

Communities Unlimited

USDA Rural Development - Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge

INNOVATIVE PLACEMAKING TO CREATE QUALITY OF LIFE IN 3 RURAL COMMUNITIES IN Mississippi

Oct. 1, 2022 – September 30, 2024

FINAL REPORT

USDA funded the majority of this innovative effort along with contributions of several philanthropic partners, identified and coordinated by Communities Unlimited.

Communities Unlimited is a long-standing partner of USDA Rural Development serving many of our smallest and most rural communities throughout seven US Southern states.

CU's Approach to our work:

Through human connection and ingenuity combined with cutting-edge technology and expertise, we connect people to solutions that sustain healthy businesses, healthy communities, and healthy lives.

For more on CU see: <https://communitiesu.org/annual-report-2023/>

What was expected to happen?

Communities Unlimited (CU) planned to utilize its proven, applied leadership skill development approach to create a diverse and sustainable leadership team in each community that continues placemaking activities after the grant period is complete. CU planned to support the development of a comprehensive placemaking plan which will include a clear timeline and action plan to serve as an accountability tool for the new leadership team. CU planned to provide support around connecting with the newly formed Rural Partners Network to ensure training in securing federal dollars for placemaking strategies is a high priority.

Additional training around these federal and philanthropic funds to implement the placemaking strategies, and intentional engagement of the USDA RD staff are pivotal to implement the plan and will be coordinated by CU staff. CU will leverage its strong relationships with the Foundation for the Mid South, The Mississippi Alliance for Nonprofits and Philanthropy, local Planning and Development Districts, municipal governments and other community partners to: (1) Identify 3 diverse leadership teams, (2) enhance broadband access, equity and/or education in each community, (3) identify vacant and abandoned properties for pocket parks and community garden enhancements, (4) identify potential recreational spaces, and (5) support small business solutions that enhance quality of life including potential transportation options in the communities through technical assistance and capital. Impact will be measured qualitatively to determine a mindset shift about the quality of life and quantitatively by measuring the (1) increase in number of households with access to adequate and/or affordable broadband options (2) number of properties/places improved, (3) dollars secured for placemaking and (4) quality of life businesses started.

What actually occurred?

Creation of **diverse, inclusive community leadership teams** who are not only the “usual suspects” and not only elected officials or staff is a non-negotiable for CU in our Community Sustainability work. That said, it is not easy to form quickly, and for this staff that was a part of the learning curve. This is important because it brings greater talents, perspectives and engagement; but also critically because it builds networks and relationships across economic, ethnic, age and social groups to create new local paths for success, employment, and entrepreneurial and capital connections. In a sense, this part of the work in a sense, is both the path and destination.

CS staff also had the unique opportunity to work from the beginning with the USDA Rural Partners Network. If not for the relationships developed with the RPN staff, our staff would not have been as successful as they were. Our team feel that underserved communities were really given an advocate through RPN.

COAHOMA

In Coahoma, there were several highlights of the work within this community. What stuck out for staff first was the way they were welcomed into the community. Their spirit and the love and desire to better their town amazed everyone who was brought into the work there. The relationships established there were able to give us a “jumpstart” on other opportunities for the small, underserved communities such as the Community Change Grant. The second highlight as far as getting the actual work was the Cooking Matters program. It was well attended, and it showed people that they can cook healthy. It also “normalized” Mississippi State Extension coming in and giving demonstrations. The broadband team’s work was also empowering in the space as it allowed community members to better understand the truth behind the numbers that get thrown around related to broadband expansion. Coahoma having its own plan and analysis educated not only the municipal leaders but their constituents

HOLLANDALE

In Hollandale, a highlight there was seeing two racially diverse community organizations coming together as part of my leadership team and seeing them build relationships and make decisions together. The team learned to believe that great things can happen to Hollandale. Although we did not locate the funds to complete the project, we brought the groups together to have many conversations about the renovation of the ballpark, with a result of the mayor locating funds to initiate the revitalization of the park. Another highlight was the securing of funds to initiate community engagement activities in discussion on expanding and improving the Hollandale Rail Trail. Staff was able to build upon existing relationships and utilize a team already established (with additional members as well!). Other resources that came into the community included Mississippi Brownfield project partners who have been and will continue conversations with the community about site eligibility.

GORE SPRINGS

In Gore Springs, the highlight came later in the project. I was able to connect them to the technical assistance expertise of our CU Broadband team, with whom they regularly meet. This team was the smallest with the most room for improving relationship and figuring out who they were as a community before embarking on any real project outcomes. While leaving them with a plan for both placemaking and broadband was important to the work the relationship of the team will be what outlives all of those markers. While the broadband team spent time within each community attending collaborations and researching to complete their individual community plans one example, Gore Springs, is included with this report.

What can be improved, and how?

Another challenge is to balance being sensitive and flexible to community priorities and demands on volunteer time, yet to also maintain consistent project delivery and schedule to build confidence and trust in community work that is new and unknown to most of the participants. While still being sensitive to the community, it is important to advocate for the importance of maintaining adequate regular structure.

Community specific, In Gore Springs, the team wished they had been able to “read” the community more accurately to identify the members of a broader leadership team. A great lesson learned since was to pay even closer attention to the political dynamics in a community-not for it to drive the work, but just to be aware of it. Again, in Gore Springs the team would say that it was difficult at times to work with unincorporated communities in that there were not a lot of public spaces to work with, or public officials (except for county supervisors) to make decisions in the community.

Advice to other organizations planning to similar projects:

- A diverse and inclusive community leadership or visioning team is a must.
- These principles from the WealthWorks model are good for consideration even if using other models for organizing and community work. We returned to these several times with each Community Leadership Team:



CS & WealthWorks Principles

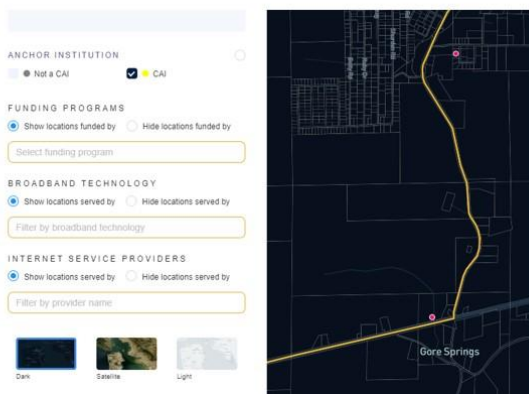
#1 – **Create wealth**, broadly defined, and aspire to do no harm.

#2 – Root wealth in local people, places and firms through **local ownership, control and influence.**



#3 – Build **lasting livelihoods** by intentionally including people and firms on the economic margins.

Community Anchor Institutions (CAI)



- Schools
- Libraries
- Health care
- Public Safety
- Higher education
- Public housing organizations
- Community support organizations facilitating broadband use by vulnerable populations (i.e. senior centers, job training, summer camps, etc.)

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Resources

Mississippi Broadband Office

Housed under the Department of Finance and Administration, it is called the **Broadband Expansion and Accessibility of Mississippi (BEAM)** office

Sally Burchfield Doty, Director

Website:

<https://www.beam.ms.gov/>

Email:

<https://www.beam.ms.gov/contact-us>

Phone: (601) 359-5029

Address: 501 North West Street,
1201 Woolfolk Bldg., Jackson, MS
39201

Digital Literacy Resources

Free Online Classes

Public Library Association, Digital Learn platform offers online courses—available in both English and Spanish
<https://www.digitalllearn.org/>

AARP – Classes for Seniors

Senior Planet tech Ready Classes:
<https://seniorplanet.org/digitalskillsready/>

Digital Literacy Resources

Digital literacy training modules containing lesson plans, workbooks, activity worksheets, and resources. Digital Literacy Training Toolkit:

<https://www.tsl.texas.gov/workskills>

Northstar Digital Literacy:

<https://www.digitalliteracyassessments.org/>

Broadband Funding Resources

Interactive BroadbandUSA Funding Guide:
https://broadbandusa.ntia.doc.gov/sites/default/files/2023-07/FY23_BroadbandUSA_Federal_Funding_Interactive_Guide_071323.pdf

BroadbandUSA Funding website:

<https://broadbandusa.ntia.doc.gov/funding-programs>

Digital Equity Funding Programs

The **Digital Equity Act of 2021** funded planning for states to identify their Digital Equity challenges and propose solutions to address them. AR will have digital equity funds to address digital equity challenges starting around January 2025 and they will be able to create digital equity grant programs. Additionally, the NTIA will have a federal digital equity grant program that communities can apply for. We will know more about these programs within the next few months and communities should be getting ready now.

<https://broadbandusa.ntia.doc.gov/funding-programs/digital-equity-act-programs>

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Resources

Digital Equity Data Sources

Mapping Broadband Health in America platform, how broadband and health intersect: <https://www.fcc.gov/reports-research/maps/connect2health/>

National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) – Indicators of Broadband Need mapping tool: <https://bit.ly/4aQ7SLN>

<https://bit.ly/3VgdgST>

<https://bit.ly/3x6jZqj>

Microsoft Digital Equity Index: <https://bit.ly/3yTQysk>

Digit Equity Data Sources Cont.

Purdue Digital Divide Index: <https://bit.ly/3VfLBRU>

Digital Equity Act Covered Population Viewer: <https://bit.ly/4bMc1lv>

Social Vulnerability Index: <https://bit.ly/4aQATqL>

Census/NTIA Broadband Dashboard: <https://mtgis-portal.geo.census.gov/arcgis/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=233ad09d77e14150be143b9447ed5074>

Internet Affordability Resources

Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP):

FCC Overview: [fcc.gov/acp](https://www.fcc.gov/acp)

ACP Application portal: [getinternet.gov/apply](https://www.getinternet.gov/apply)

ACP Community Tool Kit of Promotional Tools:

[fcc.gov/acp-consumer-outreach-toolkit](https://www.fcc.gov/acp-consumer-outreach-toolkit)

Free and low-cost internet plans: [digitalinclusion.org/free-low-cost-internet-plans](https://www.digitalinclusion.org/free-low-cost-internet-plans)

Access to Devices Resources

PCs for People:

<https://www.pcsforpeople.org/>

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Contact Information



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Broadband Basics

Gore Springs, MS

USDA Broadband Technical Assistance Program
community meeting July 15, 2024

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WHAT IS BROADBAND?

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• **Broadband** just means “**high-speed internet.**”

• **It doesn't matter how you get it (wireless, fiber, cable, satellite) it just matters that it meets the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) minimum definition for speed.**

• **Up until recently, the FCC defined broadband as anything faster than 25 megabits per second (Mbps) download and 3 megabits per second (Mbps) upload (25/3), and many funding programs still use that speed threshold to determine grant eligibility, but the FCC recently raised the minimum standard for broadband to 100 Mbps download and 20 Mbps upload (100/20).**

Internet speed used to be determined in **kilobits per second (Kbps)**, now it is measured in **mega bits per second (Mbps)** and (hopefully one day) it will be measured in **giga bits per second (Gbps)**. Right now, most of rural America is below 1 Gigabit per second speed.

1 Gbps = 1,000 Mbps

Common rural internet packages are 1 Mbps, 10 Mbps, 25 Mbps, 100 Mbps.

Almost any metropolitan area has internet speeds of 100+ Mbps.

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Why Does Speed Matter?

TIME

Internet speed affects the time it takes it download a file.

- At 10 Mbps / 1 Mbps downloading a 2 GB file can take 30 minutes to download.
- At 25 Mbps / 3 Mbps it takes 11 minutes.
- At 1 Gbps it takes 17 seconds.

CAPACITY

Internet Speed affects the number of devices that can be connected at the same time.

- At 10 Mbps / 1 Mbps 1-2 devices can be connected at the same time.
- At 25 Mbps / 3 Mbps 3-5 devices.
- At 1 Gbps 10+ devices.

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Served, Unserved, Underserved



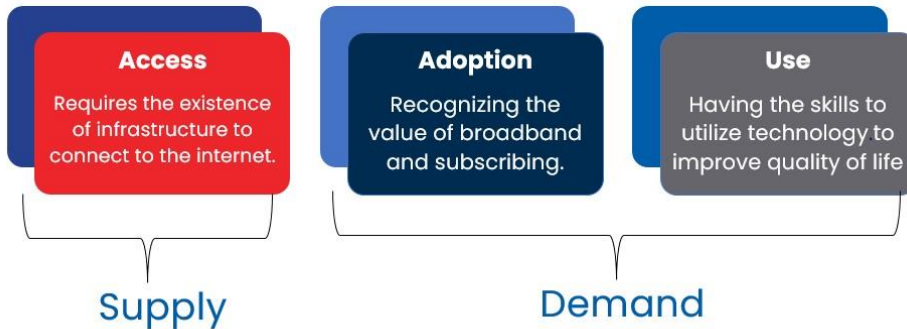
Unserved		Underserved		Served	
Technical Definition	A Family of Five	Technical Definition	A Family of Five	Technical Definition	A Family of Five
No access or access to less than 25 mbps download, 3 mbps upload, and 100 ms latency (25/3)	Up to 2 uses simultaneously	Lack access to 100 mbps download, 20mbps upload, and 100 ms latency (100/20)	Up to 3-4 uses simultaneously	100 mbps download & 20 mbps upload or greater	5+ uses simultaneously

Internet Uses

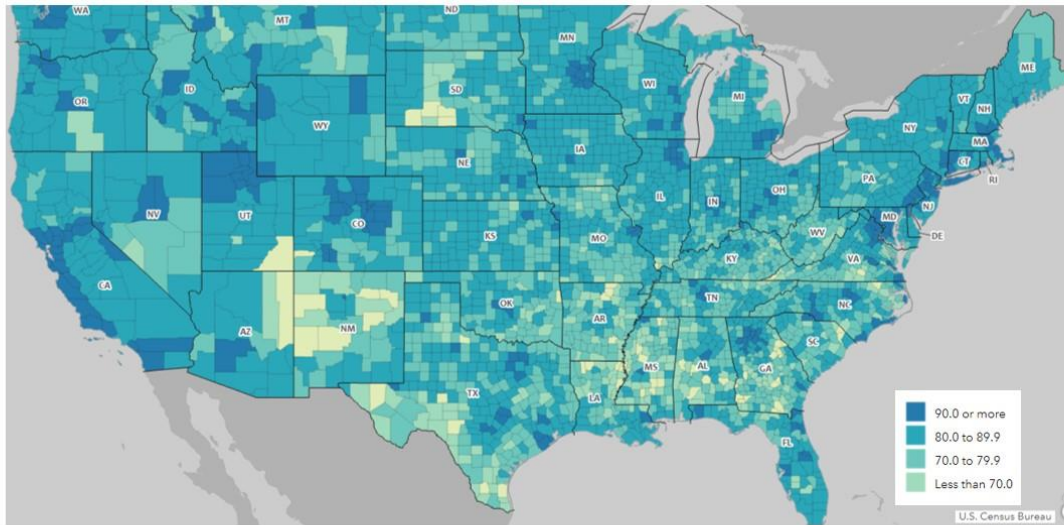
Learning	Health	Work	Government	Commerce	Community	Enrichment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homework • Tutoring • Group projects • Lecture VODs • Material distribution • Student tracking • Simulations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Telemedicine • Health monitoring • Public health awareness • Increase healthcare usage and capacity • Research distribution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work-from-anywhere • E-mailing & scheduling • Presentations, events, & conferences • Continuing education • Online job applications • VR training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smart grid applications • First responder communication • Benefit enrollment • Public alerts • Voter registration • Immunization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Home business • Online shopping • Web hosting • Advertising & growth • Customer service • Real-time metrics • Internet-of-Things 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication with friends and family • Social media • Cultural activities • Church services • Neighborhood coordination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diverse content creation • Media streaming • Gaming • News & events • Civic participation • General browsing



Core Components of Connectivity



Census/NTIA Broadband Dashboard



Percentage of households with a broadband subscription

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Internet Adoption and Use

When people do not subscribe to the internet even though it is available, it is often because:

- They cannot afford it.
- They do not see the value in it.
- They do not know how to use it.

Approximately 5% of US residents lack access to 25/3 Mbps broadband, and approximately 10% of US residents lack access to 100/20 Mbps broadband. **By comparison, approximately 23% of US residents do not subscribe to broadband at home.**

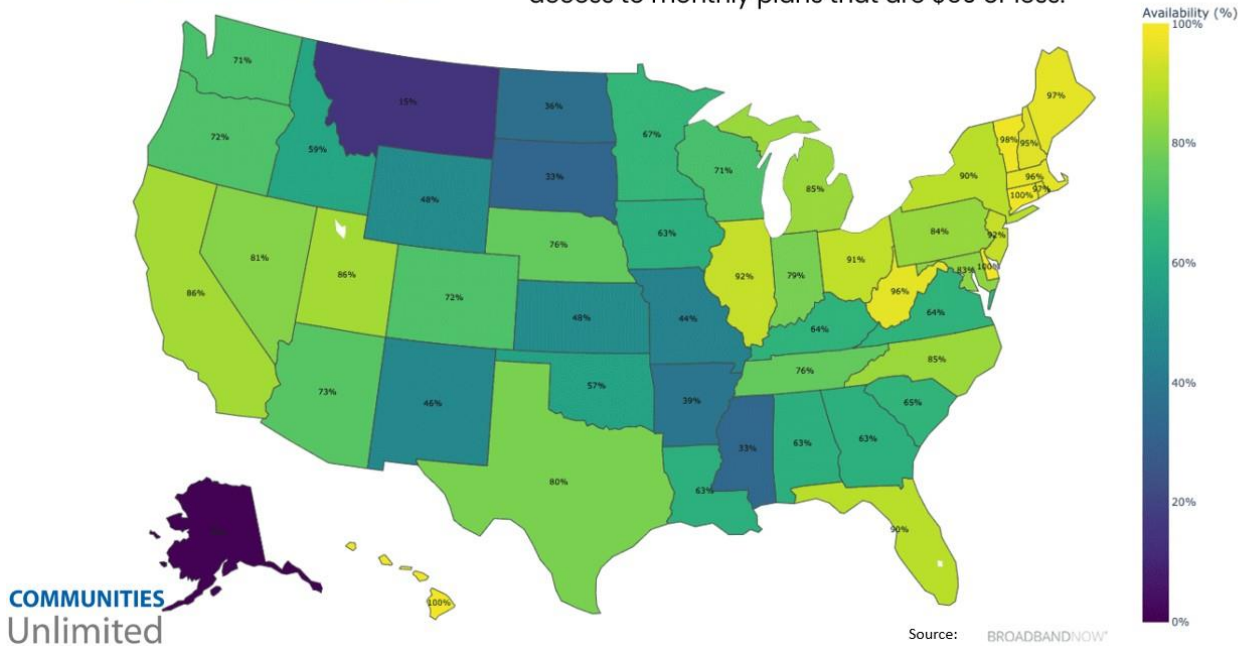
[A Handbook for the Effective Administration of State and Local Digital Equity Programs](#) By Paul Garnett and Deborah Lathen February 2023

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Affordability

Low-priced Broadband Availability by State

This map shows how much of the state's population has access to monthly plans that are \$50 or less.



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Core Components of Digital Equity

The **DIGITAL DIVIDE** is the gap between those who have affordable access, skills, and support to effectively engage online -- and those who do not.

DIGITAL LITERACY is the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills.

DIGITAL EQUITY is when ALL individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy, and economy.

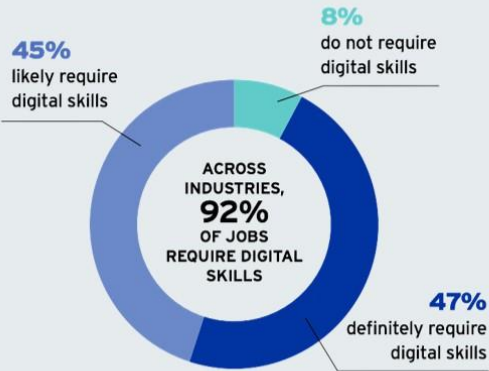
DIGITAL INCLUSION is ensuring that ALL individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, have access to and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)s.

The Digital Divide is the problem. Digital Equity is the goal. Digital Inclusion is how you get there.

Digital Literacy

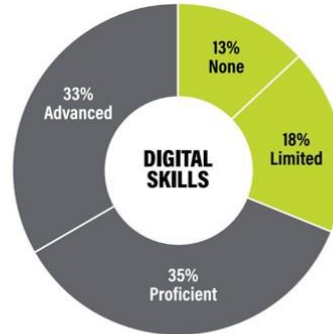
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92% of jobs require digital skills.



 NATIONAL SKILLS COALITION

Yet, **1/3** of American workers lack digital skills.




Currently employed US workers ages 16-64.
Source: OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) 2012-14.

People who qualify for jobs that require even one digital skill can earn an average of 23% more than those working in jobs requiring no digital skills – an increase of \$8,000 per year for an individual worker.

WHY DOES BROADBAND MATTER?

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Lack of broadband high-speed internet availability has been found to negatively impact a community's **"economic well-being,"** based on measures like growth of business, jobs and population.

- [Northeastern University Global Resilience Institute](#)

Photo by [Sersey Zuber](#) on [Unsplash](#)

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Broadband and Agriculture



A [2024] report by the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society estimates that, across 15 agricultural counties in Illinois, faster internet speeds could boost production of corn and soybeans by over \$100 million annually.

In Bond County, Illinois, the model estimates the county could have boosted corn and soybean production by a combined \$4.8 million in 2021 if they had expanded broadband internet access.

SOURCE: <https://dailyonder.com/how-much-money-can-broadband-bring-a-rural-community-by-some-estimates-millions/2024/01/30/>

Photo: [Randy Faith](#) - [Unsplash](#)

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Broadband Return on Investment (ROI)



TX: "A 2019 study done by the US Chamber and Amazon, found that increased access to digital tools in rural Texas would **increase annual sales of goods and services by \$6.6 billion dollars, add 23,000 jobs and increase wages statewide by \$962 million.**"

– Bryan Daniel Chairman of the Texas Workforce Commission

US: A 2021 Deloitte study found that **a 10-percentage-point increase** in broadband access in 2014 would have resulted in more than **875,000 additional US jobs and \$186 billion more dollars** in economic output in 2019.



A **10-percentage-point increase** of broadband expansion in 2016 would have resulted in more than **806,000 additional jobs in 2019, or an average annual increase of 269,000 jobs.**

"While the term good is subjective, many professionals consider a good ROI to be 10.5% or greater for investments in stocks. This number is the standard because it's the average return of the S&P 500, an index that serves as a benchmark of the overall performance of the U.S. stock market." <https://www.indeed.com>

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CURRENT STATE OF MISSISSIPPI

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ACCESS RATE: 87.6%
(25/3), 76.1% (100/20)

UNSERVED: 12.4%

ADOPTION RATE:
78.0%

Mississippi Broadband Office

Housed under the Department of Finance and Administration, it is called the Broadband Expansion and Accessibility of Mississippi (BEAM) office

Sally Burchfield Doty, Director

Website: <https://www.beam.ms.gov/>

Email:
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Phone: (601) 359-5029

Address: 501 North West Street, 1201
Woolfolk Bldg., Jackson, MS 39201

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BEAD & DEA ALLOCATIONS – MS

- In 2021, the U.S. Senate passed the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) now called the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL), a \$1.2 trillion bipartisan infrastructure package which includes \$65 billion in broadband funding.
- \$42.45 billion from the Broadband Equity, Access & Deployment (BEAD) program will go directly to states to improve broadband networks, administered by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) within the Department of Commerce.
- \$2.75 billion for the Digital Equity Act (DEA) to establish three grant programs that promote digital equity and inclusion, for state Digital Equity Planning and digital equity projects.

\$1.2 Billion from
BEAD

\$10.8 Million from
DEA

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Municipal Networks

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Municipal networks are when the local government owns the network. There are laws in many states that restrict or outlaw municipal networks, including Mississippi.

GORE SPRINGS, MS

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Demographic Challenges

Economic Indicators:

- Grenada County's poverty rate stands at 22.20%, slightly above the state average and much higher than the national rate.
- Median household income at \$45,745 is significantly lower than both state and national medians.

Broadband Disparities:

- According to FCC Broadband Map, 87.34% of Grenada County locations lack basic 25/3 Mbps service.
- 12.66% are underserved, with 87.34% having 100/20 Mbps, impacting internet access.

Digital Divide:

- 23.80% of Grenada County households lack internet subscriptions, and 11.80% lack computers, indicating a digital divide.

Infrastructure Challenges:

- Gore Springs lacks schools, with only a Post Office, a church, a cemetery, a community center and some businesses.
- The community faces challenges with healthcare access as there are no hospitals.

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Covered Populations

According to the Digital Equity Act of 2021 there are 8 categories of covered populations that experience greater challenges with connectivity. These categories tend to be associated with lower levels of digital inclusion. They may lack reliable broadband services, internet-ready devices or the skills needed to connect and ensure online privacy and cybersecurity:

1. Individuals living in households with incomes at or below 150% of the poverty line.
2. Individuals 60 years of age or older.
3. Veterans.
4. Individuals living with disabilities.
5. Individuals with barriers to the English language (including English language learners and those with low literacy).
6. Members of racial and ethnic minority groups.
7. Individuals residing in rural areas.
8. Incarcerated individuals.

Aging	Veterans	Persons with Disabilities	Incarcerated Individuals	Racial/Ethnic Minorities	Rural Residents	Individuals who Speak English "less than well"	Individuals 150% Federal Poverty Level & Below
18.20%	5.90%	19.90%	0.50%	47.90%	100%	8.40%	34.90%

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Best Practices

1. Address Barriers to Connectivity – Access:

- Engage the community in broadband and digital equity planning.
- Conduct a Community Needs Assessment to identify challenges and underserved areas.

2. Address Barriers to Connectivity – Public Wi-Fi:

- Inventory and promote existing public Wi-Fi locations.
- Encourage public buildings and businesses to offer free Wi-Fi.

3. Address Barriers to Internet Adoption – Affordability:

- Share information about internet subsidy programs and discounts.
- Promote low-cost internet options widely in the community.

4. Address Barriers to Digital Literacy – Adult Computer Classes:

- Inventory and promote digital literacy training opportunities.
- Invest in digital literacy programs and consider Digital Navigator initiatives.

5. Address Barriers to Internet Adoption – Tech Training & Events:

- Educate the public about broadband benefits and digital inclusion.
- Coordinate with professional organizations for industry-specific technology training.

6. Address Barriers to Connectivity – Access to Devices:

- Share information about programs providing low-cost or free devices.
- Promote locations with public computers, including libraries and community centers.

7. Address Barriers to Connectivity – Digital Inclusion:

- Prioritize inclusivity, considering diverse populations.
- Focus efforts on covered populations and support community anchor institutions.

8. Address Barriers to Connectivity – Policies and Regulation:

- Advocate for broadband-friendly policies and regulations.
- Support the passage of broadband-friendly ordinances at the local level.

9. Address Barriers to Connectivity – Sustainability:

- Include Digital Equity programs in local budgets.
- Pursue funding solutions beyond initial grants and regularly evaluate program impact.

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Recommendations

• Accessibility Focus:

- Proper accommodation in digital training/devices for community members with disabilities.
- Modify training opportunities to ensure inclusivity when promoting digital literacy.

• Support for Aging Population:

- Regular computer skills, device, online safety, and cybersecurity classes for aging community members.
- Offer classes at senior centers.

• Combatting Poverty:

- Share resources about affordability programs widely.
- Determine eligibility for affordability programs through school district records, collaborate with ISPs for low-cost options.
- Develop a tailored wraparound services strategy for low-income residents based on needs.

• Veterans Support:

- Consider veterans when promoting digital literacy and low-cost internet options.
- Collaborate with county Veterans Affairs Department for resource distribution and digital skills courses.

• Multilingual and Simple Communication:

- Offer bilingual digital equity activities, courses, and resources.
- Deliver content in simple, easy-to-understand language for effective education.

• Incarcerated/Formerly Incarcerated Focus:

- Provide basic computer, internet, and online safety training for this population.
- Recognize limited exposure, offer extra attention for skills improvement and workforce development.

• Rural Community Considerations:

- Recognize lower adoption rates and slower internet speeds.
- Offer in-person digital literacy classes, reducing reliance on online teaching tools

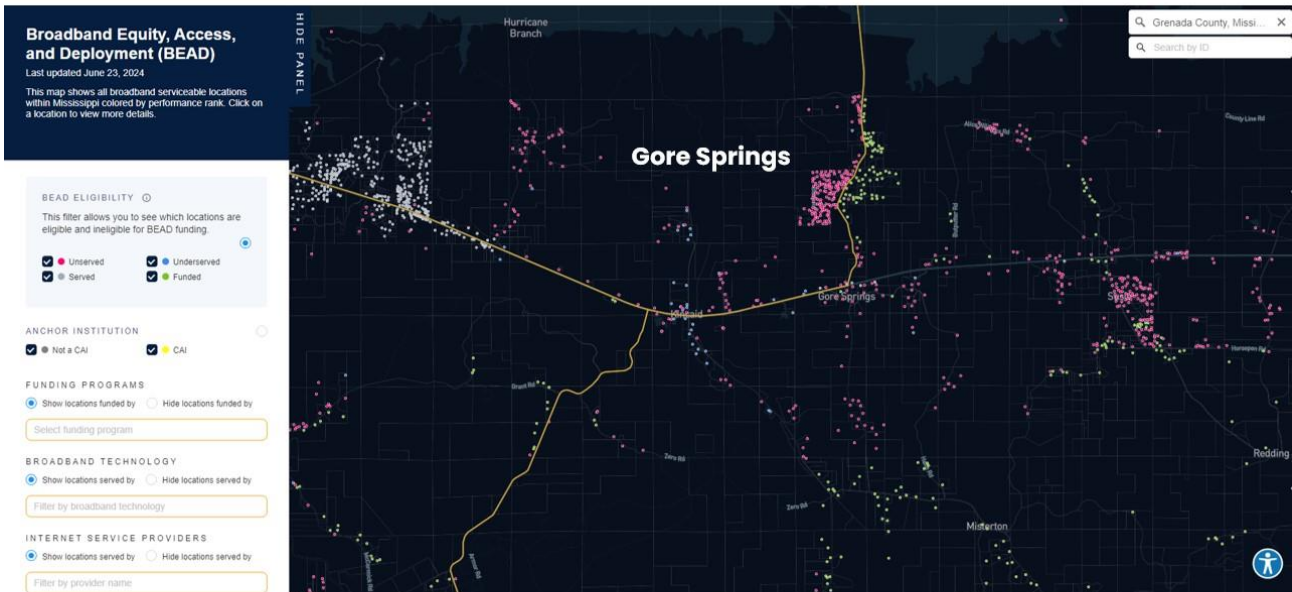
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Broadband Service Review

GORE SPRINGS, MS

See: <https://broadbandms.com/>

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See: <https://broadbandms.com/>

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Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD)

Last updated June 23, 2024

This map shows all broadband serviceable locations within Mississippi colored by performance rank. Click on a location to view more details.

BEAD ELIGIBILITY

This filter allows you to see which locations are eligible and ineligible for BEAD funding.

- Unserved
- Underserved
- Served
- Funded

ANCHOR INSTITUTION

- Not a CAI
- CAI

FUNDING PROGRAMS

- Show locations funded by
- Hide locations funded by

Select funding program

BROADBAND TECHNOLOGY

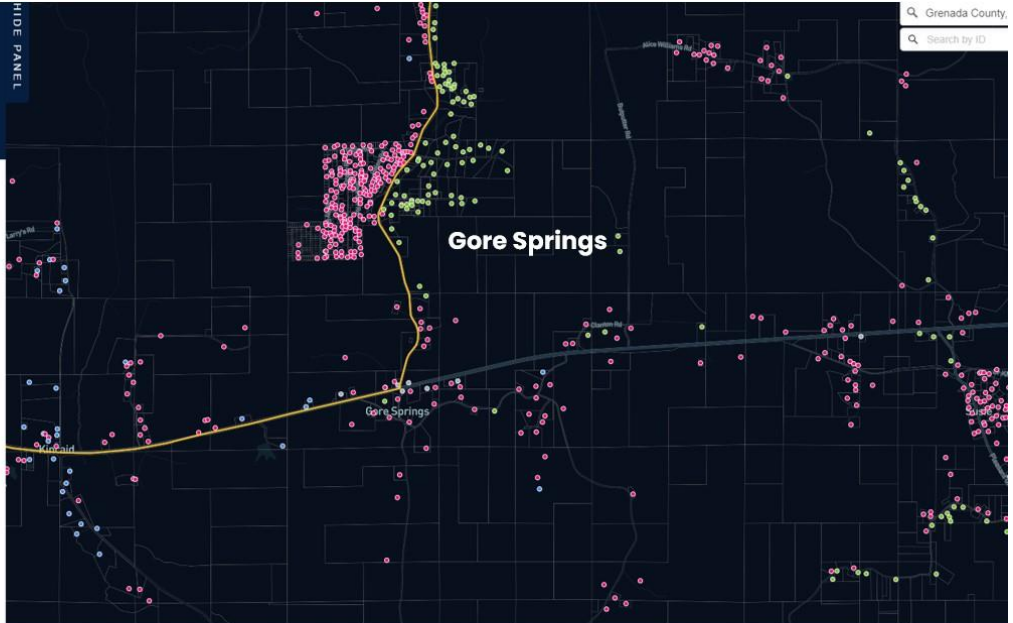
- Show locations served by
- Hide locations served by

Filter by broadband technology

INTERNET SERVICE PROVIDERS

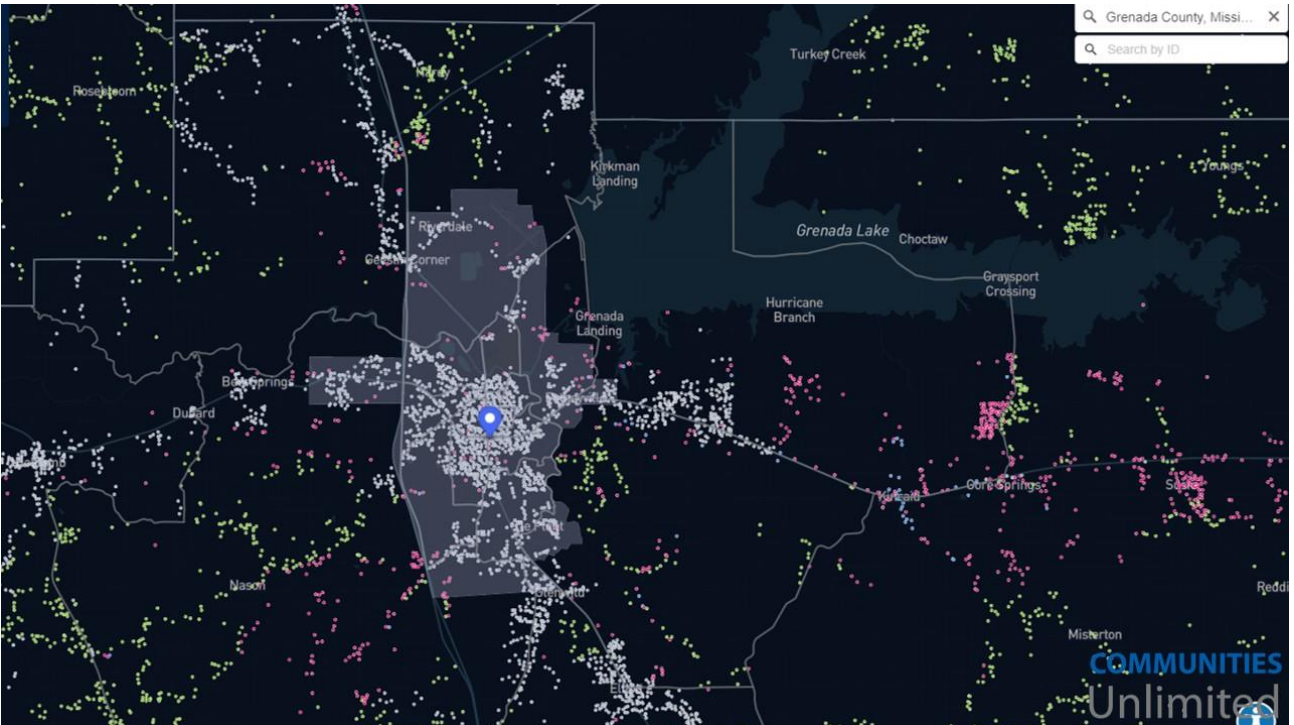
- Show locations served by
- Hide locations served by

Filter by provider name



See: <https://broadbandms.com/>

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Gore Springs, MS

Service levels reported by Internet Service Providers to the FCC as of Dec. 2023 (latest released in May):

Grenada County total

13,076 units **88.75% served 25/3 Mbps** wired + licensed FW 12.31.23)

87.65% served at 100/20 Mbps wired + licensed FW 12.31.23)

19.37% fiber

q

Gore Springs is some of the less served area of County.

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