



# Digital Opportunities Compass Pilot Program Recommendations

## **BENZIE COUNTY**



## Purpose of this Report

Benzie County was chosen to participate in a pilot project focused on creating strategies for digital opportunities. The project was conducted by Merit Network's Technology Impact Research team and was funded in part by Merit Network. This report details the primary short-term and long-term objectives that arose from this project. It offers insights into the decision-making and collaborative processes involved. All solutions presented in this document were developed by community volunteers. Achieving comprehensive connectivity, access to devices, and digital literacy requires sustained efforts. This report describes the envisioned "ideal" state and suggests next steps. While it is not a complete digital equity strategy, it lays the groundwork and establishes a basis for future development.

### Acknowledgements

*The strategies, goals, measurements, and recommendations included in this report were developed entirely by community volunteers through a collaborative process with the Benzie County Broadband Task Force, Grow Benzie, and Benzie County. \*\*Individual household speed test results can vary depending upon time of day and network traffic. All figures and calculations in this report reflect the highest measured speed from a household.*

### Participants in this collaborative included:

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**Michelle Barefoot**, Benzie Chamber of Commerce

**Jackie Borozan**, Grow Benzie

**Tom Centlivre**, Benzie County Resident

**Douglas Durand**, Benzie Senior Resources

**Tim Jahn**, Advent Lutheran Church

**Jen Kruch**, Benzie County Resident  
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**Stacy Pasche**, Benzie Shores District Library

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## Executive Summary

The Benzie County Broadband Task Force convened over a period of seven months with the primary objective of formulating strategies to harness digital opportunities within the community. This report encapsulates recommendations collaboratively developed by task force members, reflecting a shared commitment to realizing digital equity.

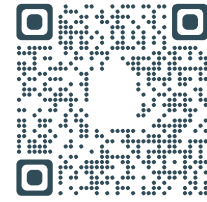
Digital equity, as defined by the task force, denotes the principle that all individuals should have equitable access to and proficiency in utilizing digital tools, including high-speed internet, digital devices, and literacy programs. By fostering digital equity, the community aims to ensure universal participation in the digital realm, thereby fostering equality across various domains such as civic engagement, employment, education, and healthcare access.

The task force delineated long-term objectives encompassing connectivity and affordability, enhancing quality of life, and fostering digital skills and accessibility. Concurrently, short-term goals were established to capitalize on infrastructure funding opportunities, monitor broadband expansion, conduct comprehensive asset mapping and needs assessments, develop an opportunities dashboard, secure funding for digital navigator programs, forge a community coalition, leverage existing educational resources, and devise a strategy for sustained device accessibility.

Moving forward, the task force advocates for the continuation and expansion of its activities, emphasizing the importance of sustaining partnerships, exploring diverse funding opportunities, and pursuing additional avenues for progress. Noteworthy funding sources under consideration include federal allocations, public grant programs, private and nonprofit contributions, and prospective funding streams.

The recommendations set forth in this report serve as a blueprint for advancing digital equity and fostering a more inclusive, digitally empowered community in Benzie County. Through concerted efforts and strategic collaboration, the task force endeavors to propel the region towards a future where digital opportunities are accessible to all.

[View the Working Paper](#)



## About the Digital Opportunities Compass

The “digital inclusion triangle” of broadband connectivity, device access, and basic digital literacy represents an important foundation for digital equity. However, 25 years of research related to how broadband and device access, affordability, and digital skills relate to broader social and development outcomes has demonstrated that digital equity is achieved more sustainably when approached holistically. The “Digital Opportunities Compass” framework is intended to assist stakeholders with the development and long-term assessment of programs and strategies to positively impact the digital divide and digital equity within communities and also provides a mechanism for community engagement and inter-institutional collaboration (Rhinesmith et al., 2023).

The Compass was developed by academic researchers and practitioners from the Quello Center at Michigan State University, Merit Network, the National Digital Inclusion Alliance, and the Digital Equity Research Center. Additional contributors and peer reviewers include researchers from 10 additional research universities and think tanks (Rhinesmith et al., 2023).

The Compass can be used to facilitate multi-stakeholder digital equity planning. It identifies six broad areas that impact digital equity and its association with community and/or neighborhood level outcomes: Contexts, Governance, Connectivity, Skills, Applications, and Outcomes. These components are closely tied to what research has shown about the factors that affect digital inequalities and, consequently, broader outcomes. These factors are also important starting points to impact digital inequality sustainably.



Merit Network created a structured decision-making approach, guided by the Compass, to help communities and volunteers build research-driven digital opportunity strategies and evaluate these programs over the long term in ways that reflected local context, needs, and realistic capacity. This approach facilitates the development of robust digital ecosystems and lays a solid foundation for crafting effective digital grant proposals.

## History

In 2021, Benzie County placed emphasis on its digital future by dedicating funds for the expansion of broadband, informed by a resident survey. This survey revealed specific needs, leading to the recruitment of Mitch Shapiro, a broadband industry specialist, as a consultant later that year. Shapiro's insights into the necessity for local engagement prompted the formation of crucial partnerships with entities like Grow Benzie, Merit Network, and the Central Broadband Action Network (CBAN).

The following year, Benzie County collaborated with Michigan Moonshot at Merit Network to carry out another survey to evaluate the county's broadband accessibility and usage. The results showed that 57% of households reported completely lacking access.

Among those without internet, 57% mentioned the absence of available services at their locations, while 34% cited high service costs as the barrier. Furthermore, 77% of these households expressed willingness to pay between \$25 and \$101+ for internet service, indicating a significant demand if it were accessible.

In 2023, Benzie County was among the initial pilot communities to engage in the Digital Opportunities Compass program, developing a strategy to enhance digital equity locally.

Grow Benzie was crucial in forming a community task force to assist with both the Compass process and the BEAD challenge process. The task force, lead by Mitch Shapiro, utilized local resources effectively, including a coding volunteer and GIS support from Northwestern Michigan College, as well as collaboration with the CMU Rural Health Equity Institute.

Benzie County has since continued its collaborative efforts with local broadband providers, which led to a successful application for the open-access network ROBIN grant and a fruitful partnership with Cherry Capital Connection in Spring 2023.

## Methodology

Although Benzie County has yet to secure widespread, affordable broadband for all its residents, enhancing digital opportunities alongside infrastructure development is essential. Promoting digital equity improves access to, and the skills needed for, opportunities that elevate quality of life, diminish inequalities, drive economic growth, and enhance societal participation. It is feasible to expand digital opportunities for those residents who lack internet connections. Moreover, residents who already have internet access can also gain from these efforts.

The initiative started by assembling a task force, composed of a diverse group of community stakeholders. This team collaborated to pinpoint and devise solutions tailored for different segments of the population, including small businesses, local government entities, educational institutions, nonprofits, senior centers, and faith-based organizations. It was essential to have a wide-ranging representation to ensure that as many community interests and voices were heard as possible. Task force participants were not required to have previous technological expertise. The primary objective was to explore the community's needs related to digital skills, access, equipment requirements, affordability issues, and necessary programs, all aimed at enhancing digital opportunities for both residents and businesses.

The Benzie County Broadband Task Force met both virtually and in-person over the course of seven months. Each meeting focused on a discussion centered around indicator areas of the Compass; connectivity, skills, applications, governance, contexts, and broader outcomes. Smaller working groups met periodically between task force meetings and surveys were often deployed to the group as a decision-making mechanism.



## A Shared Definition of Digital Equity

### **Together, the task force developed a shared definition of digital equity for the County:**

Digital equity ensures that everyone has the same opportunities to access and use digital tools like high-speed internet, digital devices, and literacy programs. This allows full participation in the digital facets of society, helping to turn technology into a bridge that enhances equality across civic involvement, employment, education, and healthcare access, rather than a barrier.

## Envisioning a Digitally Equitable Benzie County

Achieving ubiquitous connectivity and digital equity at a county level requires a long-term commitment. It is essential to establish a clear vision for the community's ideal future, even if the complete path to realization isn't yet clear. Studies have shown that having clear goals and a plan makes it easier to seize opportunities as they arise. Consequently, the task force outlined long-term goals and identified initial steps toward reaching them. This plan doesn't cover every necessary action, but rather identifies a vision and the initial efforts that will pave the way for subsequent steps. This plan also recognizes that needs and solutions may differ across various segments of the population, and accounts for such.



## Long-Term Goals



### **Connectivity & Affordability**

Broadband is core to living in Benzie County and should be considered a basic need. 100% accessibility will enhance economic well-being, support small businesses, and contribute to health and wellness, thus fortifying the overall prosperity and well-being of our community



### **Quality of Life**

The ultimate objective is to create an inclusive environment that empowers organizations and individuals of all ages, fostering full participation in educational, social, and civic opportunities facilitated by technology.



### **Digital Skills and Accessibility**

Benzie County will enhance digital skills across all sectors of residents who desire to participate, reflective of the evolving needs and applications.



## Short-Term Actions/Goals

While this list of short-term goals is not exhaustive, the Task Force outlined potential next steps in achieving the long-term objectives.

### Connectivity & Affordability

It is the goal to reach ubiquitous high-speed connectivity in Benzie County when construction is complete for projects funded through federal and state programs. These programs include the Realizing Opportunity with Broadband Infrastructure Networks (ROBIN) Grant Program and the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF), which have already allocated funds to support network expansion in Benzie County. An even larger grant program, Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) is currently in the early stages of deciding where to allocate its grant support. As the BEAD grant process unfolds and construction supported by all of these programs is completed, the County will track progress toward 100% coverage, and continue to evolve its strategies for achieving that goal.

State and federal funding is critical to building broadband infrastructure in low-density rural areas, as is developing collaborative relationships with ISPs to attract and make good use of this funding. A model for such collaboration was developed during the ROBIN grant process when the County supported the grant application of Cherry Capital Connection (CCC), a regional ISP. This led to a successful ROBIN grant application that will bring an innovative open-access fiber network to portions of the County and create a model for further collaborative efforts going forward. This CCC network will bring a fiber connection able to deliver symmetrical gigabit speeds to approximately 1,430 currently unserved or underserved locations in the County, while also providing a competitive option for more than 3,600 other locations that currently only have one network option able to deliver 100/20 Mbps speeds.

## Short-Term Actions/Goals

### Connectivity & Affordability

Future government financial support for broadband infrastructure construction is likely to be limited once the BEAD program is completed. However, the Task Force and the County should remain engaged with ISPs, community partners, and state and national agencies to remain current on potential future funding opportunities and other unique opportunities as they arise. Some next steps are suggested below.

#### **1. Take Advantage of Infrastructure Funding Opportunities**

In December 2023 the Task Force identified the BEAD program as a priority for funding network expansion in Benzie County. Reflecting this priority, it created a subcommittee led by consultant Mitch Shapiro and Grow Benzie's Jackie Borozan to focus intensively on participating in the BEAD challenge process to the benefit of County residents. The challenge process will determine what locations are eligible for BEAD construction grants and will conclude in late July.

The subcommittee should continue to coordinate efforts related to the BEAD program, including remaining engaged with the Michigan High-Speed Internet Office (MIHI) and ISPs active in Benzie County, and keeping the County and the Task Force informed of significant developments related to BEAD and other programs supporting network construction in the County.

#### **2. Continue to Monitor Broadband Expansion**

To ensure successful internet infrastructure deployment, the County should establish and maintain a process for continual monitoring of ISP network construction in relation to RDOF, ROBIN, and BEAD funding timelines and the objective of reaching 100% broadband coverage.

This requires fostering community involvement and cultivating strong connections with local ISPs, as well as a broader network of service providers, experts, and equipment vendors. The goals of these activities are twofold: 1) to enhance broadband coverage and affordability within the County; and 2) to maintain the ability to respond promptly and efficiently to fluctuations in the funding, regulatory, and market landscape, which is notably dynamic and complex. Additionally, the County should develop and sustain GIS capabilities to track progress and identify obstacles in achieving universal broadband availability. For example, a continually updated digital map that identifies the status of ongoing funding awards and ISP build outs would support this goal. This effort should both complement and utilize state and federal data platforms, while also offering enhanced, locally tailored capacities that bolster effective local monitoring and planning.

## Short-Term Actions/Goals

### Quality of Life, Digital Skills, and Accessibility

#### **1. Conduct a digital equity asset map and needs assessment**

A digital equity asset map is a strategic tool used in planning and community development that catalogs the resources currently available within a community. This map assists other organizations involved in promoting digital equity and supports community members by highlighting the providers of digital equity solutions. It also helps pinpoint gaps where additional resources are needed. The map encompasses:

- Digital equity organizations, including nonprofit device refurbishers, digital inclusion coalitions, and community technology centers.
- Organizations that conduct digital inclusion programs, such as public libraries, senior centers, and community centers.
- Entities serving specific populations, like public housing authorities, programs for returning citizens, telehealth support, and university agricultural extension services.
- Additional community assets, including anchor institutions, internet service providers (ISPs), common gathering spaces, and policymakers.
- Conversations with organizations involved in digital equity programs should also encompass questions about capacity versus demand for existing services.

Task force representatives have pinpointed certain needs in Benzie County, but a detailed assessment could reveal more about the infrastructure, devices, training, and cybersecurity requirements across all community segments. This deeper analysis could be achieved by conducting surveys and engaging in direct conversations with residents (refer to the “Create a Community Coalition for Digital Support” section). The National Digital Inclusion Alliance has created sample questionnaires that could serve as a foundation (NDIA, 2023). The findings from this assessment should inform a detailed plan outlining the specifics of training programs, including the target audience, training requirements, and locations.

## Short-Term Actions/Goals

### Quality of Life, Digital Skills, and Accessibility

#### **2. Develop a Benzie County Digital Opportunities Dashboard/Portal**

Using the data gathered from the digital equity asset map, a digital opportunities dashboard website would serve as a central repository for county civic and government resources, school information, a calendar of digital equity opportunities and training, information on digital literacy programs, and ongoing educational opportunities. This would centralize existing resources and promote continued or new collaboration with participating agencies.

A collaborative outreach strategy could be initiated by the County, local libraries, Grow Benzie, and other stakeholders to map out available resources and establish a framework for continuously updating this information. Residents would benefit from learning about the opportunities highlighted in these resources either directly through the involved organizations (especially if they are unconnected or lack the digital skills to find the information) or via a community-wide awareness campaign to promote these resources.



## Short-Term Actions/Goals

### Quality of Life, Digital Skills, and Accessibility

#### **3. Identify Funding to Support a Digital Navigator(s) in Benzie**

According to the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA, n.d.), Digital Navigators are trusted guides who assist community members in internet adoption and the use of computing devices. Digital navigation services include ongoing assistance with affordable internet access, device acquisition, technical skills, and application support. Typically located at reputable community organizations, digital navigators are well-versed in local resources connected to digital equity. They assist residents in utilizing essential online services, suggest helpful resources, and follow up with clients periodically to help them achieve their objectives.

The Digital Navigators Model of the National Digital Inclusion Alliance, reveals that the most significant quality of Digital Navigators is that they are members of the communities they serve (NDIA, n.d.). By establishing a degree of familiarity and trust with the community members, the Digital Navigators are then able to optimize community engagement and education, identifying and achieving sustainable digital learning goals. Other important qualities such as speaking in a language that is understood, being patient and flexible by catering to specific community members' needs, being technically competent, and having empathy are necessary for being effective Digital Navigators as well. Digital Navigator programs are the most effective when they are co-designed with community members and incorporated into existing community sectors (healthcare, K-12 and adult education, employment assistance, etc.) (World Education, 2023).

Lack of digital skills and literacy keeps marginalized communities (especially rural) from having adequate access to education, work, healthcare, and other necessities of life. In 2022 the National Digital Inclusion Alliance received a multiyear \$10 million dollar grant from Google.org (the philanthropic branch of Google) to create the National Digital Navigator Corps (NDIA, n.d.). This framework will help support marginalized communities' digital skills education through hands-on training and community outreach by connecting communities to the internet, using devices, and accessing online resources. Research done in digital skills training highlights that hands-on learning is an effective way to optimize the advantages of these opportunities for community members for various reasons (Pendell et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2023; Wedlake et al., 2021). Many community members cite the aspect of trust and empathy they share with other community members within the learning environment. They also support the social aspect of learning from the Digital Navigators who are also a part of their community as well.

## Short-Term Actions/Goals

### Quality of Life, Digital Skills, and Accessibility

#### **3. Identify Funding to Support a Digital Navigator(s) in Benzie (continued)**

Another phenomenon observed from the hands-on learning supported by Digital Navigators is that the more digitally adept community members facilitated digital skills access and learning for other community members who required more effort and time during the hands-on learning process (Wedlake et al., 2021). Encompassing this support and coordination among community members, the hands-on based digital skills learning model suggests the potential for community members to serve as intermediaries to lessen the digital divide in the community. Overall, this may also help with community members' retention and motivation to learn digital skills, which ultimately creates a positive feedback learning cycle (Wedlake et al., 2021). Effectively, hands-on learning supported by the Digital Navigator increases self-efficacy in digital skills and literacy, and the ability to leverage online resources among community members.

The State of Michigan's Digital Equity Plan indicates plans to implement a Digital Navigator Network. State Digital Navigators will collaborate with community-based nonprofits and individuals working in digital inclusion. A navigator will be placed within each prosperity region in Michigan and in some select communities. It is not currently known where, or for how long, these navigators will be deployed.

The Task Force suggests collaborating with the Michigan High Speed Internet Office to compete for placing a Community or Regional Navigator in Benzie County. Additionally, it recommends pursuing funding and resources to employ more Digital Navigators within the county. One or two Navigators may not be enough to support the demand for these services, given Benzie County's population of greater than 18,000 residents. These navigators would be stationed at libraries and visit various community anchor locations. Organizations such as Americorps could also be investigated for Digital Navigator staffing needs. Some Benzie County organizations, such as Grow Benzie, have prior experience working with Americorps.

## Short-Term Actions/Goals

### Quality of Life, Digital Skills, and Accessibility

#### **4. Create a Community Coalition for Digital Support**

Everyone possesses unique talents and resources that should be acknowledged and harnessed. In the realm of community development, focusing on what individuals can offer, rather than their needs, is crucial. Needs are generally catered to by institutions, but a citizen-centered approach prioritizes using community assets. This initiative proposes enhancing community training through new educational programs. By utilizing the insights from the digital equity asset map and assessment, collaborative programming could be established with entities like the National Honor Society, local IT businesses, or by adapting existing high school courses into evening community classes. Initiatives like “Tech Tuesdays” or similar small programs at libraries and other nonprofits could exemplify such collaborative efforts.

A model akin to Detroit’s Connect 313 could be explored (Connect 313, n.d.). Connect 313 is a digital equity strategy led by citizens in Detroit. Volunteer ambassadors, managed centrally, are tasked with fostering digital equity through initiatives and training within small community sectors. These volunteers, who are stationed in areas near their homes or workplaces, offer a wide array of digital equity advocacy, education, and resource connections. When funds allow, these ambassadors receive a modest stipend for their efforts. This method promotes trust and relationship development, enhancing residents’ comfort with digital technology and their willingness to seek assistance. This model also promotes community engagement and outreach for all digital equity efforts within the community.

Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) is a framework for the sustainable development of communities, by leveraging existing resources within the community, rather than relying on external entities (Mcknight and Kretzmann, 1996). The significance of Asset Based Community Development asserts as its core tenet, that communities can initiate and sustain the internal development process by recognizing and deploying existing community assets. This process effectively results in sustainable economic opportunities and community enablement. ABCD can be achieved, for example, by building on the asset mapping recommendation earlier in this report.

## Short-Term Actions/Goals

### Quality of Life, Digital Skills, and Accessibility

#### 5. Leverage Other Existing Educational Resources

Merit Network is the recipient of a USDA Broadband Technical Assistance Grant to support digital equity efforts in many communities throughout Michigan. One output of this grant is the curation and development of digital skills and digital literacy resources, cybersecurity initiatives, programs, and training materials. It is suggested that digital navigators, community ambassadors, and others working in digital equity in Benzie County leverage the assets.

As a part of the State of Michigan's Digital Equity Plan, it is the goal of the state to provide training to Michiganders and to support inclusive initiatives. When they become available, the training materials developed by the state can be leveraged to help fill the gaps we see in Benzie County.

#### 6. Develop an Ongoing Strategy for Device Accessibility

The Task Force is tasked with investigating opportunities for device refurbishment and donation within the community. During the digital equity asset mapping, it would be beneficial to reach out to large businesses to foster partnerships that encourage these companies to donate their used devices. These devices could then be given to residents in need. Additionally, the Task Force should consider collaborating with national organizations like Human-I-T, among others, for this purpose.





## Relationship to State of Michigan Digital Equity Plan

The Digital Equity Plan for the State of Michigan outlines various strategies and goals aimed at ensuring that all residents eventually have access to affordable, high-speed internet and necessary devices. The plan also seeks to enhance health outcomes, especially in rural regions, support and promote digital literacy programs, and enable citizens to safeguard themselves online, among other objectives. It is advised that the task force remain vigilant in keeping abreast of updates and new initiatives introduced in the State's plan to maximize the advantages for the residents of Benzie County.

## Additional Next Steps

To ensure the task force remains effective and continues to build momentum, it is crucial to consistently recruit new members. Moreover, maintaining a robust partnership with Grow Benzie and the Community Broadband Action Network (CBAN) is essential for advancing digital equity in the community. With a digital equity plan established, the task force and/or the county should explore funding opportunities outlined in the "Funding and Sustainability" section, among other potential sources as they arise.

Additionally, the County might consider ongoing involvement with Merit's Broadband Equity and Advocacy community of practice, and participating in a consortial Digital Equity Act grant application that Merit may be coordinating with other members of this group.

## Funding and Sustainability

### Michigan Digital Equity Act Funds: Request for Proposals (RFP)

In its Digital Equity plan, the state of Michigan states “The main vehicle for closing the digital divide in Michigan will be through the implementation of a **robust community Digital Navigator program**” (p. 60). “ Also, “MIHI will continue to work with partners to scale programs that are successful in smaller areas to statewide efforts. **Digital Navigators will be placed in organizations as determined by a competitive RFP process**...Potential host site partners include, but are not limited to: Michigan Works! Associations, Library Systems, Local Community Colleges, Colleges, Universities, Intermediate School Districts, Tribal Nations, Councils of Government, United Way organizations, Philanthropic entities, Healthcare Systems, Non-profit entities, Other partners, as needed” (p. 68).

There is not yet specific guidance on how to apply for the program run by MIHI. This program is tentatively expected to launch in Autumn 2024. Michigan is currently applying for funding this program, and the National Telecommunication and Information Administration (NTIA) has stated that state awards will be made on a rolling basis no later than August 28, 2024.

Communities interested in submitting a bid for a Digital Navigator can begin by closely reviewing Michigan’s Digital Equity strategy. Strong RFP responses are typically rooted in the language and priorities of the funding agency. Recommended reading includes:

**pp. 11-19: Digital Inclusion Strategies.** Questions to consider:

- Does the organization’s digital equity strategy align to any of these priorities?
- Is the organization well-suited to deliver this outcome to those in most need in the community? (Capacity, other funding sources, community support)
- What partnerships, if any, would be beneficial for this priority?

**pp. 60 - 68: Digital Navigator Implementation plan.** This guidance will inform the RFP opportunity MIHI will administer. Questions to consider:

- Does your organization already offer digital navigation services? If so, what differentiates its approach? What are the core competencies and qualifications of individuals suited to the role?
- Review the digital navigator key performance indicators (KPIs). Does the organization have existing success in accomplishing these?
- Would the organization be able to facilitate these services on a community or regional level?

NTIA will also be releasing a grant application for Competitive Digital Equity Act funding, anticipated in Autumn 2024. In contrast to state Capacity Funds, this funding is anticipated for large scale projects and will be open to applications across the nation.

## Funding and Sustainability

### Public Grant Funding

**For continuing digital opportunity planning:** The Economic Development Administration's Planning FY 2023 EDA Planning and Local Technical Assistance offers a local technical assistance program to strengthen the capacity of local, regional, or State organizations and institutions to undertake and promote effective economic development programs through projects such as feasibility studies, impact analyses, disaster resiliency plans, and project planning. Projects must align to one or more EDA priority investment areas, including Technology-Based Economic Development. This grant opportunity is open to county applicants. Previously, 30-50 awards have been made each year with an average award of \$100,000. Cost sharing is required and varies based on local economic distress indicators. Applications are accepted on a rolling basis.

**For local businesses to invest in digital skills:** Going PRO Talent Fund grants are awarded to employers through the Michigan Works! network (MWAs). Participating employers play an integral role in defining their key training needs and working with their local MWAs and other partners to develop an appropriate training plan. Training must fill a demonstrated talent need experienced by the employer and lead to a transferable, industry-recognized credential. Round 2 applications accepted through May 10. Businesses interested in learning more or applying for funding should contact their local Michigan Works! Service Center.

**For improving digital inclusion at local libraries:** The State Library of Michigan has opened its 2024/2025 Improving Access to Information grants program. This Library Services and Technologies Act (LSTA) grant program is designed to provide libraries with the opportunity to expand services for learning and access to information and/or to develop library services that provide all users access to information. The intent is to fund one-year projects that increase access to library collections and information. In the latest round, four libraries received funding for digital inclusion projects. This funding is best used to augment existing projects, as the total award for 26 libraries was \$356,541 in the funding round. Applications are due Wednesday, May 31st by 5:00 PM EST.

### Private/Non-Profit Funding and Contributions

**4-H Tech Changemakers Program:** Some 4-H programs, with close community participation and support, offer a program for teen volunteers to provide digital skills to underserved members of the community.

**The Bell Foundation:** This foundation offers grants (typically ~\$10,000), including for projects focused on digital inclusion for underserved groups. Applicants are often 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations with a clear proof of concept and project plan. Applications are ongoing, with review periods for different project types. The application for Health and Wellbeing & Technology grants opens April 1-30. The application for Economic and Social Mobility & Sustainability grants opens October 1-31.

## Funding and Sustainability

### Future Opportunities and Ongoing Monitoring for Funding

**Some funding opportunities that may be best suited for longer-term planning include:** For future distance learning and telehealth projects: USDA's Rural Utilities Service - Distance Learning and Telemedicine grant provides grants to encourage and improve telemedicine and distance learning services in rural areas through the use of telecommunications, computer networks, and related advanced technologies to be used by students, teachers, medical professionals, and rural residents. Grants are for projects where the benefit is primarily delivered to end users that are not at the same location as the source of the education or healthcare service. Typically offered annually, awards range from \$50,000 - \$1,000,000. The latest application window closes April 29th, but it's recommended to begin preparing for the next round as early as possible due to the short application window. Some key activities to begin planning are scoping partnerships and project plans.

**For future partnerships with higher education:** The Department of Labor has released Building Pathways to Infrastructure Jobs Grant Program Round 2. The purpose of this grant program is to build community colleges' capacity to meet the skill development needs of employers and equitably support students in obtaining good jobs in in-demand industries. Applicants may apply for up to \$5,750,000 for initial consortia grants and \$1,750,000 for initial single institution grants. The minimum for both types of applicants is \$1,500,000. Though eligible applicants for this grant must be higher education institutions, there is a significant focus on collaboration with local organizations and employers. As the task force continues to build its capacity and partnerships, it may consider workforce development funding through partnerships with higher education similar to this opportunity.

**For future economic development planning:** USDA Strategic Economic and Community Development grants support projects that promote and implement strategic community investment plans. Eligible applicants must already be part of a rural development program, and must present a plan that is multi-jurisdictional and multi-sectoral. May be best suited for incorporating broadband into other regional public infrastructure projects.

## Funding and Sustainability

### Future Opportunities and Ongoing Monitoring for Funding

**For future rural infrastructure planning and deployment:** USDA has historically offered several grant programs to increase connectivity in rural areas. *Future rounds of these programs are awaiting funding*, typically through the Farm Bill. These include:

**Community Connect:** Provides financial assistance to eligible applicants that will provide broadband service in rural, economically-challenged communities where service does not exist.

**ReConnect Loan & Grant Program:** Offers loans, grants, and loan-grant combinations to facilitate broadband deployment in areas of rural America that currently do not have sufficient access to broadband.

**Broadband Technical Assistance:** Provides financial assistance through cooperative agreements to eligible entities to receive or deliver broadband technical assistance and training and supports the development and expansion of broadband cooperatives.

It's recommended that the task force routinely monitors for funding opportunities. This guide from Michigan State University contains some excellent guidance on researching and preparing for grants, though some resources require an MSU login. Some additional suggested resources for monitoring include:

#### Follow updates from specific federal agencies:

- National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA)
- Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)
- US Department of Agriculture (USDA)
- US Economic Development Administration (EDA)
- Department of Education (DOE) - consider Title grants for serving specific populations

#### Follow updates from state agencies and task forces:

- MI Labor and Economic Opportunity (LEO)
- MI High Speed Internet Office (MIHI)
- MI State Library
- Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC)
- Policy and Planning, Strategic Engagement, and Alignment section of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services

#### Subscribe to newsletters and forums to learn how other communities are funding and executing projects:

- [Rural Community Toolbox](#)
- [National Skills Coalition](#)
- [National Digital Inclusion Alliance](#)
- [National Association of Counties](#)

## Other Areas for Future Consideration

### Digital Civic Participation

The Task Force highlighted the significance of expanding digital civic participation. This encompasses enhancing e-government services such as online tax payments, access to public records, and facilitating online voting and surveys to widen democratic engagement. It also includes platforms that enable citizens to contribute feedback on community planning, local government initiatives, and public policies, thereby directly involving them in decision-making processes. Furthermore, social media and digital technologies are recognized as valuable tools for organizing and disseminating information, such as emergency alerts, public health updates, and community event notifications.

Currently, many townships in Benzie County lack a website, online services, or a significant online presence. Enhancing digital civic engagement could lead to more robust democratic communities where residents have greater interactions and closer connections with their government. Additionally, these digital channels could appeal to those considering relocating to the area. However, local capacity and interest present obstacles to improving online visibility in these townships. The Task Force or the County might consider exploring collaborative opportunities among the Task Force, the County, and the municipalities to devise a collective solution.

### Efficacy Measurements and Continual Development of Comprehensive Strategy

Systems should be implemented to track progress toward goals and the effectiveness of programs that are implemented. When possible, program goals should link to both the long-term strategies set forth in this document and to other broader outcomes in the community. One of the goals of successful digital transformation is to change important community sociodemographic characteristics, such as income and education levels over time. The multifaceted nature of the broadband ecosystem raises challenges for measuring the impacts of efforts over time on community outcomes, however it is critical to consider them. Examples of broader outcomes that tie to broadband and digital equity efforts could include measurements of economic development (jobs, income, startups, and growth), social development (quality of life, safety, mental health), physical environment (water quality, housing, transit), and civic participation.

These recommendations are designed to guide the initial phases of Benzie County's digital equity initiatives. The Task Force, the County, and other stakeholders should collaborate to create a detailed, long-term digital equity strategy. This should occur after initiating asset mapping, developing programs, exploring funding options, and beginning the implementation of the State of Michigan's Digital Equity Plan. Comprehensive information gathered from these activities will be crucial for forming a sustainable long-term strategy.

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