



# National Digital Navigator Corps Stories

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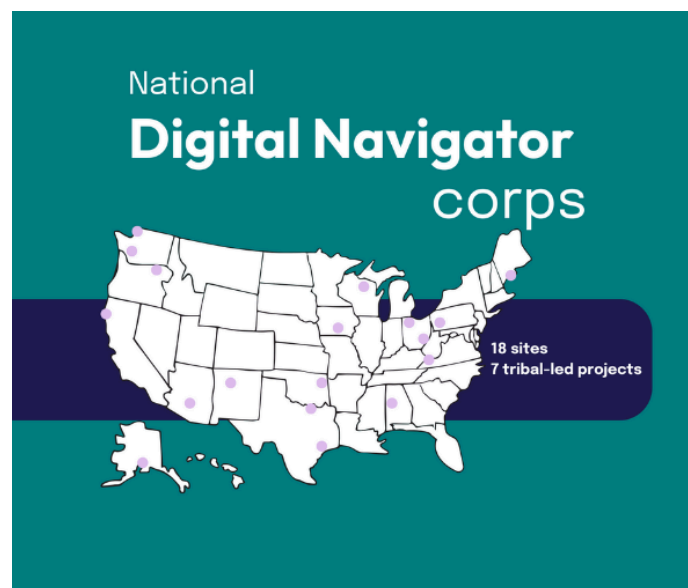
# Introduction to the National Digital Navigator Corps

## How did it begin?

In February 2022, National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) received a \$10 million grant from Google.org – the largest grant it has received to date – to create a National Digital Navigator Corps. The funding was used to build and advance local digital inclusion work and to strengthen the digital navigator model in rural and Tribal communities, in partnership with AMERIND Critical Infrastructure.

## Where did it happen?

After a competitive selection process, 18 community-based organizations and Tribal governments were selected to host a digital navigator program and hire a full-time digital navigator to participate in this cohort. All 18 of the sites provided digital navigator services to rural communities in 16 states. Of those, 7 were Tribal-led projects and an additional 3 served Tribal communities along with other rural communities. The digital navigator model was developed and adapted to fit each community.



# What is this collection?

This collection of impact stories showcases the work of the National Digital Navigator Corps. These case studies showcase best practices and lessons learned from each program. Our hope is to not only provide a resource for practitioners from which to draw inspiration, but also provide a clear portrait of the concrete impact of this work on people across the country.

This stories in the collection were written by National Digital Inclusion staff in collaboration with Raynor Avenue Public Affairs. The original posts can be found on the NDIA blog at [www.digitalinclusion.org/blog](http://www.digitalinclusion.org/blog).

# Alaska Federation of Natives

## Facing Digital Challenges in the Last Frontier

Alaska is a land of breathtaking beauty, where vast wilderness stretches as far as the eye can see and many Alaska Natives continue to live off the land, relying on subsistence hunting and fishing to sustain their way of life. For many, life's daily priorities include securing food, water, and safe housing—making internet connectivity and digital skills understandably lower on the list of immediate concerns. However, the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) took an opportunity to show how digital skills could make life just a little easier, even in a place where the challenges of modern technology often take a back seat to more pressing needs.

AFN, the largest statewide Native organization in Alaska, represents 120,000 Alaska Natives through partnerships with Tribal corporations, nonprofits, and nearly 200 villages. With a mission to amplify Native voices and improve lives, AFN was selected to host a Digital Navigator program, as part of NDIA's National Digital Navigator Corps funding from Google.org.



*An aerial view of one of Alaska's many islands.*

Emmanuel “Sajai” Borrromeo, AFN’s lead Digital Navigator, knew there would be limitations and designed his outreach to meet Alaska Natives where they are—both geographically and in terms of digital skills. Sajai’s background in IT made him well-equipped to tackle the technical aspects of the role, but his new mission of community outreach required an entirely different approach. From Anchorage to remote villages, Sajai began by partnering with existing organizations to build trust, offer support, and bring the benefits of connectivity to Alaska’s farthest reaches.

For many Alaska Natives, life revolves around traditional practices and a strong connection to the land. Reliable, affordable internet access varies greatly across the state, sending emails or making online payments seem far removed from their daily lives. Sajai quickly learned that to make an impact, he had to meet people where they were—both figuratively and literally.

**“The seeds of curiosity are planted when a person is made aware of how technology can improve their lives. Our first job as Digital Navigators is getting to know people, and then identifying ways in which technology can benefit them,” Sajai explains.**

One key partnership was with the Housing Authority, which serves Alaska Native residents in Anchorage. Residents were required to transition to online rent payments but lacked the digital skills to do so. Many didn’t even have email accounts. Sajai hosted classes in the housing lounge to help residents sign up for email,

navigate online payments, and answer questions about cybersecurity and device troubleshooting.

Elders, in particular, benefit from Sajai’s patient approach. One woman, hard of hearing and living alone in subsidized housing, became a regular client. Sajai guided her through signing up for the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), helped her purchase a laptop, and taught her how to use voice dictation to write emails. He even showed her how to scan documents and send them to the Tribal office, saving her hours of travel time. Over the course of five to seven meetings, Sajai empowered her to embrace technology as a tool to improve her daily life.

Alaska's unique geography and remote living conditions posed significant challenges for the program. Many residents in villages don't have physical addresses, only PO boxes, making it difficult to ship devices. In these cases, Sajai arranged face-to-face meetings when residents traveled to Anchorage. In the village of Nanwalick, where residents live off the land, Sajai built a relationship with the Tribal administrator and hosted a laptop giveaway for 10 families. His plan to provide in-person training in the village had to be postponed due to personal circumstances, but the effort demonstrated his commitment to building bridges between tradition and technology.



*Emmanuel "Sajai" Borromeo, AFN's lead Digital Navigator, hosting listening sessions in rural Alaska.*

While the program's outreach often began with simple incentives, like a free laptop for completing training sessions, it quickly became apparent that digital skills could have a profound impact on people's lives. From teaching elders to stream their favorite shows on Netflix to helping families access online shopping, the Digital Navigator program showed that even small technological advances could save time and improve quality of life.

Sajai also worked to spread awareness through social media campaigns on AFN's Facebook page, where clients often referred friends and family to his services. Many of the questions he fielded were basic—like how to set up an email account or troubleshoot a flip phone—but for those he helped, these small victories were life-changing.

Although many Alaska Natives continue to face challenges that overshadow the importance of digital connectivity, like clean drinking water and housing issues, the Digital Navigator program laid the groundwork for bridging the gap between tradition and technology. Sajai's work demonstrated how digital tools can support traditional lifestyles, whether by enabling faster communication, simplifying daily tasks, or providing access to essential resources like education and healthcare.

By partnering with Tribal organizations, housing authorities, and local leaders, the Alaska Federation of Natives and its Digital Navigator program have shown that digital equity isn't just about broadband and devices—it's about empowering people to use technology in ways that make sense for their unique lives. While the program itself has shifted, its impact remains: a testament to the resilience and adaptability of Alaska Natives and the power of connection, both online and off.

## **Increasing Access, Affordability, and Adoption for the Alaska Federation of Natives**

- **Find programming that works with your community.** The Digital Navigator achieved positive outcomes by requiring skills training as part of the process to receive a laptop. Most participants who completed basic computer training became repeat clients, often returning with follow-up questions or to build on their digital skills.
- **Assessing digital skills and customizing lessons.** The Digital Navigator used intake forms to evaluate each individual's skill level and tailored training sessions to help participants feel more comfortable using technology. This personalized approach ensured that lessons addressed each person's unique needs.

- **Community outreach with small steps and big impact.** Scaling a program across Alaska’s vast geographic area proved most effective when partnering with existing affiliates or chapters. For example, the Alaska Federation of Natives collaborated with the Housing Authority, which required renters to transition to a new online payment system. AFN hosted meetings where the Digital Navigator led training sessions, teaching residents how to set up and navigate the system. These sessions not only addressed immediate needs but also fostered long-term digital adoption.
- **Increasing visibility of Digital Navigator resources:** The Digital Navigator actively participated in high-profile speaking engagements at national and state events, including Net Inclusion, annual infrastructure summits with the State of Alaska, and Alaska Municipal League gatherings. At the AFN convention, the Digital Navigator staffed a booth and was present at a statewide Tribal gathering in Anchorage to promote his services as a Digital Navigator.

## **Alaska Federation of Natives Digital Navigator Program Highlights:**

- Alaska Federation of Natives is the largest statewide Native organization in Alaska, representing 120,000 Alaska Natives through partnership with Tribal corporations, nonprofits, and nearly 200 villages.
- More than 120 clients received device troubleshooting, email basics, computer skills, and individual training sessions.

# Cayuse Native Solutions

## Technology Meets Tradition: Bridging the Digital Divide on the Umatilla Reservation

Nearly 5,000 people call the Umatilla Nation home. On any given day, residents across the reservation come together to celebrate and honor their heritage and culture. Whether it's a traditional event, social gathering, or Tribal leadership meeting, community is an integral part of every day here, and connecting with each other is woven into the fabric of Tribal life.

For Tribal communities, 'connectivity' means preserving traditions while engaging with the modern digital world. Unfortunately, limited technology and connectivity resources on the Umatilla Reservation have also left many residents without the opportunity and tools needed to thrive in today's online society. But with the help of a locally run initiative aimed at addressing the technology needs of all Umatilla residents, achieving digital equity may soon be realized.

Thanks to a grant through Google.org, Cayuse Native Solutions (CNS) was selected to join NDIA's National Digital Navigator Corps to launch a program



*Digital Navigator Leo Wallahee helps a community member during his public office hours at the Yellowhawk Tribal Health Center.*

providing free, hands-on technology assistance to residents across the reservation. That community-trusted resource is Leo Wallahee, the lead Digital Navigator for the program.

“I want every person to not only be taken care of but to feel important and valued as a human being,” Leo says. This philosophy drives his work, whether he’s demystifying technology, teaching basic computer skills, or helping a resident set up Starlink’s satellite internet service.

As a Yakama Nation member and descendant of the Wenatchapam people, Leo brings technical expertise and a deep understanding of the importance of community bonds. Having lived on the Umatilla reservation for 18 years, he knows how vital it is to build trust and foster connections.

**“I’ve come to learn that helping even one person in a day can create a ripple effect.”**

Leo Wallahee, Digital Navigator

“Having a skilled person in the community who understands the technology barriers and how to interact respectfully is the real success of this Digital Navigator program,” said Debra Croswell, Executive Managing Director of CNS, the for-profit enterprise of the

Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) that provides technology solutions to Native Nations, Tribal entities, Native-owned businesses, and organizations serving Indigenous communities.

The Umatilla Reservation’s diverse population faces various digital needs that Leo assesses through personalized, one-on-one interactions. He holds office hours a few times per month at locations like the Nixyaawii Governance Center, Mission Senior Center, Yellowhawk Tribal Health Center, and Nixyaawii Community Financial Services. These sessions cover everything from navigating email to troubleshooting new devices – but always at the individual’s pace.

One of Leo’s most impactful stories shows the power of trust and connection through these personal interactions. “During one of my office hours at the

Nixyaawii Governance Center, an employee stopped by and inquired about a laptop,” Leo shared. “After filling out the required intake form and receiving a laptop, I began teaching him how to use email and other programs. After several sessions, he told me he was having fun learning and felt comfortable using it on his own. Now he stops by my regular office hours just to say hi and catch up.”

The program’s success lies in its flexibility and commitment to meeting residents where they feel most comfortable. For some, this means attending Leo’s office hours. For others, it means inviting him into their homes for hands-on assistance. Leo recalls visiting a resident to help connect a printer and showing her how to safely open attachments on her phone. For those without a computer at home, learning to use their mobile devices effectively is critical.

“On Tribal land like the Umatilla Reservation, letting people know about the program is the first step, even if it’s one resident at a time,” Leo said. “Stick with it. Get yourself known and out there. Don’t get discouraged if it’s slow and you feel like you’re not helping.”

The program is an extension of CNS’s broader mission to provide technology solutions to Native Nations and organizations serving Indigenous communities. However, this grant was specifically designed to support the hiring of the community-based Digital Navigators alongside programmatic and technical support –helping Umatilla, other Tribal members, and non-Tribal residents alike. Leo’s role is to identify the most pressing technology needs and deliver solutions that are both practical and empowering.

“Technology is only as useful as the ability of people to use it,” Debra Croswell explains. “That’s why having someone like Leo, who can demystify technology and work closely with residents, is so essential.”

As Leo continues his work, the impact of the Digital Navigator program grows. Each resident he assists not only gains valuable skills but also feels more connected to their community. For Leo, every session—even those with just one or two participants—is meaningful.

Looking ahead, CNS hopes to expand the program’s reach and deepen its impact. With Leo’s steady presence and dedication, the Umatilla reservation is taking significant steps to bridge the digital divide and create opportunities for all its residents to thrive in today’s digital world.

As Leo continues his work, the impact of the Digital Navigator program grows. Each resident he assists not only gains valuable skills but also feels more connected to their community. For Leo, every session—even those with just one or two participants—is meaningful. “I’ve come to learn that helping even one person in a day can create a ripple effect,” he shares.



*Digital Navigator Leo Wallahee leads a digital skills class for residents of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.*

## Increasing Access, Affordability, and Adoption on Umatilla Reservation

- **Assessing the digital skills of community members.** The Digital Navigator evaluates the level of technical assistance needed based on intake forms the community members fill out and customizes learning based on individual skill sets.
- **Enhancing connectivity.** The Digital Navigator assists local elders in learning how to use their cell phones for email, and helps households connect to local wireless and satellite internet providers. The Digital Navigator also helps families obtain laptops so that students can facilitate at-home learning.
- **Creating sustainable digital skills.** The Digital Navigator assisted a single mother with two children by providing her with a laptop and teaching her how to use it. This allowed her to enroll and participate in online classes at the local community college, building sustainable digital skills.
- **Accessing community resources.** Establishing regular office hours at four community buildings with the highest volume of foot traffic has been the most successful way for the Digital Navigator to connect with community members.

### Umatilla Reservation Digital Navigator Program Highlights:

- Located in Northeastern Oregon on 270,000 acres.
- Umatilla Reservation is home to the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, a union of the Cayuse, Umatilla, and Walla Walla Tribes totaling 3,000 members and 2,000 non-Tribal members.
- Program led by Cayuse Native Solutions.
- Provided individual technical assistance and led group digital skills training to more than 200 people.
- Nearly 120 people have received a laptop, two-in-one device or tablet.

# Community Broadband Action Network

## The Relentless and Rewarding Work of a Digital Navigator in Rural Iowa

At a laptop distribution event in a small county in southern Iowa, a mother and her son approached the organizer, unsure if the opportunity was legitimate. “She was apprehensive at first, thinking it might be a scam, but broke down in tears when she realized it was real,” shares Allison Ruhl, the lead Digital Navigator for southern and southwest Iowa. The mother explained she had been doing everything in her power to help her son achieve his dream of attending college but never believed a laptop would be within reach. For her son, who was already excelling in high school and taking college-level courses, the laptop would be a vital tool for his future.

Moments like these are what drive Allison. Working in rural Iowa, where seven of the state’s smallest incorporated communities are located, she has been tirelessly building a program to reach residents with technical assistance, digital skills training, and devices. Her work bridges the gap for people in hard-to-reach geographies, helping them gain the tools and confidence they need to thrive in an increasingly digital world.

Allison is central to the Community Broadband Action Network (CBAN)’s participation in NDIA’s National Digital Navigator Corps. With support from a



*CBAN’s Digital Navigator Allison Ruhl assists clients at a recent tech fair.*

Google.org grant, Allison meets residents, assesses their digital skills, and tailors training to meet their individual needs. Whether it's helping a grandmother send her first email or guiding families toward affordable internet options, Allison understands the life-changing potential of each interaction.



*At CBAN's Tech Tune-Up and Fair, community partner Grand River Mutual provides tech guidance to a client.*

CBAN, established in 2018, originally focused on helping communities gain control over their broadband access. But as they engaged more deeply with local residents, they realized that access was only one piece of the puzzle. Adoption and trust were equally critical to success. "Hooking people up and walking away is an inadequate approach," explains CBAN Co-Founder and Digital Equity Practice Leader, Jon Willow. "We needed someone who could meet people where they are, and Allison has done just that."

In a region with minimal technological infrastructure, including limited local media, Allison has had to get creative with outreach. From signup sheets at grocery stores to word of mouth at libraries, she uses grassroots methods to connect with the community. "You can't rely on traditional outreach here," she says. "You have to meet people in their spaces, at their pace."

Allison's determination has been key to growing CBAN's Digital Navigator program. At events like tech fairs, she ensures residents leave with more than just a device –they leave with confidence and the skills to use it effectively. "Not taking no for an answer is part of the job," Allison says. "It's about showing people the value, sharing success stories, and being there every step of the way."

CBAN’s impact extends beyond individual clients. The organization has established rural hubs across five counties, providing spaces where residents can learn, collaborate, and build connections. Whether hosting one-on-one sessions or partnering with local organizations to address digital equity, CBAN has become a trusted resource in southern Iowa. And for many county residents, Allison is the familiar face they rely on.

“Allison is brilliant at meeting people where they are,” Jon notes. “She’s tenacious with both clients and partners, staying with them until we meet the goal. Her work has already made a lasting impact.”

**“The need is great, but so is the potential. Every person we help is a step toward a more connected and equitable community.”**

Allison Ruhl, Digital Navigator

Despite these successes, challenges remain. Internet affordability is one of the biggest hurdles in rural Iowa, where reliable service is often out of reach for many families. “Connectivity shouldn’t be a luxury—it’s a necessity,” Allison emphasizes.

CBAN’s leadership is committed to ensuring the sustainability of the Digital Navigator program. They’re exploring partnerships and innovative solutions to secure ongoing funding, recognizing that having someone like Allison in the community is essential to their mission. As Allison plans her next tech fair and continues her daily work, she remains optimistic about the future.

Here, success isn’t just about the number of devices distributed or workshops held—it’s about the lives changed through opportunities to learn about and access technology. Students heading to college, grandparents reconnecting with family, and communities finding new ways to solve challenges all point to the transformative power of digital inclusion.

In rural Iowa, where resources are scarce, but determination runs deep, Allison and CBAN are proving that with creativity, resilience, and heart, even the most remote corners can thrive in the digital world.

## Increasing Access, Affordability, and Adoption in Iowa's Southern Tier Counties

- **Helping residents know the various connectivity options available.** With no media landscape in a largely remote, rural, and underserved area, CBAN has learned creativity is vital in getting the word out to every member of the community, whether through local radio, grocery store flyers, or Facebook posts.
- **Expanding connectivity.** CBAN has established relationships with five rural communities in South Central Iowa, which act as rural hubs for clients to meet, discuss digital equity, and learn. Through events that allow clients to bring their own devices, 1:1 sessions, and partnerships with community organizations, they have gained a positive reputation as a crucial resource for rural Iowa.
- **Pursuing local partnerships.** CBAN works with community-based organizations of all kinds to identify and build support for digital navigation services. The organization is currently evaluating partnerships with other agencies and the State of Iowa to coordinate and advise Digital Navigator trainers, who would be employed by other agencies.
- **Tailoring digital navigation services.** CBAN's digital skilling curriculum is divided into three tracks, curated to the needs of learners at different levels. From there, the Digital Navigator works with clients to establish personal goals and offer the needed support around device ownership and access to affordable internet.

### Community Broadband Action Network's (CBAN) Digital Navigator Program Highlights:

- **Primarily** serves Taylor, Ringgold, Montgomery, and Decatur counties in southern Iowa.

# Cherokee Nation

## Building Connections: How Cherokee Nation's Digital Navigator is Bringing Digital Skills to Every Corner of the Reservation

Meet Kendall Lee-Daughtery, Cherokee Nation's Digital Navigator program lead, and a proud Cherokee Nation citizen. Kendall isn't just a tech guy—he's part of the community. Growing up in Cherokee Nation, he's someone people trust to help them navigate the often confusing world of technology. Whether explaining internet plans, figuring out devices, or troubleshooting connectivity issues, Kendall's got it covered because he gets it.

For Cherokee citizens living on and off the reservation, staying connected is more than just having access to the internet. It's about staying close to their Tribe and culture and feeling part of the digital world. Cherokee Nation Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin, Jr., couldn't have said it better: "...it is vital for our Tribe's



long-term success that we ensure that all Cherokee citizens, no matter where they live, remain connected to our Tribe, our government, and our culture."

The Cherokee Nation is making strides toward improving broadband access on their reservation, which spans an incredible 7,000 square miles in rural northeastern Oklahoma. The challenge is real—there are still 6,000 Cherokee

households without internet or computers at home, according to estimates from [Cherokee Nation](#). That's a lot of people disconnected, not only from technology but from opportunities in education, health care, and staying connected with loved ones.

That's where the Cherokee Nation's digital navigator program, part of the National Digital Navigator Corps (NDNC), steps in. Partnering with NDIA, AMERIND Critical Infrastructure and supported by Google.org, this program addresses the community's most significant need—helping

**“When I first started as a digital navigator, I thought the job was going to be more of an IT service role. However, I now see that I’m helping members of my own community and making a real impact on their everyday lives. Giving back to the community where I was raised is incredibly rewarding.”** Kendall Lee-Daughtery

Cherokee citizens, especially elders and Cherokee language speakers, access critical services like telehealth or expand educational resources for school-age children. Reliable internet isn't easy to come by, with limited infrastructure and high prices, but the program is making headway.

One of Kendall's stories from working with an elder shows the impact of this work. He helped a Tribal elder who needed internet connectivity so her pacemaker could update data in real-time for her doctor to access. Kendall set up a hotspot, helped her apply for the Affordable Connectivity Program benefit, and even secured an internet provider to ensure she didn't have to make long trips to the doctor. This isn't just about tech—it's about peace of mind, knowing she's getting the care she needs right from home.

Kendall's office is in the J.W. Sam-Gadusi building in Catoosa, where the Connected Learning Center, a partnership with AT&T, provides a dedicated space for digital learning. With 15 computer stations and fiber internet, Kendall can hold one-on-one training sessions and group workshops on skills such as resume building. He's usually out on the road, meeting people right where they are, helping them connect to the digital world one home at a time.

There's much more to the work of a digital navigator than just showing people how to use a computer. It's about ensuring they feel confident and empowered to take advantage of the opportunities the internet provides. For many residents, the terminology on an internet bill or knowing which plans they qualify for is a mystery. Kendall is their go-to guide, breaking it down and making it easy to understand.



But this is just the beginning. The Cherokee Nation is looking to expand the program and spread the word about this critical resource. From partnering with local internet service providers or creating a 'Learn to Earn' program where residents can earn a laptop by completing an online course, exciting things are on the horizon.



*Cherokee Nation, AT&T, and Compudopt team up to give laptops to students at Kenwood & Oaks Mission Schools. September 10, 2024.*

## Increasing Access, Affordability, and Adoption for Cherokee Nation

- **Helping residents know the various connectivity options available to them.** Beginning during COVID, hotspots were distributed throughout the Cherokee Nation to improve connectivity, and Kendall ensured citizens were aware of the hotspots and helped with connectivity.
- **Access to technology.** NDNC funding has provided laptops to qualifying Cherokee residents and tech support from Kendall.
- **Expanding connectivity.** Cherokee Nation received federal funding from the Tribal Broadband Connectivity Fund to expand connectivity in the very rural parts of Cherokee Nation with 15 new cell towers and 240 miles of fiber.
- **Accessing community resources.** Kendall utilized the new Connected Learning Center in Catoosa for training classes and workshops.

### Cherokee Nation Digital Navigator Program Highlights:

- Located in Northeastern Oklahoma.
- 14 counties across 7,000 square miles.
- 140,000+ Cherokee Nation citizens live within the Tribe's reservation .
- Provided tech assistance and digital skills to approximately 210 residents and distributed 170 WiFi hotspot devices and 150 laptops to students.

# Computer Reach

## How Computer Reach's Digital Navigator Program is Transforming Communities in Western Pennsylvania

Starting a small business is extremely challenging. Now, imagine starting a small business without internet access. It's even more difficult in rural areas, where the lack of broadband access, limited resources, and a shortage of digital skills have left entire communities disconnected from today's digital world.

That's where Computer Reach, a community-based organization, comes in, working hard to help communities overcome these barriers in underserved areas in Western Pennsylvania. Computer Reach is dedicated to giving people in Western Pennsylvania access to technology—using refurbished computers, teaching digital skills, and providing support to communities that need it most. While they've helped many different groups, reaching rural areas meant trying something new: community-based digital navigators.



*Digital Navigator Sarah Radcliffe presenting at the Leadership Washington County monthly meeting*

“There’s not a lot of ongoing digital inclusion efforts in Pennsylvania’s western half,” explains Dave Sevick, Executive Director of Computer Reach. “While Pittsburgh and Allegheny County have more services, there aren’t any programs giving out free devices and doing training for rural communities. With fewer people, there are fewer resources.”

That’s the value of digital navigators—trusted community members who can provide one-on-one guidance and support to help connect people to the digital world. Computer Reach was selected by NDIA to create a digital navigator program as part of a grant from Google.org.

**“The best advice I could offer for leading a program like this one is to be flexible, be able to pivot, and stand firm in your boundaries. Make things work but not at the expense of work-life balance.”** Sarah Radcliffe

These navigators offer personalized in-person or remote support to help people become more comfortable using technology in ways that make sense for them. Sarah Radcliffe, Computer Reach’s digital navigator, is leading the charge in Washington County. Sarah is passionate about empowering people by teaching digital skills and providing free devices to those who need them, making sure everyone has access to the digital world.

One of Sarah’s favorite stories is about Ronald Garrett, or “G,” who’s starting his own painting business. “He’s motivated and passionate about learning,” Sarah shares. “We’ve been teaching him how to use ChatGPT to help him set up his business. He’s so eager to learn, and it’s amazing to see how much confidence he’s gained as a business owner.”

Sarah’s work has already had a measurable impact. Since the program launched, she’s served over 250 end users, handed out countless refurbished devices, and helped small business owners, students, and seniors access everything from job opportunities to health services—all through technology.

“G” himself couldn’t agree more. “I know that the skills I’ve learned will benefit me in the best way,” he says. And it’s not just him. From students and seniors to veterans using telehealth services, the program is making a real difference in people’s lives.

With new funding secured, Computer Reach is gearing up to expand to Greene and Fayette counties. Plans are already in motion to bring on more digital navigators, ramp up outreach, and distribute even more refurbished devices.

What makes the digital navigator program so special? According to Dave Sevick, “This work is 80% social work and 20% tech.” It’s all about relationships—getting to know people, listening to their needs, and providing ongoing support. Sarah agrees, saying, “Community members come to me for more than just computer help—I try to be a resource hub for them.” And clearly, it’s working.

**“A lot of people who didn’t have a device before, have never had a device, or wouldn’t have otherwise been able to afford one, are getting them. Those who need it are getting the necessary digital skills to build confidence in themselves, to do anything, go to school, work, do a telehealth appointment.”**

**Sarah Radcliffe**

The success of the Washington County Digital Navigator Program shows just how powerful community-based digital inclusion efforts can be. With more communities eager to get on board, Computer Reach is proving that personalized, hands-on support is the key to bridging the digital divide. As more rural areas across the country face similar challenges, programs like this offer a model for expanding digital access and use to everyone.

## Increasing Access, Affordability, and Adoption in Washington County

- **Helping residents know the various connectivity options available to them.** Through word of mouth and partner referrals, Computer Reach has been assisting the community for 24 years. Partnerships with local organizations have led to prominent media coverage in newspapers and radio.
- **Access to technology.** Through their Internet Lending Program, Computer Reach partners with T-Mobile, COSTARS, and PNC Bank to provide an affordable and flexible connectivity option for community members. Access to a gateway that supports 64 connections, with no data cap or throttling at \$35 a month means that households have reliable, fast internet to support family members connecting multiple devices. Anyone can participate in the lending program regardless of income.
- **Expanding connectivity.** Community partnerships have been instrumental in outreach efforts, enabling Computer Reach to help 265 residents in Washington County with in-person training, and access to computer devices.
- **Accessing community resources.** Computer Reach uses an asset map to identify nearby resources closest to community residents. The organization has partnered with PA Career Link, The Literacy Council, and Chrome Federal Credit Union.

### Washington County Digital Navigator Program Highlights:

- Part of Southwestern PA, bordering West Virginia
- Program led by Computer Reach
- Has provided digital skills and tech support to over 250 end-users in Washington County
- 200 hours of in-person training and 128 hours of tech support
- Distributed over 280 laptops
- Computer Reach recovered over 35,000 pounds of e-waste

# Community Service Programs of West Alabama, Inc.

## Transforming Lives Through Digital Skills: A Story of Libraries, Laptops, and Lifelong Learning

On an afternoon in rural Alabama, a group of seniors gather at their local library, excited for what has become their favorite weekly activity. Some have never touched a computer before, while others had a few stories of frustration with outdated devices. But what united them was a desire to learn—and the patient guidance of Megan Waiters, the lead Digital Navigator for the Community Service Programs of West Alabama (CSP of West Alabama).

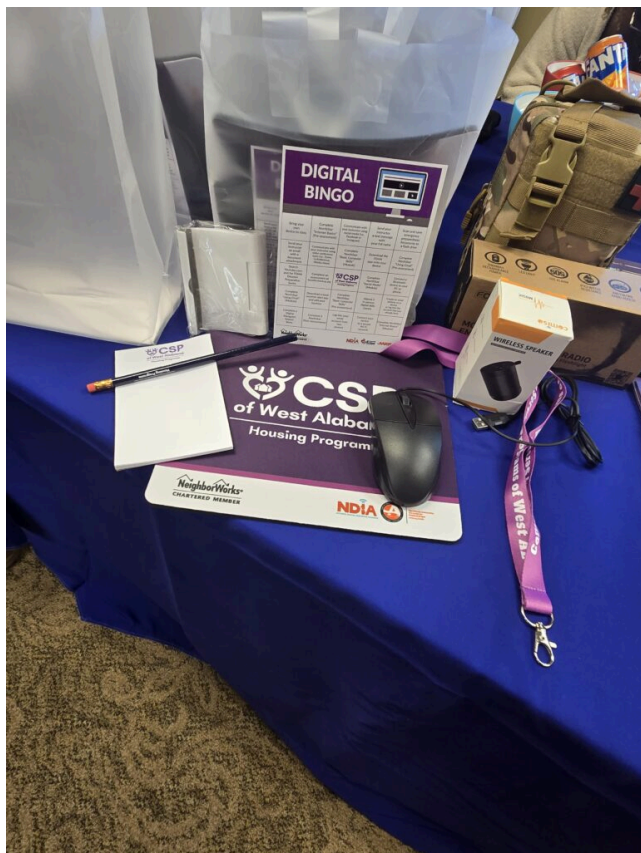
CSP of West Alabama, a non-profit organization that has been empowering low-income and vulnerable populations since 1967, was selected to participate in NDIA's National Digital Navigator Corp program. With support from a Google.org grant, the organization hired a Digital Navigator to provide digital skills training across its ten-county service area. Megan's experience as a library program director gave her unique insight into the role libraries play in rural communities.



*Digital Navigator Megan Waiters with Jada Bryant receiving a certificate for completing the Digital Skills Challenge.*

“I knew that libraries would be a good place to build a digital navigator program across ten counties because they are trusted community resource hubs for people to come in and receive hands-on support,” says Megan. “This program is about more than digital skills; it’s about empowering individuals and strengthening communities.”

One of Megan’s students, a former high school teacher, brought along her two sisters to attend classes together. “They showed up like they were back in high school,” Megan recalls fondly. By the end of the program, these students weren’t just classmates - they were confident users of digital tools, proudly downloading attachments, navigating the internet, and even identifying online scams.



*Items for participants at a Digital Skills Challenge: Digital Bingo. Prizes for the first 200 participants included a laptop, mouse, CSP customized mouse pad, lanyard, pencil, and notepad, along with Bluetooth Speaker.*

For Megan, moments like these are the heart of her work. “Every single person who started the class wanted to learn,” she shares. “To see them thrive from having no confidence in the digital space to becoming self-sufficient—it’s incredible.”

CSP of West Alabama’s Digital Navigator program is making waves across its 10-county service area, leveraging libraries as hubs of community engagement. Libraries, Megan says, are “the driving force” behind much of the program’s success. With partnerships secured at 12 libraries and plans to expand further, Megan hosts weekly sessions, helping participants gain digital confidence one step at a time.

The program’s impact is undeniable. Since its launch, CSP of West Alabama has distributed over 560 devices,

including laptops and tablets, to residents who completed digital skills training. Many of these devices were tied to the now-expired federal Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), which Megan helped more than 700 clients navigate and enroll in. Participants not only received devices but also learned the skills needed to use them effectively, such as scanning documents, using email, and accessing online portals.

A highlight of this program is the Digital Skills Challenge, which brings together seniors, families, and other community members for in-person and hybrid classes at libraries across multiple counties. Using Northstar Digital Literacy's curriculum, Megan guided 76 participants through pre-tests, personalized lessons, and final assessments. Graduates leave with certifications, new devices, and a sense of accomplishment. There's even a graduation complete with laptops, mousepads, and Bluetooth speakers for the participants.

For some, the journey from digital novice to confident user starts with simple, practical tasks. Megan frequently assists clients with everyday challenges, like scanning documents for housing assistance applications or troubleshooting issues on their devices. "People learn in cycles," she explains. "They need repetition and real-world application to retain these skills—and technology changes so often, it's important to keep learning."

"This Digital Navigator Program has impacted my life tremendously," says Jessie U., a 68-year-old woman who took one of Megan's digital skills courses. "The tools I have learned to help me with my computer skills were sharpened by the knowledge I learned through this class. Now I am better equipped to send emails, scan documents, and save important information."

Megan says that assessing individual skill levels is an important part of creating a Digital Navigator program. "Everyone comes to you with a different skill set – whether it's computer basics or more advanced knowledge, the digital skills modules are designed to help people at all levels."

One example of this came recently following a digital skills class. "I took this course believing that I already knew a lot about the use of the computer and

smartphone. I just wanted a refresher. Imagine my dismay when my test scores were well below what I expected them to be. I found myself learning a lot of new things, which allowed me to perform tasks the ‘right way’ not the way I had learned through trial and error. My way often involved many unnecessary steps and was time-consuming,” says Barbara W.

Creative initiatives like Digital Bingo have added a fun twist to the learning process. Inspired by the popularity of bingo at senior centers, Megan designed cards listing 24 digital skill activities, such as computer and internet basics, and aligned with the Northstar Digital Literacy program. Following initial pre-assessments on areas regarding basic computer fields, participants can pick an activity that interests them and learn about it. Megan and the library staff are there to assist.

Participants who get bingo earn prizes, including devices, tying motivation to tangible rewards.

In all of the navigator lessons, I’ve learned so much more than I thought I was going to learn,” shares Jarmonia T. after taking one of Megan’s workshops. “The impact that the Digital Navigator Program has on me is that I now know more digital skills and the opportunity to receive a free laptop, which can help with everyday needs.”



*Akron Public Library in Akron, Alabama. Each student received a “Digital Skills Challenge” participation certification.*

In addition to foundational skills, Megan incorporates elements like digital disaster preparedness, teaching participants how to scan emergency documents onto flash drives and download essential apps like FEMA’s app that provides tools to stay prepared in a disaster emergency. “If I can teach them how to be proactive, it serves them well,” Megan emphasizes.

The program’s success is a testament to Megan’s dedication and the strong partnerships she’s built, from libraries to housing offices. Looking ahead, Megan hopes to expand her outreach to include students and colleges, bringing digital skills training to even more residents. She also aims to roll out a second phase of the Digital Skills Challenge in additional counties, using community centers to reach areas where library access is limited.

While connectivity in some of Alabama’s Western rural counties remains a challenge—many residents face limited and costly internet options—Megan’s efforts are closing the gap in accessibility, affordability, and adoption. For her, the work is personal. “The need is so great,” she says. “I love what I do.”

Through a combination of passion, perseverance, and community collaboration, CSP of West Alabama’s Digital Navigator program is turning libraries into launching pads for digital empowerment and creating pathways for lifelong learning. For the hundreds of clients who’ve gained skills and confidence, it’s more than just a program—it’s a gateway to new opportunities.

## Increasing Access, Affordability, and Adoption Across West Alabama

- **Expanding access to connectivity.** Libraries offer free internet access and computers for residents, making them ideal hubs for community engagement. Regular office hours at county libraries have fostered a sustained presence, building relationships that often turn one-time visitors into repeat clients.
- **Driving digital adoption through scaled programs.** The Digital Bingo Challenge, launched at libraries in Dallas, Greene, Hale, and Sumter counties, engages participants aged 50+ to develop digital skills in a fun and rewarding way. Winners earn prizes such as laptops. In 2025, the program will expand to Bibb, Choctaw, Fayette, Lamar, Perry, and Tuscaloosa counties.
- **Equipping people with practical digital skills.** Nearly 200 individuals have received assistance through CSP of West Alabama's Housing Department. This includes first-time homebuyers completing online loan applications, renters scanning and submitting rental agreements, and clients learning to make online monthly rent payments.

### CSP of West Alabama Digital Navigator Program Highlights:

- Program led by Community Service Programs of West Alabama, Inc., which provides its core services to those in need throughout a 10-county area encompassing Bibb, Choctaw, Dallas, Fayette, Greene, Hale, Lamar, Perry, Sumter, and Tuscaloosa.
- Distributed more than 540 devices, including 76 laptops, and helped more than 400 clients gain digital skills with individual training and group sessions.

# Digital Connect Initiative, Gila River

## Building a Digital Ecosystem in Gila River Through Connection and Trust

“For me, being a Digital Navigator is an opportunity to give back to the community that shaped me,” shares Tyler Smith, Gila River’s Digital Navigator. “I want to help elevate our digital skills and uplift our voices in the pursuit of digital equity.”

Born and raised in the Gila River Indian Community, Tyler embodies the mission of the Digital Navigator program. With his deep roots and passion for giving back, he is bridging the gap between infrastructure and accessibility, empowering residents one connection at a time.

Technology is becoming an essential tool for preserving traditions and fostering new opportunities in the Gila River Indian Community, home to the Akimel O’otham (Pima) and Pee Posh (Maricopa) Tribes. Spanning 600 square miles across seven districts in central Arizona, the community faces unique challenges in ensuring everyone can access and benefit from the digital world.



*Digital Navigator Tyler Smith working with a Gila River member in a one-on-one computer skills session.*

While Gila River Telecommunications, Inc. (GRTI) has spent decades building robust broadband infrastructure, Digital Connect®, an initiative of GRTI, focuses on improving quality of life and developing future generations of O’odham leaders in technology. Through its participation in NDIA’s National Digital Navigator Corp program, with funding from Google.org, Digital Connect® designed its Digital Navigator program to create one-on-one connections with the people they serve.

Skepticism toward technology is common in Gila River, and Tyler has placed a special emphasis on serving the elders, ensuring they feel included in the digital age—at their own pace. In the program’s first year, much of the effort was spent on education and outreach, raising awareness about Digital Navigator services and demonstrating how technology could enhance lives.

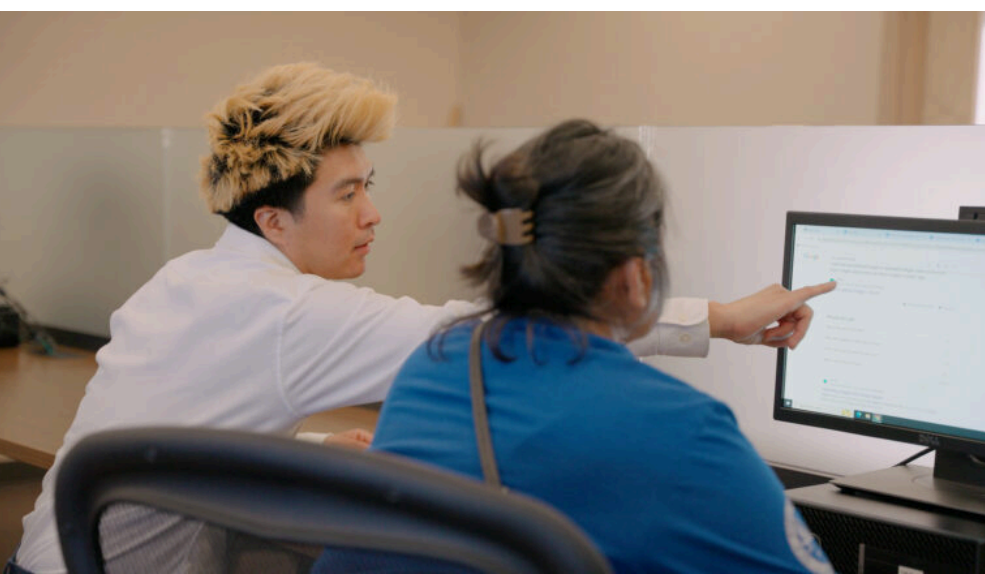
A turning point came last summer when Tyler began tailoring his approach to meet the community’s unique needs. He now visits all seven districts weekly, spending three hours in each district’s service center or community center. Whether it’s a gym, computer lab, or meeting room, Tyler sets up shop with informational materials and assists residents with everything from setting up devices to navigating social services.

“Every experience is unique and special,” Tyler says. “Once I build a relationship with someone, I get to see their daily lives and struggles. It’s about respect and understanding what they need.”

One of the biggest challenges of the program has been ensuring that residents not only receive devices but also the tools and training to use them effectively. Tyler distributes devices like Dell Latitude laptops and tablets, using intake forms to assess each recipient’s skill level and tailor lessons accordingly. For many, these devices open up new possibilities—connecting to home networks, exploring online resources, and learning to use programs like Microsoft Office and Google Workspace.

One digital journey shows how access to technology and training empowers leadership and strengthens community engagement.

As Chair of the District 3 Community Meetings, Marlo Schurz plays a key role in organizing and leading discussions. However, without a laptop, managing meetings and communications was a challenge. Through the Device Distribution Program, Marlo received a laptop and, with guidance from Tyler, built her digital skills. She earned certificates in ProSkills Outlook and Canva, improving her ability to create materials and stay connected.



*Digital Navigator Tyler Smith teaching a digital skills lesson.*

“Most people already had the internet at home but didn’t know how to use the devices to their full potential,” Tyler shares. “By walking them through their internet ecosystem and tailoring lessons to their needs, I’ve seen them gain confidence in navigating the digital world.”

video chat with family to parents helping their children with online schoolwork.

The impact has been felt across all demographics, from elders learning to

Tyler’s Digital Navigator sessions have become the program’s primary driver of new clients. These unstructured sessions allow residents to drop in and receive help with their unique challenges. By meeting people where they are, Tyler has helped reduce the discomfort many feel about engaging with technology.

The program has also distributed over 70 devices and provided follow-up support to ensure recipients can fully integrate technology into their lives. Whether it’s helping an elder connect a laptop to Wi-Fi or teaching a family how to use their home network, Tyler’s efforts have made technology more accessible and less intimidating.

The Digital Connect® Digital Navigator program shows that digital equity isn't just about infrastructure—it's about people. By building relationships and fostering trust, Tyler is helping Gila River residents unlock the benefits of the digital age while respecting their unique culture and needs.

Mikhail Sundust, Digital Connect®'s Executive Director, captures the initiative's essence: "This technology wasn't made for our people, and that's led to a natural distrust. But with a community-based digital navigator, we're putting a face to the resources. It's about humanizing technology and showing that it can support—not replace—our way of life."

Bridging tradition with technology is an important part of the Digital Navigator program at Gila River, particularly Tribal elders. Pat Smith, a respected elder from District 6, has been part of the Digital Connect® Initiative since its first digital skills class. Eager to grow her small business, Thunder Woman Creations, she learned to use Instagram and expanded her digital skills through classes and one-on-one sessions with Tyler. Pat mastered essential online tools like email and banking and received a laptop through the Device Distribution Program. Her dedication even earned her the DCI Digital Citizenship Award.

For Tyler, the work is personal. "I've seen how connected our community is, and I want to be a bridge to help people feel comfortable with technology. It's about listening, respecting, and making sure their voices are heard."

Through tailored solutions, dedicated outreach, and a deep understanding of the community, the Digital Connect® Digital Navigator program is shaping a future where technology serves the people—and not the other way around.

## Increasing Access, Affordability, and Adoption in Gila River

- **Expanding Digital Resources.** Digital Navigator sessions at anchor institutions connect residents with personalized support and bring in the most new clients for digital navigator services.
- **Building Community Trust:** The Digital Navigator engages with Tribal elders and leaders at meetings, fostering awareness and trust in the program and its training offerings.
- **Enhancing Digital Skills:** Residents who previously received laptops without training were given lessons on computer basics with the Digital Navigator.
- **Increasing Client Engagement:** The Digital Navigator expanded his outreach by visiting all seven districts weekly, spending three hours at each service center. By creating his own schedule and bringing informational materials on social services, he has increased face-to-face interactions and client engagement.

### Gila River's Digital Navigator Program Highlights:

- The Gila River Indian Community (GRIC) is located in Arizona, south of Chandler and Phoenix.
- GRIC has an approximate population of 14,000 people comprising two different tribes - the Akimel O'odam (Pima) and Pee Posh (Maricopa) - living across seven districts.
- Program led by Digital Connect Initiative, an initiative of Gila River Telecommunications, Inc. to bridge the digital divide in the Gila River Indian Community through digital skills training, support services, and learning resources that are easy to understand and readily accessible, and to develop future generations of O'odham people as leaders in technology.
- Helped 208 GRIC community members and residents with digital skills and computer training sessions, often with repeat clients.
- Distributed more than 50 laptops and 20 tablets to clients.

# Easter Seals of Greater Houston

## How One Veteran is Helping Other Veterans and Their Families with Digital Adoption in Rural Texas

Walter Prescher, a father of twelve, Methodist pastor, and Iraq war veteran with three Army tours, has been working hard to help other veterans and military families across rural areas surrounding Houston get more comfortable using the internet. His deep connection to the community, especially with veterans, makes him a trusted figure as a community resource for people in hard-to-reach areas, teaching them how to use technology to access services, stay in touch with loved ones, and be safe online.

For Walter, it's more than just teaching people how to use a computer—it's about changing lives. "A big part of what I do is help military families build the lives they want during and after service," Walter shares. "The internet has been a game-changer for so many of them. From telehealth to staying connected with their benefits, it's all digital now."



Walter's military service and familiarity with the community, led the Easter Seals of Greater Houston (ESGH) to hire him as its digital navigator for their community of veterans, people with disabilities, and their families.

When ESGH was selected to be a part of NDIA's National Digital Navigator Corp, funding from the program's sponsor, Google.org, enabled the hiring of a digital navigator to reach the often-overlooked rural communities in southeast Texas. The ESGH has been delivering help to those who need it most, and their digital inclusion efforts are no exception. Walter's work has been a natural extension to ESGH's BridgingApps, an online program that provides education and support on all kinds of devices, helping people with disabilities improve their skills.

What makes this program truly special is its personalized approach. Walter doesn't just drop off a device and move on—he works with people in community spaces, one-on-one, making sure they understand how to use the technology and feel confident doing it. His ability to meet people where they are, both literally and figuratively, has made all the difference in these rural communities.

One memorable moment for Water was helping a widower struggling with his smartphone, laptop, and fixed wireless internet. He wanted to stream TV and movies and connect with his son and grandchildren, who live out of state. When Walter helped him call his son on FaceTime, he cried. It was his first time seeing his grandchildren's faces in 18 months.

Walter's work is especially impactful for veterans who rely heavily on online services provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs. Enrolling in benefits requires broadband access, the proper devices, and the digital know-how to navigate it all.

The challenges are even more significant for veterans living on remote farms or ranches. Reliable internet can be expensive or hard to come by, but Walter has been their guide, helping them find affordable solutions and get the devices they need. For many of these families, the federal Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), a federal program that helped low-income families pay for internet and devices, was a lifeline that made internet access possible for the first time.

However, when ACP funding ran out, some families had no choice but to cut back or even disconnect entirely. Walter saw the effects firsthand, noting that 20 to 30 families lost access while others had to downgrade to slower and less reliable internet plans.

Walter quickly points out that his role is more than helping people overcome technology challenges—it's about building trust. "In rural Texas, it's a running joke that you're considered an outsider until the last person who moved in before you either dies or leaves," Walter says. Through his affiliation with the American Legion and other service groups, attending local meetings, and engaging with the community, he's earned their trust and established himself as the go-to person for tech help.

Word of mouth has been powerful, and Walter's work has spread organically through client referrals. But his impact doesn't stop there—partnerships with local organizations like social services and early childhood intervention programs have broadened awareness of his services. ESGH's relationship with the state of Texas has helped Walter connect with special education trainers who introduce him to families that can benefit from his expertise.

As more communities across the country look to build a more digitally inclusive world, Walter and ESGH's work offers a blueprint for success. It's about more than just technology—it's about relationships, trust, and understanding each person's unique needs.

There's no one-size-fits-all solution to digital inclusion. Thankfully, with people like Walter leading the way, communities are finding solutions that work for them, empowering individuals to fully participate in today's increasingly connected world.

## Increasing Access, Affordability, and Adoption in Greater Houston

- **Leverage Community Trust:** Gaining the trust of locals is essential in rural or tight-knit communities. Start by partnering with respected community members or organizations.
- **Understand Local Needs:** Tailor your services to meet the unique needs of the people you serve. Walter's work focuses heavily on veterans and seniors, helping them access the VA's online systems and telehealth services.
- **Raise Awareness of the Program through Connections:** Walter learned that many clients come from referrals who heard about his services through someone they knew. Building that referral network takes making the right contact. One-on-one connections have been more effective than broad marketing and outreach.

### Greater Houston Digital Navigator Program Highlights:

- Easter Seals of Greater Houston serves 14,500+ families in 21 counties
- Provided digital skill and technical assistance to 218 individual clients, led 284 digital skills training sessions, and distributed 61 devices.

# Forest County Broadband Committee

## Empowering Connections: The Heart of Forest County's Digital Navigator Program

In Forest County, Wisconsin, where the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest spreads out for miles and the population is around 9,500, life appears to move a bit slower. But thanks to the efforts of local hero Steve Watson, things are speeding up—digitally, that is!

Located along the state's northeast border, Forest County faces significant challenges with internet access, particularly for older residents and members of the Forest County Potawatomi and Sokaogon Chippewa Communities. The region's dense trees and rugged terrain complicate the installation of broadband infrastructure. In addition to connectivity issues, residents also struggle with obtaining the necessary devices and digital skills to use the internet effectively. This is where Steve plays a crucial role in helping the community.



*Forest County Digital Navigator Steve Watson and community members*

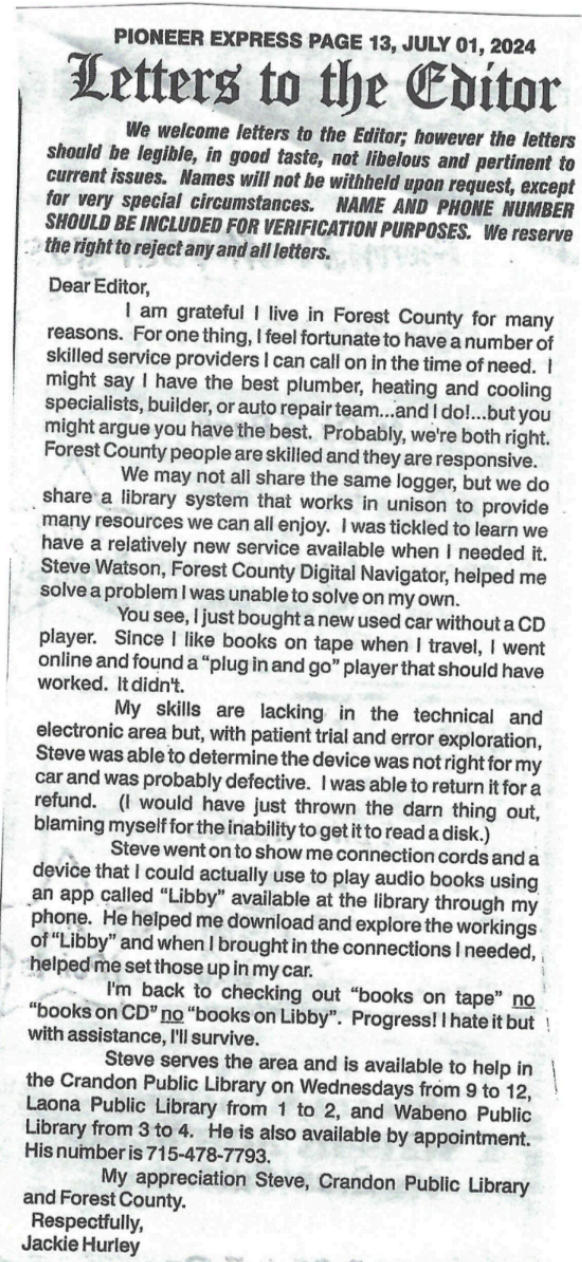
As a digital navigator on the Forest County Broadband Committee, Steve has made it his mission to help folks connect with technology in ways they never thought possible. Whether it's getting someone set up with their first laptop, troubleshooting a tricky tech issue, or explaining how to use telehealth services, Steve's the guy everyone knows they can count on.

"It's not just about tech," Steve says with a smile. "It's about making sure people feel confident and comfortable in today's digital world. It can be overwhelming, but once they get the hang of it, the possibilities are endless."

Since NDIA selected Forest County to be part of the National Digital Navigator Corps in 2022 as part of the grant from Google.org, Steve has been a familiar face around town. He's not the type to stay behind a desk all day—Steve's on the move, often traveling across the county to meet people where they are. Whether it's at a local library, a Tribal community center, or someone's home, Steve is always ready to lend a hand, and the community loves him for it. His patience, warmth, and easy-going demeanor have made him a local favorite.

"Steve's not just some IT guy," one resident said. "He makes learning fun. I never thought I'd be able to use the internet, but thanks to him, I'm emailing my grandkids every week!"

Steve's approach is personal. He gets to know people, listens to their concerns, and tailors his help to their needs. For seniors, it might be learning how to stay



*Jackie Hurley's letter to the editor, Pioneer Express, July 1, 2024*

safe online or setting up a telehealth appointment. For others, it could be figuring out how to pay bills online or using social media to stay connected to family. The key? Steve makes technology feel doable, no matter how tech-savvy (or tech-shy) his clients are.

Some of the folks I work with haven't used computers much, if at all," Steve explains. "They just need a little guidance and someone to show them that they can do this. I love seeing their confidence grow."



*Digital Navigator Steve Watson and AMERIND staff member Davida Delmar at Tribal Broadband Bootcamp*

Steve's office at the Forest County Courthouse is regularly buzzing with activity. Partnerships with local schools, libraries, and Tribal centers help spread the word, letting people know that he's there as a resource. Steve has helped more than 200 people with everything from computer basics to online security, ensuring Forest County's residents have the skills they need to thrive.

Going beyond group settings, Steve is also there to address individual needs. He's known for making house calls, driving through the dense forests and rolling hills to reach people who might be unable to travel. "Sometimes the best learning happens when I'm sitting at someone's kitchen table, helping them with their device," Steve shares. "That personal connection makes all the difference."

In addition to learning digital skills, the community has benefited from increased access to devices. The digital navigator program helps source refurbished ThinkPad laptops and Lenovo tablets for local families in need, ensuring that more people have the tools they need to access the digital world.

The work doesn't stop there. Forest County's Broadband Committee is busy applying for grants to bring better internet access to the region, and in the meantime, Steve and his team are focused on what they can do right now—guaranteeing that residents have the digital skills they need, are equipped with devices, and are ready to tap into the possibilities of the online world.

“It's exciting to see how much we've accomplished already,” Steve says. “But I know there's so much more we can do. I'm just getting started.”

For the community Digital Navigator Program, digital equity is about finding the right solution for each person. “There's no ‘one size fits all’ when it comes to helping people get online,” Amber Rehberg, Area 4 Extension Director, University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Extension, explains. “Some folks just need a few tips, while others need help finding the right device or even figuring out how to get basic internet access. It's about making sure everyone has the tools they need to thrive.” Steve and the Forest County Digital Navigator Program are doing precisely that—taking a personal approach to bridging the digital divide, one resident at a time.

As the program grows and reaches even more people, the message is clear: everyone deserves a chance to participate in the digital world and ensure that no one in Forest County gets left behind.

## Increasing Access, Affordability, and Adoption for Forest County Residents

- **Raising Awareness:** Community connections and local partnerships, including events, county fair exhibits, library meetings, and town halls, have been the most successful means to inform residents that a digital navigator program is available to them.
- **Building Trusted Relationships:** A digital navigator who is familiar with the community instills trust, which is essential to the program's success.
- **Access to Technology:** Through National Digital Navigator Corps funding, more than 100 refurbished laptops and tablets were procured from Human-I-T and Nauncka and distributed to residents.
- **Expanding Connectivity:** The county is applying for Competitive Digital Equity Grant and state capacity grant funds to expand high-speed internet and provide ongoing access to affordable digital skills services.
- **Accessing community resources:** Continued engagement with local organizations ensures comprehensive digital equity support for residents.

### Forest County Digital Navigator Program Highlights:

- Located along the northeastern border of Wisconsin, with 1,000 square miles of dense forest and 800+ lakes
- 9,500 residents, including Forest County Potawatomi Tribal Community and Sokaogon Chippewa Community
- Helped more than 250 residents with individualized computer and tech training and distributed over 100 devices
- Provided access to digital navigator resources at more than 300 community events, offering regular drop-in hours at local libraries and teaching digital workshops
- Program led by Forest County Broadband Committee and University of Wisconsin, Madison Extension

# Hocking Athens Perry Community Action

## For Southeast Ohio's Digital Navigator, Every Day is a Good Day

“The difference between opportunity and frustration often comes down to a simple digital connection,” said Abby Russell.

Abby serves as the digital navigator for Hocking Athens Perry Community Action (HAPCAP), an organization selected by NDIA to develop a National Digital Navigator Corps program. Along with support from a Google.org grant, the hiring of community-based resources in rural areas like Abby is possible. In Appalachian Southeast Ohio, where broadband access is often sparse, and computer skills are critical, Abby spends her days helping residents become more familiar with technology and enhance their digital skills. Abby's work reshapes how residents can connect to resources, family, essential services, and opportunities.



*One-on-one Digital Navigator session with a community member.*

Here, reliable internet can be hard to find and often expensive. Simply getting online is a significant hurdle, and many county services require online accounts to access benefits.

As a community-based resource, Abby is here to help.

She teaches residents how to access the internet and develop fundamental digital skills, such as setting up an email account and navigating online forms.

Abby recalls one of her most memorable clients, a foster parent who didn't have computers at home for the school-aged children in her care. The school sent Chromebooks home, but they often got damaged in transit. Replacing them wasn't feasible. After reaching out to HAPCAP for assistance, this parent received a refurbished computer and, with Abby's help, ensured their at-home learning was a success. The community support made all the difference for this family, which was later honored with the distinction of "Foster Parents of the Year" in their community. Abby's impact reached beyond technical assistance—supporting a family's journey to stability and opportunity.

Her role is critical in a place where residents turn to each other as resources. As she puts it, "In our rural communities, people tend to rely on those they know and trust." Abby's approach is simple: she physically and digitally meets clients where they are. This often means meeting at one of the public libraries in Hocking, Athens, or Perry County, where a trip to the local county library may be the only option to access a computer.

Abby saw the need for basic computer skills during the pandemic when doctor appointments shifted online. She worked in a local medical office then, and many patients needed to learn how to access online video services, create an account, or log on to access the patient portal. These stories are all too frequent in Southeastern Ohio.

Since the start of HAPCAP's digital navigator program in 2022, Abby has partnered with local libraries, schools, job and family service programs, and organizations like the Survivor Advocacy Outreach Program to ensure people are aware of her services. She has taught workshops to help survivors of domestic abuse gain digital skills, connect devices, and access essential services.

The level of technical help or digital guidance varies between school-aged children, parents, and seniors. Abby's day-to-day involves a wide range of support, from helping set up new devices and learning basic computer skills to preparing for job interviews on platforms like Zoom and teaching parents how to keep their kids safe online. She works with senior centers to host cybersecurity workshops on avoiding scams and preventing fraud.

HAPCAP works with partners like PCs for People to source refurbished devices and turns to Abby to teach digital readiness. She holds 'giveaway classes' where clients can keep the laptop only after completing the workshop. This hands-on training builds skills and confidence for a region where resources are stretched thin.

HAPCAP also provides support for people newly released from the jail system. Abby worked with a man who was recently released and enrolled in a re-entry program. He lacked reliable transportation to attend mandatory classes, so Abby gave him a laptop and instructions on how to use it. Although he had some computer experience, he was unfamiliar with new technology and wanted to learn how to use Zoom for job interviews. Abby taught him how to use Zoom and enrolled him in Northstar Digital Literacy training courses to update his computer skills and boost his confidence. He now feels more hopeful that his new digital skills will lead to more job opportunities.

Given limited resources, even businesses need more experience with technology. Abby recently helped a local flea market vendor set up mobile payment options, showing how tools like Square or PayPal can simplify transactions. These skills open doors for local businesses, enabling them to grow and operate more efficiently.

Abby is also keenly aware of the personal impact of her work. "Helping people connect to their families, find jobs, or even stay on top of their health—it all pays off. Every day is a good day," she says. Whether she's helping a parent navigate their child's school portal or a grandparent use video to call a family member, she's not only teaching skills; she's expanding what people believe is possible in their lives.

Abby had another fulfilling experience when she went above and beyond her technical support role. An incoming call from an older veteran was transferred to Abby accidentally. He was trying to get information about a local meals-on-wheels program because he lived alone, didn't have family close by, and couldn't drive to the grocery store. During their conversation, he asked Abby about grocery delivery. Abby patiently explained Instacart to him, helped him download and navigate the app, and showed him how to find food, order, pay, schedule delivery, and reorder. Abby's resourcefulness and patience equipped him with new skills that helped him maintain his independence and made his life a bit easier.

Abby wishes to add more digital navigators to HAPCAP to serve the increasing number of people seeking help and provide skills that could help reshape the region.

In her role, Abby is transforming more than just how people use technology; she's helping residents of Hocking, Athens, and Perry Counties envision a future where digital skills are a given, not a barrier. And in an area that's long needed a way to bridge the gap between isolation and opportunity, Abby's work offers more than digital access—it offers hope.

## **Increasing Access, Affordability, and Adoption for Hocking, Athens, and Perry County Residents**

- **Helping residents access essential services.** Abby has helped community members with their online application process for county assistance programs and accessing benefits.
- **Creating new opportunities.** Through HAPCAP's support of helping people newly released from the jail system re-enter society, Abby's digital skills training teaches computer basics and internet navigation to help with employment opportunities.
- **Expanding community reach.** Abby looks for any opportunity to partner with a community organization or attend a local event to reach more county residents. While attending a Gardening Expo, she taught several farmers how to place online orders for their agri-business. This simple task will save them countless hours, allowing them to make better use of their valuable time in the field.

### **Hocking Athens Perry Community Action Digital Navigator Program Highlights:**

- Located in Southeastern Ohio, covering Hocking, Athens, and Perry counties.
- Provided digital skills training to approximately 300 residents and distributed 150 laptops.

# Hoopa Valley Public Utilities District

## Bringing the Digital World to the Heart of Tribal Land

What happens when a lifelong Hoopa Valley community member combines his passion for helping others with his tech know-how? The digital divides in his community begin to close. Meet Abraham “Abe” Camez, a digital navigator. For years, Abe has been a trusted figure in Hoopa, and now he’s connecting homes to the internet and empowering his neighbors with the skills they need to thrive online.

The Hoopa Valley Reservation, spanning over 102,000 acres in Humboldt County, California, is the largest Indian reservation in the state. The Hoopa people proudly maintain their traditions and strong Tribal identity, carrying forward a deep connection to their homeland. But as the world becomes increasingly digital, the 3,500 Hoopa Valley residents face challenges that make it hard to stay connected—both to each other and beyond their Tribal land.



*Hoopa Valley, northeast Humboldt County, California, along the Trinity River.*

Living in rural California, the residents of Hoopa Valley have long struggled with a lack of reliable internet and technology. The community’s remote location and

dense Douglas Fir trees create a complex infrastructure environment, leaving many without sufficient access to the internet. The area is also prone to wildfires during the summer months, which makes reliable connectivity throughout the reservation particularly critical.

Following federal funding programs that became available to Tribal lands during the pandemic, the Hoopa Valley Public Utilities District (HVPUD) took on broadband initiatives to bring affordable, reliable connectivity to Hoopa Valley. HVPUD first created Acorn Wireless, a Tribally-owned and operated internet service provider that provides 200 households with internet service today. While some homes have been able to access fixed wireless services, the reality is that the community continues to be deeply affected by the digital divide.

By leveraging federal funding from the Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program (TBCP), HVPUD hopes to significantly improve internet infrastructure on the reservation, aiming to provide equitable access to high-speed broadband for residents and businesses through initiatives focused on digital equity; this includes building out fiber optic networks and expanding wireless coverage across the remote tribal lands. HVPUD launched its new digital navigator program to help residents get online and thrive in the digital world through NDIA's National Digital Navigator Corps, funded by Google.org in partnership with AMERIND Critical Infrastructure.

Abe - a familiar face in the community - is at the forefront of this effort. Moving to Hoopa at just two years old, Abe has dedicated his life to serving his community in various roles—from law enforcement



*Recipient of a Samsung tablet at a community health fair event.*

to pandemic response. Now, as Hoopa Valley’s digital navigator, Abe is helping residents bridge the technology gap and equipping them with essential digital skills.

What makes this program so impactful is its community-first approach. Abe has made it his mission to ensure that everyone, especially Hupa Elders, feels comfortable using technology. Whether it’s showing someone how to navigate the web, teaching them to use Google Docs, or walking them through the basics of Microsoft Office, Abe is there to guide them every step of the way.

“I’ve been working with my community for years,” Abe shares. “So I know how important it is to have someone you trust help you through something that feels new and overwhelming.”

In the program’s early days, one of Abe’s most significant accomplishments was helping nearly 100 Hoopa residents enroll in the federal Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), which gave households discounted internet service. While the ACP has since expired, those efforts helped many families get online for the first time, making a real difference in their daily lives. Now, Abe has shifted his focus to building digital skills and expanding opportunities for residents through programs like the “learn to earn” initiative, where residents receive a computer device after completing digital skills training.

Through this initiative, Abe uses the local library—one of the few public places in Hoopa Valley with consistent internet access—to teach residents critical tech skills. After completing a series of lessons, participants earn a certificate and are given an iPad, thanks to a partnership with the school district. “We’ve had people of all ages come through the program,” Abe says. “One of the most memorable moments was when an Elder came in with her son and daughter to take the class together. It really showed how technology can bring generations together.”

Abe’s work continues beyond the library. He’s also regularly out in the field, riding along with the technicians from Acorn Wireless. During installation appointments, Abe introduces himself to residents and offers help setting up routers, finding affordable streaming services, and explaining how to navigate their new digital tools.

“My goal is to meet people where they are—literally and figuratively,” Abe explains. “When I’m at their homes, I get to see what they need firsthand and provide personalized help on the spot.”

Despite his efforts, the challenges of spreading the word about the program remain. Hoopa Valley is a large, rural area with limited connectivity, and reaching everyone takes time. Abe has been getting creative with his outreach, using Facebook posts, flyers, and newspaper articles to inform people about his services. He regularly attends local health fairs and events at the K’ima Medical Center, talking to residents about the digital skills programs available to them. There’s progress, but Abe knows there’s more work to do. As Hoopa Valley’s broadband infrastructure improves and the fiber build is completed in the coming years, Abe expects even more residents will seek out his services. “Right now, not everyone has internet access, so digital training isn’t always a top priority,” he explains. “But as connectivity increases, people are going to need help navigating it—and this program will be equipped to do that.”

In the meantime, Abe continues focusing on what he does best—supporting his community with patience, understanding, and practical solutions. Through partnerships with schools, libraries, and local organizations, Abe ensures that Hoopa Valley is not left behind in the digital age.

The digital navigator program recently expanded to a neighboring community just south of Hoopa Valley. Abe helped set up a small computer lab at the Willow Creek Community Resource Center to make space for several computer stations. Community residents can access the internet and turn to Abe for help with essential device support or attend a digital literacy skills training class through Northstar’s certification program.

“We’ve made a lot of progress, but there’s still so much potential,” Abe says. “The more people we can get online, the more opportunities we can create for everyone here in Hoopa.”

With Abe’s leadership and the continued efforts of the digital navigator program, Hoopa Valley is setting the stage for a future where every resident can fully engage in the digital world—one connection at a time.

## Increasing Access, Affordability, and Adoption in Hoopa Valley

- **Helping residents know the various connectivity options available to them.** As an Acorn Wireless employee, Abe is well-versed in helping community members with connectivity options and offers onsite technical assistance during technician service appointments.
- **Access to devices.** Nearly 100 residents previously enrolled in the Affordable Connectivity Program received Samsung Galaxy Tablets. Twenty tablets were distributed at community outreach events, and thirty-one iPads were given out through a recently launched learn-to-earn program utilizing NorthStar Digital Literacy Skills Training.
- **Expanding the reach of the digital navigator program.** Creating programs to build digital skills like the “frequent flyer” program, which encourages Tribal elders to return for follow-up help with the digital navigator.
- **Accessing community resources.** Leveraging community sites with high foot traffic ensures residents have access to consistent and reliable resources where they can learn at their own pace. Abe promotes his regular drop-in office hours at Hoopa Valley’s local library on social media pages, flyers, and the local Tribal radio station. At the Willow Creek Community Resource Center, Abe hosts drop-in hours weekly and hopes to set up two new computer stations.

### Hoopa Valley Digital Navigator Program Highlights:

- 3,500 Hupa residents, 1,200 households
- Has provided more than 280 Hoopa residents with tech help, conducted more than 50 skills training workshops, and distributed 100 tablets and 31 refurbished iPads
- Recently opened a small computer lab at neighboring Willow Creek Community Center, helping a dozen community members with internet and device skills
- Program led by Hoopa Valley Public Utilities District

# Jemez Pueblo

## Building Digital Skills for the Pueblo of Jemez: Respecting Tradition While Embracing Technology

In north-central New Mexico is a Tribal nation, the Pueblo of Jemez, known as Walatowa, a Towa word meaning “this is the place.” Nearly 2,000 residents live in this vibrant, culturally-rich community where they proudly preserve their heritage, fluently speak the Towa language, and carry forward generations of traditions.

For people deeply rooted in ancestral practices, sustainability is key to the Jemez Pueblo way of life. When the Pueblo was selected in 2022 to host a Digital Navigator program, it was clear the initiative would need to be thoughtfully integrated into the community’s culture to succeed. That’s when Angela Diahkah, Program Director at Jemez Pueblo Tribal Network (JNET), turned to two of Jemez-raised community members to serve as trusted guides for technology, digital skills, and internet adoption.

JNET, a Tribally-owned and operated internet service provider established in 2020, was created to improve broadband communications for students and the broader community. Through its



*Digital Navigator Corey Yepa helping a Tribal member set up a laptop.*

participation in the National Digital Navigator Corp program, made possible by NDIA and funding from Google.org, JNET hired community-based Digital Navigators to bridge the technology gap. The program is designed to help clients better understand the new internet service, connect their devices, and build foundational digital literacy skills.



*Christmas Light Contest to Promote JNET and Digital Navigator services.*

Digital Navigators Jordan Chinana and Kyla Magdalena have been working tirelessly to bring their expertise directly to Tribal members. Both emphasize that building trust has been critical to their success, as they strive to honor and respect traditions in their outreach. “We’ve learned that offering to help people get online or teach them new skills must be from a trusted source,” Angela said.

Like many communities, Jemez turned to Zoom during the pandemic to stay connected. For many residents, however, this was a new and intimidating experience. Even as more homes have access to fixed wireless connectivity, many residents still need guidance on connecting their homes to the network, setting up devices, and using essential online tools.

Jordan and Kyla, both fluent Towa speakers, use their native language when meeting with residents, to ensure that every lesson—from setting up a laptop to navigating the internet—is clear and culturally resonant.

Jordan assists with internet installations and teaches digital skills courses in both Towa and English. He’s also creating “how-to” videos in Towa to make learning even more accessible. Kyla, equally passionate about her work, enjoys helping local artists sell their creations online and teaching elders how to use digital tools to stay connected with family members.

Kyla’s collaboration with senior citizens during lunchtime phone aid stations has been particularly impactful. “We start with the basics—like adjusting font size or volume—and expand from there,” she shares. These sessions have grown into evening workshops, giving even more residents the opportunity to learn in a supportive environment.

The program has already transformed the lives of many Tribal members. One Elder learned how to pay bills online and register a vehicle, while others discovered how to stream their favorite music or connect with grandkids on Snapchat. Local artists have been empowered to accept online payments and expand their businesses, fostering self-sufficiency in the digital age.

To encourage more digital adoption, the team has implemented creative initiatives, such as a “learn to earn” program where residents complete digital skills training and receive an iPad. Door-to-door surveys also help identify homes in need of devices or training, allowing the team to deliver laptops and provide on-site lessons.

The Digital Navigator program operates with deep respect for the cultural rhythms of Jemez Pueblo. Navigators adjust their schedules to accommodate Tribal ceremonies and events, ensuring they can support their community without disrupting important traditions. This balance between preserving the past and embracing the future is central to their work.



*Recipient receiving an Eeros (WiFi extender) for better connectivity.*

Angela reflects on the program’s success: “I take pride in helping my own community with digital literacy and providing devices to those who have never owned anything. The best part is that we’re using our native language to teach our community—it helps them truly understand what they’re learning.”

While JNET is focused on expanding fiber broadband across the Pueblo, the Digital Navigators are scaling their programs, offering more training sessions, and increasing awareness through outreach events and social media. This past holiday season, JNET hosted a Christmas lighting contest that prompted residents to light up their community with the incentive to win prizes and devices, while at the same time, promote the services of JNET and further digital skills opportunities for the winners and participants.

As technology becomes an essential part of everyday life, the Digital Navigator program at Jemez Pueblo is proving that bridging the digital divide isn’t just about technology—it’s about people. By combining cultural understanding with technical expertise, this team is empowering their community to thrive in the digital world without losing touch with their traditions.

## Increasing Access, Affordability, and Adoption Across the Pueblo of Jemez

- **Enhancing digital skills through tailored training programs.** Created a pilot program for a small group of Tribal employees needing to transition to an online clocking system. The digital navigator led the employees through the new system in small training sessions – in English and Towa.
- **Access to technology and skills training.** The Tribal employees needing help with the new online clocking system were also given a laptop with the requirement of taking a 6-week course with a digital navigator. In two-hour sessions, they were taught email basics, computer functionality and how to use some computer programs.
- **Showing the practical benefits of digital skills.** Teaching Tribal members how to set up online retail memberships such as Sam’s Club, or use shopping sites like Amazon highlights how digital skills can save time and money on everyday tasks.
- **Becoming a trusted community resource.** Digital Navigators use gathering places like senior centers and Tribal buildings to connect with residents. By setting up help desks or offering computer assistance in these familiar spaces, they build trust and establish themselves as reliable resources for the community.

### Jemez Pueblo Digital Navigator Program Highlights:

- Jemez Pueblo, a Tribal land in Sandoval County, New Mexico, with 3,400 members
- One of 19 pueblos of New Mexico, encompassing over 89,000 acres
- Helped more than 280 clients gain digital skills, led more than 40 digital training sessions and distributed more than 50 laptops to community members.

# Lummi Indian Business Council

## The Power of Connection: Digital Skills for a Stronger Lummi Nation

“Technology isn’t just about computers—it’s about creating access to jobs, education, healthcare, and staying connected with family,” says Joseph “Joe” Hillaire, the lead Digital Navigator for Lummi Nation, a Tribal land located along coastal northern Washington state.

Joseph Hillaire, or Joe, is helping the Lummi Indian Business Council (LIBC) build a Digital Navigator program by providing skills training and facilitating access to digital tools for residents of the Lummi Reservation.

The Lummi people have deep ties to the surrounding waterways, which are central to their way of life and fishing traditions. Despite being only eight miles west of Bellingham, the reservation can become isolated due to flooded roads that cut off access



*A group of Elders sit together at Little Bear Creek, all attentively watching the instructor at the front of the room. The atmosphere is calm and welcoming as they engage in basic tablet navigation class.*

to the outside world. As is the case with many rural areas, reliable internet access and digital literacy are significant barriers to opportunity. While connection is essential to preserving cultural traditions passed down through generations, it is also crucial for navigating today's world. Bridging that gap is a delicate balance.

## Expanding Digital Access and Skills

LIBC's Workforce Development Department has long provided employment and training services to the nearly 6,000 Tribal members, yet they recognized that digital skills were becoming an increasingly essential part of self-sufficiency. Selected by NDIA as part of its original National Digital Navigator Corps, with the support of a Google.org grant, LIBC's Digital Navigator program was launched to:

- Increase access to affordable internet and devices.
- Provide personalized digital skills training.
- Prepare individuals for workforce opportunities.

The impact of having a device is significant. The Device Distribution Program has already distributed 69 laptops, 36 tablets, and 48 Chromebooks, helping community members access online education, job applications, telehealth, and government services.

**“Before I connected with the Digital Navigator, I had an outdated device, and it made it really difficult to get my college work done. They helped me get a new laptop and completed the ACP application with me. Now, I can keep up with my classes and stay connected without worrying about internet access. By having these resources available to me, I’m not sure I would be where I am today.”**

Crystal, Student, Northwest Indian College

One Tribal member received a laptop through this program and enrolled in an online workforce training workshop. With Joe’s help, they learned how to navigate coursework, submit assignments, and access learning materials, setting them up for career success.

Alongside device distributions, Joe and his team have hosted 17 digital skills workshops, helping 184 clients build confidence in using technology, connect with essential services, and ultimately build brighter futures.

## **Meeting People Where They Are**

Reaching the community has required creativity and persistence. Many Tribal members first heard about the program through emails sent via the LIBC listserv, flyers in the Tribal newspaper, and word of mouth. But Joe knew that simply offering technology wasn’t enough—he needed to meet people where they felt comfortable.

One of the most successful outreach efforts has been partnerships with local organizations, including Evergreen Goodwill of Northwest Washington, which brings a digital equity bus—a mobile computer lab—to the reservation for hands-on training. The bus has visited locations including Little Bear, home to many Elders, where classes focused on an ‘introduction to tablets’ and cell phone basics. For many Elders, this was their first experience using touchscreen devices, and Joe was there to guide them step by step.

“We see people who may have never used a laptop or don’t have an email address,” Joe explains. “Helping them build that foundation is a big deal.” After attending workshops, several Elders returned for follow-up training, eager to stay connected with family and access online resources.

## **Digital Skills for Every Generation**

The Digital Navigator program serves a wide range of community members, with a particular focus on Elders and those seeking job training or continuing education.

For Elders, Joe offers weekend workshops at the Employment Training Center, where small group settings provide a welcoming space for learning. Topics range from basic computer skills and internet navigation to cybersecurity training, which has become a growing request as more Tribal members recognize the need for online safety.

For job seekers, Joe helps clients navigate online job applications, create resumes in Microsoft Word, and use Excel for workplace tasks.

Crystal, a student in the two-year Direct Transfer program at Northwest Indian College, turned to the Digital Navigator program for support in her educational journey. Focused on completing her degree to qualify for better job opportunities and advance her career, she had been relying on an old, outdated device passed down from a family member. The device was slow and unreliable, making it difficult to complete assignments or access her online courses.

Once Crystal connected with the Digital Navigator program– everything changed. She received a new laptop and direct support through the (now expired) Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), ensuring she could stay connected throughout the school year.

**“The more we can teach and support people in using technology, the more opportunities we create. It’s not just about getting online—it’s about making life easier, accessing essential services, and strengthening our community.”**

Joseph “Joe” Hillaire, Lead Digital Navigator for Lummi Nation

With the right tools and support, Crystal is now on track to finish her degree and pursue the career opportunities she’s been working toward. The Digital Navigator Project gave her more than just the internet and a device—it gave her the confidence and access she needed to move forward.

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As the Lummi Nation moves forward with plans to launch its own Tribal-run ISP, digital literacy will become even more critical to ensuring that everyone can fully take advantage of expanded connectivity.

## **Supporting Healthcare Through Digital Navigation**

Beyond workforce development, digital literacy is playing an increasing role in healthcare access. Joe recently visited the Lummi Tribal Health Clinic to explore ways to help patients use telehealth services. Many community members struggle with setting up video calls for doctor appointments, accessing medical records online, or using patient portals for prescription refills.

One recent example was an Elder who needed help attending a virtual doctor's visit but wasn't sure how to use her phone for video calls. With guidance from Joe, she learned how to log in, schedule, and attend telehealth appointments independently, improving her access to healthcare.

Joe is now working to develop a telehealth workshop to bridge this gap, ensuring that everyone—especially Elders and those with mobility challenges—can access the care they need.

## **The Future of Digital Navigation at Lummi Nation**

The impact of the Digital Navigator program is clear: community members are gaining independence, staying connected, and accessing new opportunities. “The community would miss it if the program were gone tomorrow,” says Alisha Pierre, Program Manager, Workforce Development at LIBC. “People rely on this resource, and we're just getting started.”

With a new funding award from WA State Dept of Commerce, the Broadband Digital Navigator Project, LIBC is set to expand its digital inclusion efforts even further. Plans are underway to help Tribal members pay for internet service and cover the cost of upgrading routers and modems for more reliable service, removing yet another barrier to participation in the digital world.

For Joe and LIBC's Workforce Development team, the work is about more than teaching people how to use technology—it's about empowering Tribal members with the skills they need to thrive and building pathways to opportunity, one connection at a time.

## Increasing Access, Affordability, and Adoption for Lummi Nation

- **Helping Residents Access Essential Services.** Through individual training, the Digital Navigator is equipping people with the skills to use a computer for email, telehealth doctor visits, and apply for jobs online, making it easier to access essential services, including healthcare, job applications, and government benefits.
- **Building Digital Confidence with Foundational Skills.** One effective way to reach more people has been to leverage the Device Distribution Program by offering introductory computer training sessions when devices are received. Lummi residents are building confidence in using technology for education and employment by providing foundational digital skills.
- **Expanding Community Reach.** The Digital Navigator program is reaching community members where they are by conducting outreach at community hubs like the Employment Training Center and local Elder housing and offering weekend digital skills workshops. Through partnerships with Evergreen Goodwill of Northwest Washington's mobile computer lab and outreach via LIBC's listserv and newspaper, the program is ensuring that more residents are aware of available services.

### Lummi Indian Business Council Digital Navigator Program Highlights:

- Lummi Nation are the original inhabitants of Lummi Reservation situated on a peninsula between Bellingham Bay and the Georgia Strait on Washington State's northernmost coast. Lummi Indian Business Council is the elected governing body serving Lummi Reservation.
- An estimated 6,590 people live on the Lummi Reservation. Roughly 2,564 are active Lummi citizens, and 665 are non-tribal members.
- The digital navigator program has led 17 digital skills classes, distributed 153 devices and helped 184 people with digital training sessions.

# National Digital Equity Center

## Building Digital Skills in Rural Maine: One Skill, One Device, One Person at a Time

“We are on a mission to help residents overcome the digital divide,” says Rachel Williams, the first digital navigator for Washington County, Maine, who brings essential digital skills to the community’s older population. The National Digital Equity Center (NDEC) is utilizing a Google.org grant through NDIA’s National Digital Navigator Corps program for Rachel and the team of Digital Navigators to help residents in this remote part of the state become more connected to the digital world.

In rural Washington County, the older residents who make up much of the population often feel overwhelmed by technology or unsure where to turn for help. Rachel and the team’s role as Digital Navigators are changing that. NDEC partners with community organizations, libraries, town halls, churches, and senior centers to provide digital training and guidance, transforming spaces that locals trust into digital learning hubs. Their approach is rooted in patience and understanding, offering one-on-one support and leaning on NDEC Digital Skills staff to teach digital skills tailored to each community’s needs.

For many older residents, learning technology comes with some anxiety. Here, Digital Navigators focus on teaching topics at the residents’ request. Smartphone basics is a top request. Older adults often inherit older-model iPhones from family members but don’t know how



*A Spanish-speaking resident receiving a device provided by nonprofit partner, Sunrise County Economic Council.*

to use them. The fear of making a mistake or feeling like a burden keeps many from asking for help. Even shopping online, comparing prices, or setting up secure passwords can be intimidating tasks for older residents.

Rachel and the NDEC team understand this hesitation and create a welcoming space where people feel comfortable learning at their own pace. Their goal is to show clients that learning is possible and that mistakes are part of the process. Each one receives a personalized learning plan, developed by NDEC staff. For some, the journey begins with how to turn on a device and progresses through understanding apps and email. Others might start by learning about online safety before moving on to social media or recognizing internet scams. “An individualized strategy I’ve used to build skills and confidence among my clients is about guiding each person along their digital journey at their own pace,” shares Rachel.

But the Washington County Digital Navigators’ role is more than teaching technology, it’s building trust and addressing the unique needs of this rural community. Partnering with trusted, local organizations is essential for reaching people where they live and giving them tools they can use immediately. NDEC Digital Navigators also partner with two Tribal communities in Washington County to provide digital skills training programs. Ivan Zizek is the Digital Navigator who works with a select group of Tribal residents, providing digital skills needed to assist their community with technical support issues.

Digital Navigators also teach computer basics to residents who receive refurbished laptops and tablets from NDEC through a Maine refurbishing organization – Give IT Get IT – which provides these devices. Since each person’s familiarity with technology is different, Digital Navigators provide one-on-one training sessions tailored to individual learning needs once they receive a laptop.

Proof that even a small lesson can have a big impact involves a woman rebuilding her life after facing setbacks. “She received a refurbished laptop and was trying to track her health data in Microsoft Word but found it too cumbersome. I showed her how to use Excel to set up a simple chart. She quickly picked it up, and called me a few days later, thrilled with her new skill,” shares Rachel. By learning to use Excel, she made tracking her health data easier and felt more confident tackling other digital tasks.

That wasn't the only simple lesson that gave a client more confidence. Washington County Digital Navigators teach community members to spot internet scams and navigate online shopping, a helpful skill in a remote area where retail options are limited. They've empowered older adults to use telehealth platforms, access government services, and connect with family members online.

Another example of NDEC's Digital Navigators' work in Washington County highlights a partnership with two nonprofits—one serving migrant farm workers who speak English as a second language, Mano en Mano, and another providing devices to these residents, Sunrise County Economic Council.

Marci Gaglione, a Washington County Digital Navigator, collaborates with one of NDEC's multilingual instructors to support French- and Spanish-speaking residents over Zoom. Together, they create individual learning plans, determine the best device for each person's needs, coordinate device distribution, and enroll participants in internet safety and device-specific classes—all conducted in their native language.

Through NDEC's Maine Digital Inclusion Initiative, Washington County residents are becoming more digital savvy, not only learning new skills but also gaining confidence in their ability to adapt to a world that increasingly relies on technology. The Digital Navigators' impact goes beyond digital skills; it fosters self-reliance and creates connections in a community that often feels isolated.

Digital Navigators are making a difference one skill, one device, and one person at a time. In Washington County, residents are discovering that it's never too late to learn, grow, and engage with the world. With each lesson, they're not only overcoming the digital divide—they're finding new ways to connect and thrive in the digital age.

## Increasing Access, Affordability, and Adoption for Washington County Residents

- **Build confidence with a personalized approach.** Personalized learning plans teaching computer basics are used, enabling the person to advance at their own pace.
- **Leverage resources of partner organizations.** Older populations are eager to learn about technology and embrace it with the right resources to learn. Digital navigators have access to NDEC's 45 core classes to build individual digital literacy programs.
- **Use trusted site locations.** Using trusted community partners – schools, libraries, and senior centers – as site locations for skills workshops and individual classes reaches people where they live.

### NDEC's Digital Navigator Program Highlights:

- Washington County, Maine, is a vast rural area with 31,000 people across 3,700 square miles.
- NDEC's digital navigator program provided tech assistance to more than 332 clients.
- Digital navigators led more than 1,294 digital skills training sessions for residents.
- Digital navigators helped distribute more than 135 laptops and tablets.

# Northwestern Ohio Community Action Commission

## A Lifeline Liaison: How the Northwestern Ohio Community Action Commission's Digital Navigators Get Local Residents Back on Their Feet

For sixty years, the Northwestern Ohio Community Action Commission (NOCAC) has diligently worked to minimize the effects of poverty by doing what it does best—harnessing the power of strong relationships and human connection to link vulnerable individuals to the resources they need. For many of NOCAC's clients, the capacity to succeed depends largely on their ability to use technology effectively. As such, digital skills training lies at the heart of NOCAC's efforts.

Under its Financial Opportunity Center initiatives, NOCAC launched its Digital Navigator program three years ago as part of NDIA's National Digital Navigator Corps and funded by Google.org. Since then, NOCAC has served as a community-based resource guide, helping clients attain digital skills and access affordable devices.

Jamie Huber, NOCAC Community Services Director, is consistently reminded of the importance of building social capital for her clients,



*Digital Navigator Joe Burgei works with a member of the NOCAC community.*

and one way NOCAC accomplishes this is by using digital literacy training to connect clients with other community resources. For example, NOCAC partners with financial counselors to give devices to clients who complete the financial literacy curriculum they offer. “Having access to a digital device is akin to having access to drinking water,” she says.

Joe Burgei, one of NOCAC’s digital navigators, knows this all too well. On any given day, he could be assisting clients at a domestic violence shelter, senior center, or homeless shelter. But wherever he is, he notes the value in witnessing their gratitude and appreciation firsthand. “Whether it’s providing help with a cell phone, computer, or tablet, it’s a privilege to aid our clients in catching up with society.” Joe sees between 4-7 clients daily, roughly 16-28 sessions weekly. His advice for aspiring digital navigators is simple: “Be patient and listen—let them tell their story.”



*Digital Navigator Megan Hahn distributes a laptop to an NOCAC community member.*

Joe’s colleague and fellow digital navigator, Megan Hahn, has learned the importance of her clients feeling connected to the outside world, especially to individuals not professionally obligated to assist them. Whether it’s working with the senior population to answer questions they can’t ask their kids or grandkids or assisting women at domestic violence shelters, having a device they can physically own is a monumental comfort to them and often leads to future success. Two of Megan’s female clients, for example, are using their laptops to continue their education, a powerful way to reassert control of their lives.

So, what does the future look like for the NOCAC team? They’re keeping their eyes on the [Digital Equity Act](#) state capacity subgrants, looking to pursue funding to

continue and expand their successful digital navigator program. A new building with a computer lab will be completed soon, and they view the digital navigator program as an integral use of that facility. “There are so many unknowns. When you work in nonprofits, you survive on grant money, but I see firsthand how this particular program can both change lives and connect us to other resources,” Jamie says. Above all else, NOCAC aspires to be a place for everyone to feel welcome. “I see us continuing—I don’t want it to go away. I would love to see us keep growing.”

**Megan Hahn, NOCAC Digital Navigator, offers advice to new digital navigators:**

“Take a holistic approach. Some of these individuals feel like they’ve been jerked around by a lot of people, so it’s vital to work on breaking down barriers and truly listening to them – it’s not as simple as going in and getting down to business. You have to get to know them and illustrate how these skills will benefit them in the long run.”

## Increasing Access, Affordability, and Adoption for Northwestern Ohio Residents

- **Assisting diverse populations.** NOCAC has active partnerships with area facilities that serve senior citizens, assist low-income individuals, and help those struggling with food insecurity, domestic violence, and those experiencing homelessness.
- **Accessing technology.** Through a device distribution program, NOCAC obtained Chromebooks and laptops for 45 clients in 2023 and another 11 since the beginning of January.
- **Enhancing the digital navigator program.** NOCAC is renovating a new building, which will include a computer lab. The new facility will serve as a one-stop shop for individuals to work on their digital skills, find employment, and work with NOCAC's financial coaches to develop effective financial management techniques.
- **Broadening community awareness.** To stay connected and serve their community effectively, NOCAC participates in local social networking meetings monthly and quarterly, receives client referrals to the Digital Navigation Program from their financial coaches, and leverages Facebook and resource fairs to expand their reach and engagement.

### NOCAC Digital Navigator Program Highlights:

- Primarily serves Defiance, Fulton, Henry, Paulding, Van Wert, and Williams Counties
- In 2024, the organization served 132 clients, held 350 sessions, and distributed 56 devices
- NOCAC has active partnerships with eight senior centers, two domestic violence agencies, one low-income apartment complex, and one homeless shelter/soup kitchen

# Pottsboro Area Public Library

## Unconventional Approach: How a Texas Library's Digital Equity Focus Furtheres Its Mission Through its Digital Navigator Program

Mark Revolinski knows a thing or two about technology. After retiring from thirty-eight years in the telecommunications industry, he and his wife relocated from Wisconsin to Texas to be closer to his grandchildren. As a young retiree, Mark wanted to use his talents to give back, and while determining his next move, his wife saw a social media post from the Pottsboro Library in search of a digital navigator for their pilot program. He enjoyed the role so much that when the Pottsboro Library received a grant in 2022 from Google.org as part of NDIA's National Digital Navigator Corps program, he decided to stay on as their full-time Digital Navigator. "It takes a special person to fill these shoes," he said. "As 80% social work and 20% technology teaching - it's certainly rewarding."

Mark visits assisted living centers in his role, as the area has a high elderly population. Every other Thursday, he hosts 'Technology with Mark' at different facilities throughout the Pottsboro area. Residents ask for his help with small things like turning their "ringer" on their phone to hear phone calls and text messages or help with their iPads. As Mark is quick to point out, he's helping people who did not grow up with technology become more familiar using it. These individuals are who Mark finds most rewarding to assist. "It's not only just solving their technology problems, but also sitting down and taking the opportunity to know them personally." For Mark, spending time with them is a pleasure he doesn't take for granted.

One of Mark's favorite success stories is when a woman at an assisted living facility who had recently lost her husband asked Mark for help. She could not get her Google Assistant to work properly, and because the account was set up in her husband's name, it would not respond to her voice commands. For Mark, the solution wasn't that difficult. He said to her, "Sharon, your Google is ready." She immediately replied, "Hey Google, play Elvis - I've waited three months to do that."

Mark's work is a testament to the innovation and support from the Pottsboro Library. The library, which has focused on digital equity since 2016, has worked to boost broadband access, enhance patrons' technological skills development, and improve access to devices for those in need. Dianne Connery, the library's Development Director, learned early on the disparity that exists between the haves and have-nots in a rural area. She witnessed firsthand the number of people who came to the library just to use the computers for routine everyday tasks. It caught her interest that teens in particular were unfamiliar with basic technological tasks. "How are these kids ever going to be on a level playing field when they get out of high school? If you want to reach your aspirations, you're gonna need to be tech-savvy," she said.

When the library received a grant for a digital navigator, Dianne jumped at the opportunity. She hired Mark, and the rest is history. It's clear speaking to Dianne how proud she is to have Mark leading the library's digital navigator efforts. "He makes house calls - did he tell you that?," she's quick to remark.



*Mark snaps a selfie with Helen Burton, an assisted living facility resident in Pottsboro, who turned 100 this year.*

When the Pottsboro Library recently faced potential budget cuts, the community showed up at a city council meeting to voice the impact Mark has made through his work at the library. With a packed room, some spilling out into the parking lot, multiple residents stepped up to the microphone to share what the library means to them. And they mentioned the same thing repeatedly—the Digital Navigator Program.

Older adults talked about how the Digital Navigator helped them figure out telehealth appointments, saving them long trips to the doctor. One woman, Jo Ann, got emotional describing how, after her husband recently passed, she'd felt completely disconnected—until the Digital Navigator showed her how to organize her digital photos. She said, “her life would be so much harder without Mark. I would struggle without the help I receive at our library.”

These stories weren't just heartwarming—they made a difference. City officials listened and saw firsthand that the library isn't just a place to check out books. It's where people come to learn, connect, and get the support they need in an increasingly digital world. Thanks to the overwhelming show of support, the funding cuts were stopped, at least for now.

So, what does the future hold for Pottsboro Library's Digital Navigator program? Hopefully additional growth and evolution. The Texas State Library and Archives Commission will be awarding additional grants through the Digital Equity Act, and Pottsboro is hoping one of them has their name on it to build on the digital navigator program. “We've seen the impact it has had on the community,” Dianne said. And as for Mark? He's committed to remain in place until the conclusion of one of their current grants, and he plans to retire (again). He'll leave behind big shoes to fill but has abundant faith and pride in the Digital Navigator program he helped mold.

“After establishing a digital navigator program, individuals may not at first comprehend its purpose. Be patient. The program may begin slowly, but once people see the program's immense value, they'll start knocking on your door in no time.”

Mark Revolinski, Digital Navigator

## Increasing Access, Affordability, and Adoption Across Grayson County, Texas

- **Raising Awareness:** Local TV commercials and flyers initially helped spread the word. Because of the grants it's received, the library can help nonprofit organizations that rely on community donations get up to speed with their technology. In turn, those organizations provide referrals for people to go to Pottsboro Library.
- **Building Trusted Relationships:** Pottsboro Library is a fixture in the community, not only through its digital navigator program but also through partnerships with organizations like a local multicultural center, where it assists immigrants with technology training, and Family Promise, which helps people transition out of homelessness.
- **Access to Technology:** Pottsboro Library has distributed a total of 87 devices to residents in need.
- **Expanding Connectivity:** As a Digital Navigator, Mark has assisted 195 community residents and developed digital skills for 97 residents.
- **Accessing Community Resources:** The staff at a rural library know the community personally and become nimble enough to address their needs. For example, when schools shut down during the pandemic, a young mother came to the library completely overwhelmed at the prospect of providing education for her kids in her mobile home with no computers and or Internet access. The library staff was able to help connect her home to the Internet and provide technology training so that she could educate her children. She's since gone on to attend community college.

### Pottsboro Library Digital Navigator Program Highlights:

- Located in Grayson County, Texas, with a population of just under 3,000.
- Mark has helped 195 individuals with device support and assisted 97 individuals with digital skills development, and the library has distributed a total of 87 devices.

# Shaping Our Appalachian Region

## How Digital Skills Are Opening Doors for Eastern Kentuckians

In Appalachia Kentucky where reliable internet access and digital literacy can mean the difference between opportunity and isolation, Ashley Smith is helping people navigate a new path forward. As the local Digital Navigator, Ashley has worked one-on-one with hundreds of residents, connecting them to education, jobs, and essential online resources.

“Many people here want to learn new skills for job opportunities but don’t know where to start,” Ashley explains. “Whether it’s getting a college student comfortable with online learning or teaching a thrift store owner how to make flyers with Canva, I want to bring digital skills to those who need them most.”

One of Ashley’s first clients was a college student struggling to use Blackboard, a platform essential for online coursework. Frustrated and falling behind, she turned to Ashley for help. After just a few sessions, she felt confident navigating the platform, keeping up with assignments, and taking control of her education.



*Digital Navigator Ashley Smith with two laptop recipients.*

Stories like this highlight the critical role Ashley plays in helping residents embrace technology—whether it’s setting up an email account, searching for a job online, or helping with telehealth appointments.

Shaping Our Appalachian Region (SOAR), a nonprofit dedicated to rebuilding economically distressed communities in Eastern Kentucky, launched its Digital Navigator program in 2022 as part of NDIA’s National Digital Navigator Corp and support from a Google.org grant. The goal is to empower residents with tools and training to build critical tech skills and gain the confidence to get online.

Ashley hosts free classes and one-on-one training at libraries, career centers, and community organizations across the region. Her workshops cover everything from basic computer skills and resume writing to creating LinkedIn profiles, and Excel training.

At Big Sandy Community Technical College, she works with adults pursuing GED certification, ensuring they have the digital skills to succeed. She also supports Job Corps students—young people who didn’t complete traditional high school—helping them build digital skills that set them up for early employment.

For many residents, owning a computer has never been an option. Through SOAR’s partnership with career services organizations, Ashley ensures that residents who complete digital skills training receive a device. This ‘learn to earn’ model not only helps bridge the digital divide but also builds confidence in using technology effectively.

A Kentucky Career Center employee shared the impact of these efforts: “Our customers come to us with a lot of needs. Most are recently laid off and are devastated about losing their jobs. Others come to us seeking better lives. The devices you are able to give to the customers who complete the assignments make such differences in their lives. They are able to seek work, go back to school, and get more training. They are able to better themselves, and in turn, that betters their quality of life for their families. A few have said how thankful they are to get this opportunity and to be able to better themselves through the program.”

Beyond job training, Ashley is helping residents in recovery programs regain stability. In 2024 alone, 114 clients in recovery earned 872 digital skill certificates in Northstar Online Learning, setting them on a path toward economic independence.



*Digital Navigator Ashley Smith pictured with Neon Rising and Connect Humanity in Fleming-Neon (Letcher County), Kentucky.*

One participant, Terry, was in disbelief when Ashley told her she qualified for a laptop after completing her coursework. Overcome with gratitude, she shared: “I came to this program with hope to better myself in every way possible. I got better at digital literacy even when I didn’t think I needed to learn. Through this program I have more hope and a way better understanding of computers and the program software that will help me drastically in the profession I want in the future.”

For those in remote areas of Eastern Kentucky, where broadband is scarce, SOAR is piloting a Starlink initiative to cover the first year of satellite service and installation costs for eligible residents.

Through partnerships with the Primary Care Centers of Eastern Kentucky, Ashley is hosting workshops to train participants on telehealth platforms, ensuring they can access essential healthcare services online. The goal is to distribute 60 Starlink satellites and teach 100 people how to use telehealth portals before the pilot program ends in May 2026.

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Access to reliable internet isn't just about convenience—it can be a matter of life and death. During a Red Bird High School basketball tournament, the school's phone lines were unexpectedly cut. A woman attending the game began experiencing severe chest pains, and with no way to call 9-1-1, school officials feared the worst. But thanks to a backup Starlink satellite provided by SOAR, they were able to place the emergency call and get help immediately. Without it, they would have had to drive 20 minutes to the nearest ridge just to find cell service.

“Digital skills are part of everyday life,” Ashley says. “We want people to not just have internet access, but to know how to use it effectively. When they sit down with me they start to see what's possible.”

Ashley is already thinking about the future, with plans to expand the Digital Navigator program using a “train the trainer” model. This approach would equip local organizations to embed Digital Navigators into their programs, extending the reach of digital literacy resources across the region.

In a community long defined by resilience and determination, SOAR's Digital Navigator program isn't just about teaching technology—it's about creating lasting opportunities, connecting residents to the digital world, and ensuring Eastern Kentuckians can build a future where they thrive.

Ashley's work is a lifeline for Eastern Kentuckians, offering education, opportunity, and confidence to those who need it most. With more partnerships and funding secured, SOAR's Digital Navigator program is set to expand and continue breaking down digital barriers in the Appalachian region—one person, one skill, and one connection at a time.

## Increasing Access, Affordability, and Adoption for Eastern Kentucky Residents

- **Creating Adult Education Opportunities.** Digital navigators support adults pursuing GED certification, offering one-on-one digital skills training.
- **Expanding Digital Inclusion.** SOAR's Digital Navigator program was instrumental in securing an Economic Development Administration grant, which will fund two additional Digital Navigators for workforce development outreach and training.
- **'Learn to Earn' Model.** Residents in career services programs, community colleges, and recovery programs receive laptop computers after completing digital skills training, ensuring they are prepared for success.
- **Workforce Development Readiness.** Digital skills classes help people search for jobs, build resumes, and explore remote work opportunities.
- **Supporting Eastern Kentucky Job Seekers.** Digital Navigators provide training on the Eastern Kentucky Job Board, LinkedIn and online applications, ensuring residents are prepared for today's job market.

### SOAR Digital Navigator Program Highlights:

- Program led by SOAR, a nonprofit addressing the deep-seated issue of population retention and growth across 54 counties in Eastern Kentucky.
- Provided more than 740 people with individualized digital skills training sessions.
- Conducted more than 80 events and classes for nearly 725 people on topics ranging from computer basics and resume building to GED certification support and career upskilling.
- Has secured more than 140 laptops and tablets for community members.

# Washington State University Extension, Grays Harbor County

## How One Local Digital Navigator Is Building Partnerships To Ensure That Grays Harbor County Is A Connected Community

When Shannon O'Brien first set up office hours at the Westport Library, she wasn't sure what to expect. Within hours, seniors were trickling in, some holding laptops they hadn't turned on in years, others with questions as simple as "How do I set up an email account?" After Shannon's help, the relief on their faces was immediate. For her, these moments aren't just about answering questions—they're about helping neighbors gain confidence in a digital world that can often feel overwhelming and difficult to navigate.

Shannon joined Washington State University (WSU) Grays Harbor Extension in early 2024, bringing a unique combination of technical expertise and a deep passion for service. Her upbringing in rural and indigenous communities instilled in her a passion for service and advocacy that drives her work today.



*Digital Navigator Shannon O'Brien helping the community connect through hands-on learning at the WSU extension office.*

Her work as a Digital Navigator goes beyond teaching digital skills—it’s about earning trust, understanding individual needs, and providing support in a way that truly meets people where they are. From the libraries of Westport to community fairs in Aberdeen, Shannon has established herself as a friendly, reliable resource for those in need of digital assistance.

“People in Grays Harbor want the space to ask questions and make mistakes without judgment,” Shannon shares. “It’s really about connecting, listening, and giving them the confidence to take those first steps.”

Grays Harbor is a close-knit community and the effectiveness of the Digital Navigator Program has been the result of collaboration. Shannon has forged partnerships with local organizations like Timberland Regional Library, Parents as Teachers, and Therapeutic Court to reach more residents needing technical assistance.

WSU Grays Harbor provides both Parents as Teachers and Therapeutic County with devices to distribute as necessary and Shannon focuses on digital skills support. In individual sessions, Shannon covers topics like telehealth, finding reliable information using search engines, resetting WiFi, setting up parental controls, using virtual learning tools, and online shopping.

Parents as Teachers is an organization that gives resources to help guide parents through the early stages of a child’s development by matching parents and caregivers with trained professionals who make regular personal home visits.

A rewarding moment came when a mother of two—juggling a newborn and a three-year-old—came to Shannon feeling overwhelmed from managing her children’s healthcare, handling legal documents related to a custody arrangement, and staying connected with family who live across the country. Together, they set up her telehealth portal, practiced scheduling virtual appointments, and organized her medical records, saving her time and reducing stress. Next, they streamlined her legal documents, teaching her how to create digital files and email attachments, making it easier to manage custody paperwork. Finally, they set up video calls so her children could stay connected with their grandparents and relatives.

By the end of the session, she sighed with relief and said, “It feels like the world was just lifted off my shoulders.” With newfound confidence, she can now handle daily challenges more smoothly, improving life for herself and her children.

The partnership with Therapeutic Court supports individuals rebuilding their lives by helping them develop the digital skills needed to become workforce-ready or advance their education. One of Shannon’s clients is working toward an associate degree in Automotive Technology, another is earning an Associate of Applied Science in Hospitality and EcoTourism, and another is pursuing a certificate in Commercial Transportation and Maintenance to obtain a CDL for commercial truck driving. By equipping them with essential digital tools, the program is opening doors to stable careers and greater independence.



*Digital Navigator Shannon O'Brien leading a workshop for the Master Gardeners program.*

Shannon’s work is filled with small victories that make a big impact. At the Grays Harbor County Fair, a beloved community tradition that attracts 27,000 visitors, Shannon helped families with the check-in process and navigate the online application system, Fair Entry, to enter their exhibit. As a steady stream of exhibitors were arriving, there were two young brothers eager to showcase their impressive LEGO cars but had not created a profile on Fair Entry. Shannon helped their mom download the app and transfer her information from 4-H Online, quickly confirming the boys’ entry was ready for the judging round.

Shannon’s efforts were integral to the fair’s success, ensuring that families could participate fully in this beloved community tradition.

For Shannon, it's not just about the numbers but the quality of each interaction. "It's a daily reward," she says. "Helping someone sign a lease, get back into college, or apply for a job—those moments show how digital skills can open doors."

What makes Shannon so effective is her ability to listen. Many residents aren't sure what help they need or how to ask for it. "People need someone who will take the time to understand their story," she says. Often, she finds herself listening to stories about grandchildren or providing referrals to housing departments or food banks.

Dan Teuteberg, WSU Extension's Program Manager, explains, "Grays Harbor is built on relationships. Shannon understands that the key to success as a Digital Navigator is meeting the community where they are and building trust. It's not about the quantity of people served but the quality of those interactions."

WSU Grays Harbor County Extension was the recipient of a Google.org grant as part of NDIA's National Digital Navigator Corp to foster digital inclusion in rural communities and Native nations. The Digital Navigator program shares resources with WSU, most notably to leverage partnerships with existing regional organizations such as the 4-H program. "What's unique about this program is that it was designed to be very county-focused with community navigators who already possess digital teaching skills and can help with broader personalized assessments of individual situations while providing resources," said Dan.

For Shannon, the goal is clear: to keep connecting with her community and empowering them to embrace technology on their own terms. Whether she's troubleshooting a cell phone or teaching seniors how to create an email account, her work is a reminder that digital skilling is about more than just skills—it's about connection, opportunity, and belonging.

Looking ahead, Shannon and the WSU Extension team aim to strengthen partnerships and build on the program's success, ensuring that all Grays Harbor residents have the digital resources and skills needed to succeed.

## Increasing Access, Affordability, and Adoption Across Grays Harbor County

- **Increasing digital skills through community partnerships.** The digital navigator's partnership with Therapeutic Court provides participants with digital skills training and laptops after reaching key milestones, helping them rebuild their lives and prepare for reentry into the workforce.
- **Access to technology.** Through the Parents as Teachers program, the digital navigator has helped distribute laptops to 70 families, ensuring young parents have the tools they need to access educational resources and manage their busy lives.
- **Expanding reach within the community.** At Timberland Regional Library, the digital navigator's regular office hours have become a cornerstone of the program, with library staff frequently referring patrons for help with everything from filling out online forms to troubleshooting laptops. These sessions often draw 5-10 people a day, creating a ripple effect of trust and awareness throughout the community.
- **Accessing community resources.** At the Sunday Market in Aberdeen, the digital navigator's help desk turned into impromptu IT support for local small businesses, where they learned how to use online payment systems, streamlining their operations and helping them connect with more customers.

### WSU Grays Harbor Digital Navigator Program Highlights:

- Grays Harbor is a county along Washington's southwest coast.
- Serving a population of nearly 80,000 individuals, Grays Harbor County includes the Quinault Indian Nation, and the Chehalis tribe.
- Has provided digital skills help and training to 294 clients, including individual and group sessions.
- More than 170 laptops have been distributed to Grays Harbor County residents who otherwise might not have access to a device.