Philadelphia County Community Conversation

🕐 **Meeting #1**　　📅 **June 24, 2023**　　📍 **Zion Baptist Church**

40 PARTICIPANTS

The inaugural Community Conversation was held at Zion Baptist Church in Philadelphia County. Hosted by community advocate and Board President and Founder of Called To Serve CDC Mike Majors, the event served as an opportunity to bring the community together to discuss challenges accessing broadband internet. This event was scheduled to coincide with a Housing Expo event underway at the same time cohosted by Senator Sharif Street, Councilmember Cindy Bass, and Called to Serve CDC. Headquartered at Zion Baptist Church, Called To Serve is a trusted community leader and advocate with a location that is known and accessible to residents across multiple neighborhoods. In addition to discussing broadband barriers, participants shared concerns about how the funding would be spent and distributed on a local level.

Critical Needs & Gaps Experienced in Philadelphia County

Providing Devices Isn't Enough
Attendees shared that during the COVID-19 pandemic, there were several programs that provided devices, but no training or accessibility help to set up the devices for those with disabilities. Challenges included being susceptible to online scams, not having internet service at home to connect devices to, and not having the digital skills to access needed online resources like applying for food assistance.

Community-Led Conversations
Participants were adamant that broadband and digital equity solutions need to be developed with true community needs in mind. They want to see investment in their local community leaders who know how to reach people and where the funding is needed most. When Senator Street spoke about how digital inclusion is a priority, and residents are the guardians of their community, attendees cheered in support and agreement. Programs come into their communities for short periods and often don't build capacity or knowledge for long-term results.

Ongoing Accessibility Issues
Many in attendance shared personal stories of trouble accessing the internet because of physical disabilities. Screen readers aren't enough to make the internet accessible. Many with visual issues need voice-activated or voice-guided devices, which are not always included in programs that give devices to residents. The City of Philadelphia's engagement toolkit was praised as a positive example of involving community voices and the needs of individuals with disabilities in planning and policy making.

Make Sure that Funding Reaches the People
Attendees expressed concerns with how funds will be tracked, and shared fears that funds will go to bigger organizations that don't have community ties and may continue to leave them out. Instead, look to use the anchors in the community as hubs for getting grant funds into the communities most in need.

21.7%
Individuals Below Poverty Level

$56,517
Median Household Income

Sourced from U.S. Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey data

Question:
Describe your internet using an animal...

Cougar, Lion, Cat, Camel, Snail

Community Voices:

"There are young people in the community that know how things work. We should be recruiting them to help."

"As a member of the city's homeless population, I use the library as my main resource to access the internet. "

"It is not just bringing services, it is hiring the folks who live here and understand the community."

Dauphin County Community Conversation

🕐 **Meeting #2**   📅 **June 27, 2023**   ⊙ **East Shore Area Library**

Accommodations Provided

30 PARTICIPANTS

The Commonwealth partnered with the Dauphin County Library System for the first Community Conversation held in Dauphin County. Located in Harrisburg, the East Shore Area Library is the system's largest library and is a key place for the community to access resources beyond books, including loanable hotspots, laptops, and other internet devices to get online. The Library provides digital literacy classes and programs such as Device Drop-In Hours and partner programs with other libraries to help protect residents online.

Critical Needs & Gaps Experienced in Dauphin County

Limited Options
When searching for alternative Internet Service Providers, residents quickly found there are limited options that offer a strong broadband connection at a competitive price. Current alternative options like Starlink, Digital Subscriber Line (DSL), and hotspots are just not enough.

Hotspots Aren't Enough
Since having an internet connection at home is critical, residents are purchasing and paying for monthly hot spot connections. While this works most of the time, it's expensive, unreliable, and slow once they push their data limits at the end of the month.

Digital Divide
It's evident the digital divide is prevalent. Various stories from senior church members lacking internet access and digital skills to access church sermons were shared. Seniors discussed being unable to find jobs online due to poor internet skills and others spoke on behalf of immigrants with low English proficiently and the difficultly of accessing essential services and resources in their language.

Cultural Considerations
Concern about working with communities that have not culturally adopted technology as quickly as other residents. Such as communicating and informing the Amish and Mennonite communities around the state, stressing the need for respectful, and inclusive approaches to including them in broadband connection.

Question:
Describe your internet using an animal...

Unicorn, Cat, Ghost, Snail trying to be a Rabbit, Goldfish, Horse

Community Voices:

"My internet is like a cat, it's fickle. Sometimes it wants to work, sometimes it doesn't. Oh, and its expensive!"

"People will sit in the parking lot after hours to use Library Wi-Fi doing homework, taking calls or accessing telehealth."

"We provide care and help to 56 families and they don't have access to do check-in meetings or attend doctor appointments."

12.5%
Individuals Below Poverty Level

$67,424
Median Household Income

Sourced from U.S. Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey data

Delaware County Community Conversation

🕐 **Meeting #3** 📅 **June 27, 2023** ⦿ **Widener University**

45 PARTICIPANTS

Cohosted by Senators John Kane and Tim Kearney and the Delaware County Council, this Community Conversation held at Widener University was one of the most attended conversations in the state. There was much discussion among attendees about keeping internet connections affordable and fast. Widener University was a great venue as its footprint in the area made it an easy and accessible place for community members to speak and hear more about this project.

Critical Needs & Gaps Experienced in Delaware County

Low-Income Internet Access
Providing internet access as a utility for low-income families is crucial, but it's necessary to ensure that the subsidized service offers a usable speed.

It's All About the Maps
The mapping portion of the planning is important to ensure that there are accurate maps to identify the unserved and underserved areas in Pennsylvania.

Local Government Support
Residents spoke about the need for local government support to stand up and speak for the communities that need internet access. Municipalities need to continue to advocate for better internet for their residents.

Constant Challenges with Internet Service Providers
Residents had frustrating stories of internet connections at their homes. Some discussed promised speeds versus actual speeds throughout their house. Others were told to purchase Wi-Fi extenders to fix their problems, but not all residents said that an extender was a solution.

9.7%
Individuals Below Poverty Level

$83,960
Median Household Income

Sourced from U.S. Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey data

Question:
Describe your internet using an animal...

Octopus, Turtle, Racehorse, Iguana, Squirrel, Gerbil

Community Voices:

"If the goal is to open up internet access, there needs to be some education about the security risks that happen when you're online."

"Once the bundle special is over you have to pay more or keep calling to find out a new bundle plan. Always negotiating."

"My internet is like a gerbil, it keeps running and chugging along, but then suddenly stops until it starts going again."

Tioga County Community Conversation

Meeting #4   June 27, 2023   Tokishi Training Center

19 PARTICIPANTS

Develop Tioga, the community-based cohost for this Community Conversation, serves as the certified economic development organization for Tioga County. It was a clear choice to have them help organize the meeting for their area. They have been a key component in the county to help promote business, employment opportunities, and offer growth resources. The discussions centered on internet service limitations based on geographical landscapes and the negative effects limited internet has on agricultural communities and businesses. The Tokishi Training Center made an excellent destination to hold the meeting as it was directly in the middle of the county allowing for easy access for residents.

Critical Needs & Gaps Experienced in Tioga County

Agriculture Needs
Business owners commented on the need for internet access in rural agriculture-heavy areas. There are business functions that are only accessible online such as taxes and forms. Some farm equipment is automated and can only run with an internet connection; if the internet is down, it can cause detrimental damage to their business.

Digital Literacy Programs
There is a need for digital literacy programs in the county. Some are already in place, such as high school seniors offering help to senior citizens in the local community. Libraries are offering classes, but find more success offering one-on-one appointments for tech issues.

Geographical Issues
There are issues with the internet due to the complex geographical landscape of Tioga County. With mountain formations along key roads, even the emergency personnel have issues staying in contact with each other when traveling through these corridors.

Speaking Out & Getting Connected
People are passionate about getting connected. Residents drive a great distance to make sure they are heard. One attending resident drove over four hours from Warren County to make sure they could voice their concern and dissatisfaction with their current provider.

Question:
Describe your internet using an animal...

Giraffe, Tortoise, Koala, Frog

Community Voices:

"Digital Literacy classes are offered, but people tend to prefer one-on-one attention for individual needs."

"Realtors show an increase in desire to move, but lacking service to internet is a big deterrent."

"My internet is like a giraffe, I had to stand on the top of my car to get service to my internet working."

12.5%
Individuals Below Poverty Level

$54,671
Median Household Income

Sourced from U.S. Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey data

Washington County Community Conversation

🕐 **Meeting #5**   📅 **June 29, 2023**   📍 **Blueprints**

25 PARTICIPANTS

Blueprints, formerly Community Action Southwest, is a nonprofit organization that serves 20,000 residents in Greene and Washington counties in Pennsylvania and throughout West Virginia. With 50 programs, they help start and mobilize the resources of the entire community, enabling families and individuals to attain the skills, knowledge, motivations, and opportunities to become self-sufficient. Residents spoke a lot about current costs regarding reliability, better ways to make the internet available to everyone, and ways to encourage adoption for all members of the community.

Critical Needs & Gaps Experienced in Washington County

Affordability
Income-constrained individuals said they relied on cell phone data plans for internet because they could not afford to pay both a cell phone and home broadband subscription. People want to pay for reliability, but with current availability in their area, it's not worth spending the money for bad service.

Access
Community members spoke about being reliant on other institutions for internet access such as the local library. Issues arise when there is bad weather in the area, or residents cannot get transportation to the locations they rely on for internet access.

Adoption
Local senior centers have Wi-Fi available, but it goes widely unused due to seniors not knowing how to use the technology. Residents spoke about the issue of seniors falling for online scams and, in turn, being scared or hesitant to use the internet.

Internet Motivations
Attendees had recommendations and suggestions for a more inclusive approach to allow easier adoption for older Pennsylvanians. One idea was to make it free for them to encourage it with little-to-no risk. Going to the homes or places where these individuals socialize for programming or information sessions can also help adoption.

12.1%
Individuals Below Poverty Level

$70,303
Median Household Income

Sourced from U.S. Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey data

Question:
Describe your internet using an animal...

Unicorn, Cat, Ghost, Snail trying to be a Rabbit, Goldfish, Horse

Community Voices:

"Automated customer service systems make it difficult, especially for a senior, to deal with an provider."

"I am reliant on library Wi-Fi, but can't access it sometimes due to weather or transportation disruptions."

"I will pay for reliability but living in an area with slow speeds, I just end up paying for speeds that the provider can't deliver."

Montour County Community Conversation

Accommodations Provided

18 PARTICIPANTS

Community Conversation cohost DRIVE Industry is a business incubator that helps develop and offer space and resources to entrepreneurs in Columbia, Montour, Snyder, Union, and Northumberland counties. Broadband is nothing new to DRIVE Industry as the organization has its own program that offers broadband through a third-party provider. The Community Conversation was heavily focused on connectivity or as a resident put it "turning the county from Swiss cheese to cheddar cheese."

Critical Needs & Gaps Experienced in Montour County

Light Switches To Turn Internet On and Off
A comment heard was that it was a normal thing to have your Wi-Fi connected to a light switch. Internet was so unreliable, it was easier to turn it on and off via light switch to reset it to normal speeds than unplug it manually or figure out another fix.

Future Proofing
Residents discussed the fact that with a lot of undeveloped land in the County, it will be important to future-proof properties that may not have a home or business yet, but could if a farmer decides to sell land in the coming years or decades.

Infrastructure
Residents commented how important broadband is and that it should be looked at on the same level as roads or bridges. Examples talked about the impact of a $1 million dollar bridge that serves a small rural community, but when people see it'll cost $500k to connect 100 homes, many people think it's a waste of funds.

Competition
Competition comments were a common theme throughout the Community Conversation. Participants felt Internet Service Providers currently have a monopoly on services. Cohost DRIVE, offers their own DRIVENET service that has helped increase competition in the area but is small compared to the larger Internet Service Providers.

8.7%
Individuals Below Poverty Level

$64,858
Median Household Income

Sourced from U.S. Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey data

Question:
Describe your internet using an animal...

Sloth, Horse, Eagle, Bear

Community Voices:

"I hope more competition is introduced in the county. There are certain parts where only one service is available and that's it!"

"Montour County is like Swiss cheese, there are spots all over the county where there is no internet available."

"I prefer fixed wireless as the best solution. It's a cheaper cost per location and would be easy to build out."

Huntingdon County Community Conversation

🕐 **Meeting #7**   📅 **July 6, 2023**   ⊙ **Bricktown Events**

16 PARTICIPANTS

The Huntingdon County Chamber of Commerce is a key partner in the economic development of the county. Known for their commitment to quality of life, economic development, and developing the county, the chamber was an enthusiastic Community Conversation partner. The discussion highlighted that every county in Pennsylvania has different needs and different levels of broadband understanding and expansion underway.

Critical Needs & Gaps Experienced in Huntingdon County

Device Dependent
The preferred device for users in Huntingdon County heavily depends on the activity they are using the internet for at that time. If it was a TV show or movie being watched, televisions or laptops were preferred. Residents said that they most often use their phones to connect to the internet out of convenience when traveling and doing day-to-day activities.

Business Use
Business owners attended the meeting to discuss connection issues and ideas they have to improve internet access in the county. Owners said the lack of internet options hinders business growth and productivity.

Government Collaboration
Attendees were interested to know what the government was doing to communicate and work with the local communities about this plan. Many appreciated the Community Conversation and the opportunity for those who struggle with internet access to have their voice heard and be included in the program's planning.

Internet Service Provider Choices
When asked how many options residents have for Internet Service Providers, almost all reported only having one provider to purchase internet from. Attendees agree that competition and options for high-speed internet service are critical concerns.

Question:
Describe your internet using an animal...

Sloth, Slug, Turtle

Community Voices:

"My preferred device changes depending on what I'm doing. If I want to read something on a bigger screen, I will use my laptop."

"When my grandson is on his tablet, we can't watch TV at the same time."

"We are in the valley and it's awful. Two employees had to come to my business just so their kids could attend school during COVID."

11.6%
Individuals Below Poverty Level

$57,055
Median Household Income

Sourced from U.S. Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey data

Erie County Community Conversation

🕐 Meeting #8   📅 July 10, 2023   ◎ Jefferson Educational Society

30 PARTICIPANTS

Community Conversation cohost Infinate Erie's mission is to coordinate inclusive growth and strategies to deliver transformative change. Internet struggles are just as important from one end of the state to the other and hearing from people in Erie County helped support the geographic distribution of Community Conversations and provide information essential to the Commonwealth's work. Discussion revolved around bundling experiences, the issues with limted provider choices, and ways the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) could be promoted more.

Critical Needs & Gaps Experienced in Erie County

Bundles
Attendees discussed bundling with internet service and cable providers, and the challenges therein. Many felt that for some, bundles are valuable if you use all the services provided by the bundle. Others believe services should be separate if part of the bundle, like internet, is slow and almost non-existent.

Provider Choice
There were many comments made about how Erie County needs more provider options. Getting 'stuck' with a provider feels there's no opportunity to find out what works best for your household's needs. There are other options like Starlink, but it is expensive and many residents would prefer something like fiber.

Digital Literacy
Attendees believe communication and education around digital literacy is lacking. Many felt that libraries and local communities were doing a lot to help fill this gap of resources, but are not "Geek Squad" and can only help troubleshoot certain issues or problems.

Affordability Connectivity Program
Suggestions were made to have the ACP advertised more. Suggestions included making it available through Pennsylvania Department of Education communications, back to school information and encouraging providers to actively offer it and tell customers about it.

15.1%
Individuals Below Poverty Level

$56,094
Median Household Income

Sourced from U.S. Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey data

Question:
Describe your internet using an animal...

Cheetah, Sloth, Turtle, Snail

Community Voices:

"We had to buy boosters for the basement so the kids can use internet. When they have friends over it's a nightmare."

"My parent says the internet works but when they use the microwave, it stops. Digital literacy is a key piece."

"Fiber is absolutely the gold standard. This once-in-a-lifetime investment needs to go to the most future-proofed technology for best ROI."

Lackawanna County Community Conversation

🕐 **Meeting #9** 📅 **July 11, 2023** 📍 **Lackawanna County Center for Public Safety**

32 PARTICIPANTS

The Lackawanna County Department of Planning and Economic Development was open and open and excited to help organize the Community Conversation for their area. Even with high population density spread along the Lackawanna River, there are many who still struggle with reliable, high speed internet. Many rural agricultural areas struggle to connect to the internet, which is a key tool when running a businesses or day-to-day operations in such an automated environment.

Critical Needs & Gaps Experienced in Lackawanna County

Actual vs. Advertised Speeds
Lackawanna attendees felt strongly about the advertised speeds provided by the Internet Service Providers compared to the actual speeds they were receiving at home. Attendees were also very unsure if they were understanding what they were promised by the provider when it came to internet speeds.

Bandwidth at Home
With the COVID pandemic, many residents experienced more people accessing their home internet at once than ever before, slowing down connections. Many felt this bandwidth issue was because neighbors and their own family were all using the internet at the same time and the internet lines were unable to accommodate everyone.

Libraries
Libraries are often seen for more than their vast supply of books and resources. In our connected world, many seek libraries to help with technical issues, technology help, and ways to improve their digital knowledge. Unfortunately, the library can only do so much, leaving residents on their own to figure out some of their problems.

Provider Profitability
Many attendees believed Internet Service Providers didn't want to connect service to their homes because it wasn't profitable. Learning that the new money coming to Pennsylvania for broadband would soon make it feasible for Internet Service Providers to connect their home with broadband internet encouraged attendees to hope for change.

Question:
Describe your internet using an animal...

Opossum, Rabbit, Litter of Dogs, Expensive Rabbit, Tortoise, Horse

Community Voices:

"I'm concerned what will not only make the providers to come connect me, but also stay here once they installed internet?"

"During COVID, it was a struggle to convert my employees to online only. It was hard to get them to upgrade their internet."

"More people are coming to the Library for technology help than anything else."

13.2%
Individuals Below Poverty Level

$61,372
Median Household Income

Sourced from U.S. Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey data

Somerset County Community Conversation

🕐 **Meeting #10**   📅 **July 11, 2023**   📍 **Somerset Trust Company**

26 PARTICIPANTS

This Community Conversation was cohosted by State Representative Carl Metzgar, a member of the PBDA board and broadband advocate, the Somerset County Commissioners, and Johnstown Area Regional Industries (JARI), a nonprofit economic development organization that has been a devoted partner of the business community in Cambria and Somerset Counties since 1974.

During the conversation, residents spoke about their struggles and need for broadband in the County. Many spoke to the price of internet compared to what they are receiving. Additionally, residents discussed the importance of libraries and how they help change the lives of the community with their continued service and support to their residents.

Critical Needs & Gaps Experienced in Somerset County

Online Services
Residents discussed their need for internet both inside and outside of their homes, citing banking as just one example. Many banks have gone online, offering customers speed and efficiency for basic banking transactions and the ability to do them day or night. Without access to the internet, it is more time-consuming to pay bills, deposit checks, and manage savings.

High Prices, Poor Service
Residents felt the services they subscribed to were not up to par with the price tag. One resident said they pay over $70 a month for 1 Mbps. They expressed their frustration at frequently being told by Internet Service Providers that they could not be provided faster speeds. Going to a hotspot is the solution many residents have been forced to adopt to access the internet.

Local Library Lending a Helping Hand
Residents praised one local library that went above and beyond to help residents. This library created a 'lobby service' where residents could access Wi-Fi in their lobby during closed hours. Prior to that, residents had to stay in their cars or lean up against the building to get a strong internet signal. Creating this lobby service helped protect residents from weather and give them a safe, more comfortable space to access the internet.

School Wi-Fi is Critical
Providing for the schools in the area was brought up multiple times during the conversation. Schools were able to provide hotspots for students during the pandemic, but have have struggled post-pandemic to get a reliable, fast internet connection. This is important for day-to-day school work and communications, but also for keeping kids safe by making sure students, teachers, and staff can communicate in case of an emergency.

14.3%
Individuals Below Poverty Level

$48,438
Median Household Income

Sourced from U.S. Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey data

Question:
Describe your internet using an animal...

Leopard, Unicorn, Cheetah

Community Voices:

"My kid would rather stay at college where there is internet than come home during holiday breaks."

"I try to help people apply for ACP, but the application is too hard to fill out."

"My internet is like a leopard. Spotty at most, but sometimes it can be quick."

York County Community Conversation

🕐 **Meeting #11**   📅 **July 11, 2023**   📍 **Eureka Volunteer Fire & Ambulance Company**

43 PARTICIPANTS

This Community Conversation was cohosted by Senator Kristin Phillips-Hill and the York County Economic Alliance. The Alliance helps drive the County's economic growth by leveraging the collaboration, resources, and expertise needed to create a sustainable prosperity. They help businesses, education, and government create a commerce environment that will in turn build a stronger community. Having YCEA as a partner made our York event one of the largest events held throughout the state.

Critical Needs & Gaps Experienced in York County

Internet Sharing
One of the first stories shared was that a resident who had internet service would allow the neighbor who was a teacher use their internet after hours since he had no internet at home. The teacher now uses a hotspot, but because of hotspot demand in the area, there were times this was not an option.

Internet Connected Devices
Many residents shared interest in using additional devices to access the internet, but their current speeds do not support it. One attendee said they bought security devices for their property, flood lights, and security cameras, but they currently do not have a strong enough connection to use them.

Internet Service Provider Perception
Internet monopoly was brought up a handful of times by residents frustrated that they felt there were no options to choose from when purchasing internet service. It was either pay high, outrageous prices for slow internet or have no internet at all.

Trying Every Solution Possible
When discussed, many residents agreed that they have tried just about everything possible to get internet and are getting tired that nothing has worked so far. Many stated they started with a digital subscriber line (DSL), moved to a satellite service like Starlink and now use a hotspot.
They want something reliable and affordable like everyone else.

Question:
Describe your internet using an animal...

Dead Animal, Snail, Sloth

Community Voices:

"I have lived in the area for 35 years. I used to have Verizon. It was joke. Now I have AT&T but sometimes my devices are Wi-Fi only and are not compatible."

"I used to bundle, but since losing my old job, I had to lose the bundle and look for a single phone line elsewhere because the bundle was so expensive."

"I can see the internet from my house, but I can't get the internet at my house. It's extremely frustrating."

9.2%
Individuals Below Poverty Level

$80,130
Median Household Income

Sourced from U.S. Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey data

Clearfield County Community Conversation

🕐 **Meeting #12**   📅 **July 18, 2023**   📍 **DuBois Mall**

25 PARTICIPANTS

North Central Pennsylvania Regional Planning and Development Commission helped organize the Clearfield County Community Conversation. North Central is a 501a (c)(3) organization and is identified as a premier regional development organization that delivers a wide range of economic, community, infrastructure, human services, and technology programs for several counties, including Clearfield. An excellent discussion was had about cellular connection, the plans for grant money distribution, and the overall impact that this scale of a project can have on the county and Pennsylvania.

Critical Needs & Gaps Experienced in Clearfield County

Internet Service Provider Accountability
Residents were concerned about how Internet Service Providers would be held accountable for their promises and connections. There was also discussion about keeping Internet Service Providers in the area once the construction is complete. It was also discussed that there are requirements for government funding, including legal obligations from Internet Service Providers to share information and report directly to the government on progress.

Upgrading Basic Equipment
Suggestions were provided by the residents about how Internet Service Providers should at least be upgrading equipment every so often to ensure areas don't get left behind. Considerations from residents regarding future-proofing the fiber deployment and asked if that will still be fast enough in 10 - 20 years.

Equitable and Affordable
Many residents attended on behalf of neighbors or those who could not attend but also struggle with internet. Residents spoke about how this plan should also include those who may already have internet service, but not fast internet.

Encourage Business Development
A point brought up from a resident included opening these grants to businesses that don't typically provide internet but have the capabilities and infrastructure to do so. An example given was to encourage electric companies an opportunity to provide internet as it may be cheaper and offer an additional competitor to the market.

Question:
Describe your internet using an animal...

Sloth, Cheetah, Prairie Dog, Slug, Missing Cat

Community Voices:

"My utilities are underground. I was told by my provider that I'd be the last to connect. Is that true?"

"The provider promises a good speed, but they tend to over-promise. Will you be able to keep them accountable?"

"I have two children with special needs, and they can't attend virtual doctor appointments. What do we have to do that have our voice heard?"

10.2%
Individuals Below Poverty Level

$60,227
Median Household Income

Sourced from U.S. Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey data

Berks County Community Conversation (Seniors)

🕐 **Meeting #13** 📅 **July 20, 2023** 📍 **Centro Hispano**

32 PARTICIPANTS

Centro Hispano leads its community with passion and purpose. They look to support and enhance the acculturation of the Latino population in the Greater Reading area through collaborative initiatives. In partnership with Centro Hispano, two Spanish-speaking sessions were offered in Berks County. The first of the two meetings was held in the morning for seniors. The meeting allowed the Commonwealth to hear directly from those who historically lack digital literacy skills to access the internet.

Critical Needs & Gaps Experienced in Berks County

Device Availability
Questions arose about device availability for seniors. Many questions centered on programs to provide devices and learning opportunity to seniors. Attendees were encouraged to continue to work with community organizations and places they already get services as they will be able to apply to get digital equity funds to help provide these devices for community members.

Infrastructure Maintenance
There was concern for the upkeep and maintenance Internet Service Providers will need to continue once the new infrastructure is built. The Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development has plans to look at the contracts with Internet Service Providers to build out the network and make sure that they are maintaining their requirements.

Promised Speeds
Residents discussed how the speeds they were currently getting were not what they were paying for. Some pay upwards of $200 a month for service and are still unable to get high-speed internet.

SafeLink and the Affordable Connectivity Program
The Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) can be confusing to understand both if you qualify for a discount and how to sign up. With SafeLink, you will not be able to apply for the ACP Program as SafeLink money comes from the same pot of money the ACP does.

10.9%
Individuals Below Poverty Level

$72,070
Median Household Income

Sourced from U.S. Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey data

Question:
Describe your internet using an animal...

Elephant

Community Voices:

"I pay Comcast for high-speed internet; over $200 a month and I don't get it."

"Is the bandwidth coming going to help me with basic internet?"

"Will I be able to apply for the ACP Program and have SafeLink?"

19 PARTICIPANTS

Centro Hispano helped put on this second event was offered to families to hear their stories, struggles, and comments about broadband. Similar to the seniors' meeting, this meeting was held entirely in Spanish. Many different stories, ranging from troubles with schooling from home, device availability, and the high costs, both monetarily and mentally from trying to get reliable, high-speed internet at home.

Critical Needs & Gaps Experienced in Berks County

Issues with Internet Service Providers
Hearing the comments and complaints residents had about their current Internet Service Provider will help to address ways to hold Internet Service Providers accountable for their service and how the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development can better write the contracts and agreements. There was a lot of discussion about customer service, general issues, and high prices.

Promised Speeds
Many attendees shared concerns about the difference between the internet speeds they were promised versus their actual received service.

Materials Provided from Schools
Schools were some of the first organizations to begin helping students and families get connected during the COVID-19 pandemic. The condensed planning period for device programs through schools caused some unanticipated problems. Parents shared that they received hardware that was poor quality, stating some even arrived broken. Others said that there was no assistance or support to set it up and troubleshooting resulted in kids missing time from school.

Slower Speeds Overtime
A pain point we heard from this meeting was that when it got towards the end of the month, residents' internet would slow down or get throttled. They were fine for the first few weeks, but it soon got unbearable and soon unusable.

10.9%
Individuals Below Poverty Level

$72,070
Median Household Income

Sourced from U.S. Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey data

Question:
Describe your internet using an animal...

Turtle, Ostrich

Community Voices:

"It's not the quality or quantity, they gave us minimal internet access that could not help maximize our kids' education. It was junk."

"The internet is very expensive, and as the month passes by, it gets slower and slower."

"Schools gave us access to internet, but it was the most basic and if you wanted higher speeds, you had to pay for it."

McKean County Community Conversation

🕐 **Meeting #15** 📅 **July 20, 2023** ◎ **Port Allegany Veterans Memorial Inc.**

32 PARTICIPANTS

In addition to the Clearfield County meeting, the North Central Pennsylvania Regional Planning and Development Commission also partnered with the Commonwealth to develop the McKean County Community Conversation. North Central is a 501a (c)(3) organization and is identified as a premier regional development organization that delivers a wide range of economic, community, infrastructure, human services, and technology programs for McKean County. Attendees wanted to learn more about the application process for the program and wanted assurances that Internet Service Providers would be held accountable for their connections, service speeds, and timelines.

Critical Needs & Gaps Experienced in McKean County

Application Interest
Hearing the comments and complaints residents had about their current Internet Service Provider will help to address ways to hold them accountable for their service and how the Department of Community and Economic Development can better write the contracts and agreements. There was a lot of discussion about customer service, general issues, and high prices.

Affordability
With the new upgrades in speed, attendees were concerned about the rise in prices for even basic packages. Speeds soon-to-be-offered will be 10 - 50 times faster than some current speeds and their bill is already enough. Comments arose about ways that affordability will be a key part of the applications submitted for funding.

Internet Service Provider Motivation
Residents have concerns that even with the broadband funding available, Internet Service Providers might not be interested in servicing all locations or offering affordable plans. Discussion continued on the developing application process that would require Internet Service Providers to match some of the funding and provide skin in the game to bring internet to these areas that need it.

Engagement at All Levels
Attendees welcomed the opportunity to provide feedback and stories on the struggles to help shape this plan and the future of broadband in the state. The Pennsylvania Broadband Development Authority made it clear that residents as well as municipalities and counties to legislators would be engaged in different parts of the plan.

Question:
Describe your internet using an animal...

Unicorn, Gnat, Snail, Cheetah

Community Voices:

"There's only 25 ports available, if someone moves in and wants more internet, someone has to drop off. The provider won't add new ports."

"Mobile internet isn't bad, but if you want good internet, you have to purchase the Cadillac of plans."

"These dollars need to be spent connecting the unserved first."

14.8%
Individuals Below Poverty Level

$52,350
Median Household Income

Sourced from U.S. Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey data

Carbon County Community Conversation (Palmerton)

🕐 **Meeting #16**   📅 **July 21, 2023**   ◎ **Palmerton Area Library**

11 PARTICIPANTS

Community Conversation cohost The Carbon County Community Foundation (CCCF) is a dynamic and dedicated organization committed to fostering positive change and growth within the Carbon County region of Pennsylvania. With a passionate focus on community development and empowerment, CCCF works tirelessly to enhance the lives of residents and the overall well-being of the area. This meeting was one of two meetings held on the same day to learn more about the internet struggles, ideas, and concerns of Carbon County.

Critical Needs & Gaps Experienced in Carbon County

Connectivity and Reliability Issues
Residents told stories about the issues with internet reliability in their area. Some had issues due to inclement weather that slows or shuts off their internet service. Others discussed old equipment around the area which caused them to be unable to get high-speed internet.

Local Government Communication
Residents and community leaders spoke about issues they've experienced communicating with their residents via the internet. Since some residents don't have internet, they are unable to receive emails or watch council live streams. They have to rely on neighbors, printed materials, or local community anchor institutions to hear what is happening in their community.

Satisfaction
A common theme throughout the Community Conversations was satisfaction (or lack thereof) between the Internet Service Provider and the service provided. The same was heard in Carbon County as attendees said that there were not a lot of competitors or options available to them in their area to keep costs competitive. Some said that they would feel comfortable paying $60 a month for high-speed internet, relating this cost to electricity costs.

Openness to Digital Literacy Classes and Training
Community members expressed interest in attending digital literacy classes or training sessions to help enhance their skills but felt there were few resources available to them now. One example topic would be a class guiding customers through the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) application.

8.7%
Individuals Below Poverty Level

$64,456
Median Household Income

Sourced from U.S. Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey data

Question:
Describe your internet using an animal...

Bat, Rabbit, Turtle, Cheetah

Community Voices:

"When it rains or gets windy, I have trouble staying connected to the internet. Unfortunately, in our area that happens more often than other areas."

"We have trouble live streaming our council meetings to the community to watch."

"I wasn't able to unlock my car with my phone because there was no Wi-Fi or cellular available. My keys were in the car!"

Carbon County Community Conversation (Nesquehoning)

🕐 **Meeting #17**   📅 **July 21, 2023**   📍 **Panther Valley Elementary School**

13 PARTICIPANTS

This meeting was the second of two held on the same day in Carbon County, cohosted by The Carbon County Community Foundation.

Critical Needs & Gaps Experienced in Carbon County

Moving In with No Internet
Carbon County is known for its beautiful landscape, but sometimes that view is tarnished by not having internet. People spoke about how they moved to the county for the scenery but the internet issues hindered their quality of life. Residents wondered how many potential residents did not move to the area because of poor internet access.

Searching for the Internet
Residents struggle to find consistently available internet connections and devices. Many rely on hotspots borrowed from libraries, but because of high demand, these devices aren't always available. When all hot spots were used, residents found other locations in the area with free and available Wi-Fi, like the McDonald's parking lot. Some parents have to spend time in the parking lot just so their kids could access the internet.

Surprised by Student Digital Literacy
A large portion of the discussion was about digital literacy and how the residents around the county felt comfortable navigating the internet and using technology. A community college professor spoke about how she was surprised by how many students don't know how to navigate the internet. Also, increasingly numbers of non-traditional students are attending school. Even using different devices such as Chromebooks or iPads, students have trouble learning a whole new technology system when they are used to using a single one for most of their education history.

Local Government Involvement
Closing thoughts included more than a few attendees agreeing they would like to see more local government involvement in advocating for residents on some of the broadband issues discussed.

8.7%
Individuals Below Poverty Level

$64,456
Median Household Income

Sourced from U.S. Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey data

Question:
Describe your internet using an animal...

Opossum, Sloth

Community Voices:

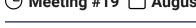*"The ACP program is better than nothing, but it still doesn't help if a bill is $200."*

"If there's high wind, forget about working."

"We used to have to go to McDonald's to access the internet. Sitting in the car, so my kid could do his homework."

Dauphin County Community Conversation

🕐 **Meeting #19** 📅 **August 17, 2023** ◎ **Harrisburg University of Science Technology**

18 PARTICIPANTS

Young Professionals of Color - Greater Harrisburg (YPOC), and Harrisburg University's Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship (CIE) were the community-based cohosts for this session. YPOC was formed in 2016 as a culturally sensitive community support space for diverse workers throughout the Harrisburg area and seeks to empower professionals of color to thrive. Harrisburg University's CIE works with students, faculty, entrepreneurs, and partners, focusing on technology within manufacturing, healthcare, and agriculture sectors. Both organizations encourage new ideas and help turn those ideas into reality, making them excellent partners to organize this Community Conversation. The discussion covered a range of topics including, disabilities, equity access, education, and internet speeds from providers. Residents included thoughts on device access among their stories and discussions.

Critical Needs & Gaps Experienced in Dauphin County

Connecting Residents With and Without Homes
One of the first points discussed was providing internet throughout the area, especially including helping those who may lack access, such as unhoused populations. Attendees spoke about how internet should be available to all and how internet accessibility for all is beneficial.

Deaf Community Consideration
Many discussions included stories of residents being hurt because of limited internet access at home. One attendee told the story about her grandfather, who is now hard of hearing, and how he couldn't access tele-health because of the poor and laggy video. Since the video was laggy, her grandfather who relies on reading lips now, couldn't understand and get the help he needed. This led to a discussion about other similar communities currently struggling due to poor, unreliable internet at home.

Device Education
Residents recognized that as broadband popularity climbs, so should device education. There is still a need for teaching how to use devices, use new software, and understand how to get the most out of your device. Older residents spoke of having the latest devices but not knowing how to use them to their fullest extent. Others spoke about having the fastest internet possible, but running outdated devices on it. One even spoke how their family is using Windows 98, a 25-year old operating system!

Internet Speed Promises
Heard throughout most Community Conversations, residents were unimpressed by the internet speeds they purchased versus what they received. They discussed what could be done and how Internet Service Providers can be kept accountable.

Question:
Describe your internet using an animal...

Lion, Giraffe, Dog, Dolphin, Turtle, Rabbit, Bat, Gopher, Spider, Rhino

Community Voices:

"I may have the fastest speeds, but can my devices support it? Lots of my family members have internet but are still using devices that are over 10 years old."

"We work primarily from home, we're hybrid. We are pouring money in trying to figure out the issue but haven't been able to fix it."

"My internet is like a gopher; it seems strong but pops in and out. Sometimes its strong, other times it's got issues."

12.5%
Individuals Below Poverty Level

$67,424
Median Household Income

Sourced from U.S. Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey data

Clarion County Community Conversation

🕐 **Meeting #20** 📅 **August 24, 2023** 📍 **Clarion County Learning Center**

21 PARTICIPANTS

Community-based cohost Clarion County Economic Development Corporation supports companies by connecting them with the many types of resources they need to grow and thrive. Within a day's truck drive of half of America's population, Clarion County sees a lot of transportation coming to and from the area. This makes resources, suppliers, and markets affordable and easily accessible to the surrounding areas. During the Clarion County Community Conversation, discussion trended towards county specific needs including increased connection in the County's State Parks, keeping internet affordable, and the immediate need for internet at home and work.

Critical Needs & Gaps Experienced in Clarion County

Tired of Surveys
Residents explained they were frustrated and tired of taking surveys and wanted action. One resident spoke about how they have been fighting the battle for internet for 12 years and every time they give their feedback, nothing is done. Other residents echoed that they were hopeful this would be one of the last surveys they would take.

State Parks Connectivity
With a handful of state parks in the County, Cook Forest State Park is among one of the largest. Residents frequently spend their time in the park, but struggle to connect to the internet on their phones, even inside the permanent structures. Residents hope a good internet connection in the park would benefit eco-tourism and economic development.

Affordability
Towards the middle of the discussion, residents discussed how inflation and the rising prices of everything are affecting them. This included the price of internet and internet bundles. They were interested in knowing more about how this upcoming plan would keep prices affordable.

Schedules and Promises
The last major discussion topic consisted of concerns from residents about the need for holding Internet Service Providers accountable to promised schedules of construction and speeds once construction is complete. Residents spoke about the problems they encountered when paying for a specific speed but received slower, unusable speeds. Many times, they must speak to the customer service hotline from the provider to get any help or get their service fixed.

Question:
Describe your internet using an animal...

Horse, Turtle, Sloth, Greyhound

Community Voices:

"I'm sick of taking surveys. We are 12 years into this battle. Our internet hasn't been updated in decades!"

"Locations at the bottom of the food chain should be upgraded first. We work from home and are constantly booted off the internet."

"My internet is like a sloth. It was really slow at first, but now it just refuses to do anything. It doesn't work."

15.2%
Individuals Below Poverty Level

$53,096
Median Household Income

Sourced from U.S. Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey data

Northampton County Community Conversation

🕐 **Meeting #21** 📅 **August 30, 2023** 📍 **Northampton Community College**

36 PARTICIPANTS

The Commonwealth organized this Community Conversation with support from the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission, the region's metropolitan planning organization. Its diverse planning work that supports residents' and communities' health, safety, and general welfare uniquely positioned it to support a regional meeting, drawing attendees from its service area and beyond. Participants included residents and organizational representatives from Lehigh, Northampton, and Monroe counties who sought to understand the technology and shared issues and concerns about current and future service.

Critical Needs & Gaps Experienced in Northampton County

Limited Options for Residents
Attendees shared concerns about the lack of competition and service plan options. Some participants were affected by Internet Service Provider agreements with the property management at their apartment complex, others had only one provider in their community, and some either couldn't get internet access or relied on satellite service. Residents also shared the challenges of their service being throttled once a specified amount of data has been used for the month.

Effects of Limited Connectivity
Not having reliable internet access touches residents of all ages, and attendees discussed how the lack of internet or poor internet connections impacts their lives or the lives of those they work with. Concerns about students being able to complete homework or participate in school remotely were expressed as some students are affected by income while others don't have adequate provider options. Work challenges were also mentioned in relation to employees being able to work from home and small business owners being able to manage their businesses effectively.

Cost Concerns
Affordability was an issue brought forth by participants as income constraints affect individuals of all ages and families with school-aged children throughout the region. Even those with the most reliable internet service also referenced what they felt were excessive monthly costs. Information about the Affordable Connectivity Program was shared with attendees, and its benefits and avenues for registration assistance were discussed.

11%
Individuals Below Poverty Level

$74,696
Median Household Income

Sourced from U.S. Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey data

Question:
Describe your internet using an animal...

Sloth, Octopus, Goldfish

Community Voices:

"We only have two providers in Lehigh Valley. It's a monopoly. We don't have a choice in providers. This is why we have some of the highest costs."

"I called my service provider to ask to increase my speed, and they said they could not."

"I work from home. My internet dropped 12 times today."

Montgomery County Community Conversation

🕐 **Meeting #22** 📅 **September 5, 2023** 📍 **Montgomery County Community College**

12 PARTICIPANTS

Senators Tracy Pennycuik and Jimmy Dillon cohosted this Community Conversation held at the Montgomery County Community College. Both Senators are on the Senate Communications and Technology Committee, with Senator Pennycuik serving as Chair and Senator Dillon as Minority Chair. This Community Conversation was attended by many stakeholders and program advocates for fast and reliable broadband in the County. Some of the attendees were teachers and professors in the area, who brought stories with them about the struggles they faced with little to no internet during the pandemic. Many spoke of students continuing to struggle with internet access outside of the classroom. internet outside of the classroom.

Critical Needs & Gaps Experienced in Montgomery County

Struggles Continue to Persist
Attendees told stories of others and how the lack of broadband is a struggle for many friends, family, and community members. Many residents require internet to be able to work and go to school online. Even though those residents had hotspots, they continue to lack internet and are in desperate need for broadband at home.

Backed by Government
Senator Pennycuick and staff attended the conversation and spoke about the importance of internet in the County and State. Pennycuick said "Every community in Pennsylvania should have high-speed and reliable broadband access." Attendees agreed this was a long overdue problem that deserved the proper attention for this once in a lifetime opportunity to connect all Pennsylvanians.

Meeting Residents Where They Are
Discussion revolved around ways to get information about the program and the digital equity resources in front of those who need it the most. An example included local school district representatives going to community and religious centers to teach parents about the school's learning management system. This helped parents know what their student would be learning and help their student succeed at home.

Digital Literacy for Everyone
Residents spoke about the need for building a robust digital literacy program available to everyone in Pennsylvania. There is a need for digital literacy from students to parents to the grandparents. Discussions included types of classes that can be offered, what programs already exist, and how to best promote a program to the right audience.

6.7%
Individuals Below Poverty Level

$106,811
Median Household Income

Sourced from U.S. Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey data

Question:
Describe your internet using an animal...

Unicorn, Octopus, Frog, Chameleon, Spider

Community Voices:

"My mother would participate in senior center programs about scams, but these resurge and repetition is necessary."

"My internet is like a chameleon; it changes depending on the users interest and skill level."

"We qualified to give out 700 hotspots over 5 years which is great, but home broadband would be so much better. A hotspot can only do so much."

Beaver County Community Conversation

🕐 **Meeting #23** 📅 **September 20, 2023** 📍 **Tech2Elevate**

15 PARTICIPANTS

This Community Conversation was held at Tech2Elevate, a pioneer in providing digital skills education throughout Beaver County. Tech2Elevate plans to offer Digital Coaches to give one-on-one, customized assistance to residents including how to use online services, set up and use an email account, and find affordable internet service. Attendees included both residents and government officials looking to discuss the state of broadband in Beaver County and their individual experiences.

Critical Needs & Gaps Experienced in Beaver County

Working Woes
All attendees work in professions that require computer and internet usage. Many have experienced challenges with freezing on meetings and virtual calls at both their home and offices. Some attendees are forced to turn off their video for Zoom meetings to avoid lagging or dropped calls. Others resort to working in coffee shops with reliable Wi-Fi, and a resident shared that half the people in the coffee shops are using laptops, implying the problem of home access may be widespread.

Cost Challenges
Most attendees agree high-speed internet service is too expensive, even when bundles are offered. Residents expressed they've even signed up for bundles that include services they don't need or use to get lower prices. Because there are only a few Internet Service Providers in the region, attendees feel there are no lower-price options available.

Online Services Aren't Optional
In recent years, especially since the pandemic, many services that were once readily available in person have moved to online only. Banking is a great example. Many brick-and-mortar branches have closed and moved services that used to be completed in person, like cashing or depositing a check, to an online system. This increases convenience for those with internet access and digital skills, it introduces challenges to populations like aging individuals and those with slow or no internet at home.

Enjoying Online Convenience
When attendees have high-speed internet access, they speak very highly of the online services bringing convenience to their lives. Multiple attendees shared positive experiences with telehealth appointments and even attending bilingual therapist appointments, something that was previously hard to imagine or access.

9.7%
Individuals Below Poverty Level

$67,350
Median Household Income

Sourced from U.S. Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey data

Question:
Describe your internet using an animal...

Dead Snail, Spider, Donkey, Gazelle

Community Voices:

"I've been freezing on internet calls, and my provider's speed test showed me I was only getting 4 percent of what I'm paying for."

"I can't get internet in corners of my house because the Wi-Fi signal is not strong enough. My security camera can't see. "

"Telemedicine is very important. My wife is using it after her surgery, and it has been great!"