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Email us at info@nextcenturycities.org

March 31, 2021
Digital Equity for Hawaii
With Burt Lum, Strategic Officer for the Hawaii Broadband Initiative

As an unfunded initiative, the Hawaii Broadband Initiative stopped and started numerous times since its inception twelve years ago. Burt Lum started in his role as Strategic Officer in 2018 and hopes to implement lasting change.

When Lum joined the Hawaii Broadband Initiative, one of his main objectives was to get funding appropriated from the state legislature for a carrier-neutral cable landing, which was identified as a key piece of infrastructure. After spending a fair amount of time to get Hawaii lawmakers to support the appropriation, the legislative proposal was unsuccessful. Nonetheless, the exercise sparked new and immediate interest in improving connectivity for Hawaii residents.

Like most cities across the country saw firsthand, the week of March 23, 2020, changed everything.

With schools and businesses shut down, the importance of reliable, high-speed Internet and digital skills training moved to the forefront. The same week that Hawaii’s lockdown began, Lum pulled together the Broadband Hui, named after the Hawaiian word for bringing people together.

For the Hawaii Broadband Initiative, as Lum states, “2020 was a building year. The Broadband Hui is a grassroots community gathering of broadband stakeholders.”

Read more from Lum about Hawaii’s work here.
Michael McDonald, the Territorial Planner for the Department of Commerce in American Samoa, has been a leading force in the fight to close the digital divide in their community. He understands that widespread connectivity is directly tied to bolstering the local economy. While broadband improvements have always been a hot topic, McDonald explained that COVID-19 “magnified the need for quality broadband and everything that comes with being able to function remotely.”

Read more about McDonald’s work to connect American Samoa [here].
Connecting Communities in Deep East Texas

With Lonnie Hunt, Executive Director of the Deep East Texas Council of Governments

If you drift off of Interstate 45 in East Texas, you’ll find a region of natural resources, rich with national forests, picturesque landscapes, clean air, and freshwater. Communities are linked by a partnership in the Deep East Texas Council of Governments (DETCOG) as well as a shared frustration with not being able to get broadband Internet access for miles.

DETCOG is both a state regional planning commission and federal economic development district. In a region of 12 counties where approximately 385,000 residents are spread over 10,000 square miles, the Council helps to support 911 services, justice systems, and essential family and youth services. One of its most pressing tasks is finding a way to connect its residents and businesses with affordable and reliable broadband connectivity.

The residents that Lonnie Hunt, the Council’s Executive Director, serves are friends and neighbors. Hunt affectionately called them the friendliest in the country and said, “We have to do more than get broadband. We have to find a way to get to every household and every business connected.”

Read more here.
Increasing Resilience in the U.S. Virgin Islands

With Daryl Wade, CIO for the Virgin Island Next Generation Network

Daryl Wade, Chief Information Officer, for the Virgin Islands Next Generation Network (ViNGN) highlighted that “the islands were 96% back six months after the storm.” Unfortunately, he noted that while getting back online was a fairly quick process, there is still a long way to go before the islands can be confident that such a catastrophe will not reoccur. The FCC estimates that 100% of USVI residents have fixed broadband access, whereas BroadbandNow suggests that wired connections extend to only 62% of the islands.

Read more about resilience in the US Virgin Islands here.

About 1,100 miles Southeast of Florida and roughly 40 miles east of Puerto Rico, our fellow Americans live on a cluster of three main islands. The U.S. Virgin Islands – made up of Saint Croix, Saint John, and Saint Thomas – is also surrounded by 50 minor islands.

In 2017, Hurricanes Maria and Irma ravaged the Virgin Islands, leaving a majority of residents without power, water, or reliable communications infrastructure. Communications have been largely restored. However, four years later, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) still designates the area as an active disaster zone.
A Women's History Month Tribute to Commissioner Alexandra Fernandez Navarro

This Women's History Month, Next Century Cities celebrates Commissioner Alexandra Fernandez Navarro who is working to improve digital opportunities and broadband network resilience in Puerto Rico.

Similar to communities on the mainland, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the depravity of the digital divide. For many Puerto Ricans, working from home was simply impossible. Much needed access to telehealth was also remote.

When 36% of Puerto Rico residents live below the poverty line, fixed broadband access is a luxury. Cell phones are oftentimes the only way to get online. Many residents still do not have broadband access of any kind.

Her work ensures that policies aimed at closing the digital divide reflect the underrepresented people they are intended to serve. Read more about what she is doing to close the digital divide in Puerto Rico here.

Join Next Century Cities’ Executive Director, Francella Ochillo, and Libraries Without Borders’ Deputy Director Katherine Trujillo, for a 30 minute webinar with the Commissioner on Thursday, April 15th. Register here.
On March 11th, NCC penned a letter to President Joseph R. Biden and Vice President Kamala D. Harris urging their leadership on a National Broadband Strategy. The letter incorporated feedback from local officials and community leaders on what they need from the Biden-Harris Administration, the Federal Communications Commission, and other agencies. Here are the key takeaways and read our full letter [here](#).

- Local leaders nationwide called for higher broadband Internet speeds, lower prices, and improved service quality.
- Inaccurate mapping and gaps in broadband data collections are ongoing barriers that stand between communities and valuable funding opportunities.
- Nontraditional (municipal, coops, mesh, etc.) networks should be included in federal programs as they provide high quality, low-priced service options and help increase competition.
- The 25/3 Mbps broadband standard, established by the FCC’s 2015 Broadband Progress Report, is outdated.
- Local digital equity plans can inform a larger federal strategy aimed at ensuring that every resident has access to broadband access and digital tools.
- Telecommunications mergers and acquisitions have an impact on Internet prices and service quality.
- Making high speed affordable broadband for every citizen is as critical to our country’s future as making electricity available to everyone was in the 1930s.
- NCC’s network has valuable insights on how federal policies can empower community leaders, those closest to the residents they serve, with the tools they need to expand broadband access.
The Digital Divide Will Make Us Sicker

By Medvis Jackson

Roughly a year ago, epidemiologists and public health officials began to advise state and municipal governments to shut down parts of the economy in order to limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Today, the nation’s digital divide presents itself as a serious obstacle to general health and wellness with regards to critical healthcare services and the equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccinations.

Moreover, in a country in which 45% of residents suffer from at least one chronic disease, the pandemic has also created a need for increased telemedicine adoption, helping patients to consult with a doctor while limiting the risk of COVID-19 exposure. In response to this phenomena, local governments should leverage existing public WiFi access points and funding sources to help those who are offline to not only schedule vaccinations, but to ensure that they can benefit from virtual care.

Amidst the ongoing effort to make COVID-19 vaccines available, reports have emerged of persons who want the vaccine being unable to access it. 13-24% of the country’s households either lacking internet access of any sort or do not have in-home broadband connections.

Read more from Medvis here.
Broadband networks are part of the DNA of resilient communities. As evidenced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, reliable and high-speed connections are vital for education, health, safety, and economic development. Natural disasters pose ongoing threats to broadband networks across the country, which only underscores the importance of centering resiliency planning in broadband deployment strategies.

In *Communities Responding to Natural Disasters Through Network Resilience*, Ryan Johnston examines emergency response efforts in California, Puerto Rico, New York, Texas, and Louisiana. Building on local insights, Johnston explains:

It is time for federal entities to prioritize network resilience planning. Ensuring that citizens have the most basic form of access, even during natural disasters, will increase public safety and prevent much of the anxiety and fear felt by citizens when they cannot reach family, friends, or trusted sources of information during a crisis. Planning for the future is necessary and essential, especially as weather conditions grow more extreme and, nationwide, residents have become increasingly reliant on broadband connectivity for key information.

DOWNLOAD THE PAPER HERE.
Speaker Heastie and Science & Technology Committee Chair Steven Otis announced that the New York Assembly 2021-22 Budget includes a new statewide $15 million Digital Inclusion Grant Program to assist local digital equity efforts. Read more about these developments in New York here.

Baltimore City Council members Zeke Cohen, Kris Burnett, and Ryan Dorsey wrote a letter calling on the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to set up a commission to investigate “digital redlining.” Read more from the letter signed by over 100 officials that asks the Commission to re-establish its Title II authority.

The Federal Communications Commission has announced their spending plan for CARES Act and Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 funding. Agency plans outline how the Commission will spend approximately $5.6 billion on a variety of programs including telehealth, the Broadband DATA Act, the Emergency Broadband Connectivity Fund, and the Secure and Trusted Communications Network Act. Review details here.
NEXT CENTURY CITIES JOINS LETTER ASKING CONGRESS TO WEIGH IN ON THE 3.45 – 3.55 GHZ AUCTION
On March 3rd, Next Century Cities joined a letter asking Congress to encourage the FCC to consider a set of licensing procedures that would increase competition, lower costs for prospective bidders, and ensure that 5G connectivity continues to be made available to those who could benefit the most.

NCC JOINS LETTER ENCOURAGING GREATER LOCAL AUTHORITY FOR MUNICIPAL BROADBAND INTERNET SERVICE IN IDAHO
NCC signed onto a letter supporting Idaho’s Senate Bill 1149 which encourages the state legislature to clear the way for municipal solutions of all sorts so that communities can address connectivity issues that have persisted for decades.

NCC STEADILY INCREASES ENGAGEMENT WITH STATE BROADBAND AUTHORITIES
Over the past year, Next Century Cities (NCC) has increased its outreach to state leaders and doubled down on participation in state level regulatory proceedings. In each of these projects, NCC has elevated local perspectives on broadband policy, highlighting the critical need for processes that invite local officials to the table and provide opportunities for meaningful local policy recommendations. Learn about our advocacy in California, Idaho, Illinois, New York, and Ohio.

NCC JOINS NLC’S CONFERENCE TO DISCUSS RESOURCES FOR BROADBAND AND DIGITAL EQUITY PROGRAMS
Next Century Cities’ Executive Director, Francella Ochillo, participated in a March 8th panel discussion, "Finding Federal Funding for Digital Equity in Your Community," alongside the National Digital Inclusion Alliance’s Angela Siefer, and U.S. Department of Education’s Sara Trettin. Susan Norton, Chief of Staff for the City of Fayetteville, Arkansas, moderated the discussion with approximately 80 local leaders.

NCC and Allies Reiterate How the Verizon-TracFone Merger Could Shift the Entire Wireless Market and Impact Lifeline
recently, NCC joined Public Knowledge, Access Humboldt, Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, and Open Technology Institute in a FCC filing encouraged the FCC to open an official docket on the matter and solicit public input on the merger.
NCC PRESENTS ON HOW THE DIGITAL DIVIDE IMPACTS PRIVACY RIGHTS ONLINE
On March 12, 2021, Next Century Cities’ Executive Director, Francella Ochillo, participated in Silicon Flat Iron’s Privacy at the Margins conference, a series of panel discussions that explored how surveillance regimes have engendered disproportionate harm to people who are new to the digital ecosystem.

EMERGENCY BROADBAND BENEFIT EXPLAINER FOR PROVIDERS
Policy Counsel for Federal Programs, Ryan Johnston, created an explainer for the non-traditional providers interested in the Emergency Broadband Benefit program.

NEXT CENTURY CITIES REITERATES WHY NET NEUTRALITY PROTECTIONS ARE AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT OF UNIVERSAL BROADBAND STRATEGIES
On March 18th, the Federal Communications Bar Association sponsored a continuing legal education course entitled, “Net Neutrality 101: A Technical and Policy Overview.” Francella Ochillo, Next Century Cities Executive Director, explained that, with affordability being a dominant concern for broadband adoption, the absence of net neutrality protections contributes to the disparity between people who can afford high-quality service and those who cannot.

The National Telecommunications and Information Administration Hosts Webinar on Three New Broadband Funding Programs
The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) received funding from the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 for broadband deployment grant programs. The statute tasks NTIA with managing three new funding initiatives to support states, Tribes, and municipalities.

Here’s What the American Rescue Plan Could Do to Support Broadband In Your Community
President Biden announced his support for the American Rescue Plan (“Plan” or “ARP”) in January 2021, and signed it into law on March 12th. Provisions impact over a dozen issue areas including state and local aid, direct payments to citizens, and support for education, public health, housing and, importantly, broadband.
As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to necessitate distance learning, telework, and reliance on telehealth, broadband connectivity is essential. For those in low-income households, maintaining an Internet connection means choosing between other necessities. Congress created the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program (“EBBP”) to address affordability, one of the main barriers to adoption.

This program, run by the Federal Communications Commission ("FCC"), offers a monthly discount to offset the cost of broadband Internet subscriptions, helping those that are struggling with connectivity with pathways to stay connected. In addition, the program provides a one-time discount on a laptop, desktop, or tablet computer. The Emergency Broadband Benefit.

RESOURCES

- FCC information and eligibility guidelines for providers
- FCC outreach partner information and eligibility guidelines for consumers
- NCC: A Quick Look for Consumers
- NCC: Explainer for Consumers (pdf)
- NCC: Resources for Nontraditional Providers
- NCC’s Emergency Broadband Benefit Explainer for Nontraditional Providers (pdf)
- National Digital Inclusion Alliance’s Emergency Broadband Benefit Website
- Op-Ed: The Emergency Broadband Benefit cannot be overlooked (March 29, 2021)
COMMUNITIES RESPONDING TO NATURAL DISASTERS THROUGH NETWORK RESILIENCE

"Broadband networks are part of the DNA of resilient communities. As evidenced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, reliable and high-speed connections are vital for education, health, safety, and economic development. Natural disasters pose ongoing threats to broadband networks across the country, which only underscores the importance of centering resiliency planning in broadband deployment strategies.

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GUIDE TO FEDERAL BROADBAND FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES IN THE U.S.

"This guide offers an overview of federal funding options that could provide financial support to Tribal, state, and local governments and utilities in their efforts to expand broadband infrastructure. We have also included the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) programs because of their wide applicability; while technically a federal-state partnership, ARC offers funding in 13 states.

Varying dramatically in size, these funding opportunities target a wide variety of deployment scenarios and end users. The programs encompass infrastructure buildout, service subsidies, and technical planning assistance."
GRANT FUNDING | Wisconsin’s Lifeline Outreach Grant Program is accepting applications through April 5th at 4:00pm CST. The purpose of the Lifeline Outreach Grant Program is to assist low-income customers to obtain affordable access to essential telecommunications through the Lifeline program which provides a discount on essential telecommunication service. The program is organized around two broad goal areas. 1) Outreach and Education aims to increase the knowledge of, and participation in, the Lifeline program. 2) Research and Resource, focuses on using research to better identify barriers to access. The application materials may be found here. Up to $250,000 may be awarded. Please contact Holly O’Higgins, USF Director, at holly.ohiggins@wisconsin.gov with any questions. Find guidelines here.

GRANT FUNDING | Wisconsin’s Nonprofit Access Grant Program is also accepting applications through April 5th at 4:00pm CST. This grant program will provide partial funding for programs and projects that facilitate affordable access to telecommunications for low-income customers, customers with disabilities, and those customers in areas of the state that have a relatively high cost of telecommunication services. 501(c)3 nonprofit organizations are eligible to apply and require a 25% match. The application materials may be found here and all applications. A total of up to $500,000 may be awarded. Please contact Billy Mauldin, TEPP Director at PSCUSFNonProfitGrants@wisconsin.gov with any questions. Eligibility requirements are here.

GRANT FUNDING | The American Heart Association called for applications. Voices for Healthy Kids funds coordinated state, local, and tribal public policy issue advocacy campaigns focused on access to healthy food and active living. Read short-form grant application requirements here.

GRANT FUNDING | The Office of Academic Integration at Cornell requests applications for 2021 Multi-Investigator Seed Grants. For 2021 deadlines and application links, view the Multi-Investigator Seed Grant RFA. Get the details here.

RFP | The City of New York released A Universal Solicitation for Broadband Request for Proposals to implement the NYC Internet Master Plan. It invites ISPs and broadband infrastructure companies to create new affordable broadband service options, leveraging up to 100,000 City-owned assets (e.g. rooftops, rooms, and poles) and focusing particularly on neighborhoods prioritized by the Task Force on Racial Inclusion and Equity. Read more here.
The NSF Partnerships for Innovation (PFI) Program offers researchers the opportunity to transform new knowledge into societal benefits through translational research and technology development efforts which catalyze partnerships to accelerate innovations that address significant societal needs.

- Deadlines: Internal Submission Deadline—Wednesday, May 5, 2021; Funding Organization’s Deadline—Wednesday, July 14, 2021
- Anticipated award amount: PFI-TT up to $250,000 for 18–24 months. PFI-RP up to $550,000 for 36 months.

**Merit is looking for stars for its Digital Inclusion Youtube Series.**

Merit is developing an informational YouTube video series we have lovingly deemed “The Moonshot Minutes.” Their goal is to provide practical, easy to follow, basic internet setup and usage guidance to end-users. We want you to help us achieve this goal. If you are interested in recording and submitting a 3–5 minute video, please contact ryfuller@merit.edu.

**Oldham County, Kentucky is hiring a Broadband Manager.**

Oldham County Fiscal Court is accepting applications for a Broadband Development Coordinator. This position within the Engineering Department will work closely with outside contractors to implement the extension of broadband to under-served areas of the county. The position requires an energetic, self-starter with strong analytical and communications skills. Find more information [here](#).

**Pew Charitable Trusts is hiring.**

Pew Charitable Trusts is hiring an associate for its Broadband Initiative. The associate will provide research on budget, fiscal, economic, and other policies related to broadband issues at both the federal and state levels. Click [here](#) to apply.

**The Internet Society is accepting applications for its Fellowship Program.**

The Early Career Fellowship is designed to empower a new, diverse generation of Internet champions who will bridge the gap between technology and policy, and become advocates for the open, globally connected, secure and trustworthy Internet. Apply [here](#).

**Facebook is Adding Its Civil Rights and Public Policy Teams.**

As it builds out its civil rights team, infrastructure, and resources, Facebook is looking to hire:

- Manager, Voting Rights, Civil Rights
- Associate General Counsel, Civil Rights
- Public Policy Manager, Racial Equity