



TO: Community Technology & Telecommunications Commission
FROM: John Speirs, Program Manager, Telecommunications & Regulatory Affairs
DATE: June 9, 2021
SUBJECT: Status Update: Digital Inclusion Projects

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide the Commission with topline information related to priority Digital Inclusion activities.

Background

On October 9th, 2020 the Community Technology and Telecommunications Commission (CTTC) convened a Special Called Meeting focused on Digital Equity. This meeting included a variety of Austin residents receiving services, policymakers, and the community leaders of local nonprofits. The global COVID-19 pandemic has necessarily elevated the importance of such conversations.

The purpose of the convening was to allow Austin citizens the opportunity to directly communicate their lived experiences and persistent challenges with accessing internet-enabled devices and equitable broadband internet. Their accounts provide “challenge data points” for further analysis by staff.

The key data points include:

- No universal screen reader standard
- Digital skills training for parents and working student families
- Insufficient hotspot bandwidth for common share wi-fi access scenarios
- Lack of culturally competent device training and resources (ESL, deaf, visually impaired, etc)
- Lack of relevancy and trust in internet or tech companies
- Lack of geographically equitable broadband

The findings of this Special Called [Meeting](#) were discussed at the subsequent Regular

[Meeting](#) of the commission on November 19th available in the Special Report on Digital Equity linked [here](#). The initial recommendations to form a working group are represented by the Digital Inclusion, Civic Engagement, and Strategic Technology and Telecom Policy Working Group of the Commission to explore the next steps in responding to the above points.

Discussion

The Office of Telecommunications & Regulatory Affairs is working to advance opportunities to ensure that every member of the Austin community has access to reliable and affordable broadband internet. As of January 2021, the City of Austin is a host for the 2021 Leadership Austin Digital Inclusion Fellow Khotan Harmon. This additional capacity has led to the creation of the Reliable and Affordable Broadband Internet for All Project. The intent of the project is to identify and develop viable longer-term solutions to address the problem of digital equity to ensure reliable, affordable broadband for all. The availability of the internet is critical to participate in a growing digital society and to provide equitable, educational, job and economic opportunities and access to healthcare.

The deliverables align with the CTTC priority goals and serve to address:

- **Report #1: Community asset mapping** and survey of existing data on the mapping and speed of private broadband infrastructure and reasons for barriers to broadband adoption.
- **Report #2 - Feasibility Plan** based on models and best practices nationally that could be offered as a possible solution in Austin for affordable reliable broadband for all in Austin.
- **Stakeholder engagement** - Reactivated, engaged and collaborating cross-sector of stakeholders in a wide-reaching and community-wide effort.

The project is currently underway with the stakeholder engagement phase, and has shaped the goals of the project with the priorities of the City of Austin Council - 1) homelessness, 2) childcare, 2) workforce development and 4) food access.

Recommendation

TARA staff affirm their commitment to the goals and priorities set forth from the special called meeting and the community convening hosted by the CTTC in Fall of 2020. Staff will continue to work with the stakeholders and the public for the related digital access outcomes of the Council priorities. Staff will ensure the project work will align neatly with the visioning work of the Commission and will ensure the project is able to move forward with long-term goals. Staff anticipates presenting more detail for this

information at the next regularly scheduled CTTC Working Group meetings at the end of June and early July, and a full briefing at the next regularly scheduled CTTC meeting on July 14.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to me by phone 512-974-3510, or email at john.speirs@austintexas.gov.