. "Broadband is the critical link for this space and city to be successful," Cain told me. "More people will come to this community if we had better access to high-speed broadband."

The iHub will also share space with two other organizations: The Staunton Creative Community Fund and the LGBT Technology Partnership and Institute. LGBT Tech's mission is to bridge the technology gap for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth, and to provide social services to LGBTQ youth and adults who are homeless or have become estranged from their families after coming out.

Chris Wood, who is the co-founder of LGBT Tech, reflected on why he chose Staunton as the headquarters for his organization. "Having access to technology gives LGBTQ youth and adults the ability to fend for themselves when it comes to finding social services, like housing and food," said Wood, who commutes each week to Washington, D.C. to advocate on behalf of his constituents. "It's already tough being gay, but when you're LGBTQ in rural Staunton that's another story," he added. Wood is working on a city-wide initiative to make Staunton a gigabyte city by accelerating fiber availability to downtown businesses and just about every home and farm community surrounding the city.



*Chris Cain, founder of the Staunton Innovation Hub*

*This story was excerpted from an article by Nicol Turner Lee and was published by the Brookings Institute.*

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