Enterprise Community Partners

Transcript of Webinar

BroadbandUSA State Broadband Leaders Network & Digital Inclusion Leaders Network Overview

Friday, January 26, 2021

Grace Campion: All right. Good afternoon. I'm going to get us started here. Thank you all for joining us. You're taking part in today's ConnectHomeUSA webinar series and my name is Grace Campion. I am one of your hosts today along with Dina Lehmann-Kim, our ConnectHomeUSA program manager at HUD.

And before Dina introduces our panelists, I just wanted to go through a few housekeeping items with you all. Today we have NTIA, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration online today who will share their knowledge with us for the first part of the presentation and we will take the remaining time for any questions that you have.

And to get into that, we ask you to share your questions in two ways. First, in the right-hand navigation panel, you'll see a hand-shaped icon and if you would like to verbally share your questions, please select the hand icon and I will unmute your line and you can ask your question out loud.

Second, if you'd like to send us your questions, please type it into the chat box and that is located in the lower right-hand navigation panel. I'll read your question out loud in the order that we've received them and if we are not able to get to all of the questions, we will send out an email reply after the webinar.

And again, I hope in the second half will be a robust conversation. So make sure you're keeping notes of what questions you want to ask. And as you know, all webinar participants are muted upon entry and if you would like to notify our team of any tech issues today, please just shoot me a note in the chat box and we'll work our best to fix it up.

Our webinar today is being recorded and will be available on HUD Exchange shortly following the webinar and immediately following this webinar you will get an invitation to complete a short survey and we ask you to please complete that and give us any feedback that you have. So without further ado, welcome, again, and I'll pass it over to Dina to kick us off and introduce our panelists. Dina.

Dina Lehmann-Kim: Thank you so much, Grace and thank you, everyone for joining us today. Happy 2021. Today is the first webinar of our 2021 series. So thank you so much for joining. I am thrilled to bring this webinar to you; I think it's going to be a really important resource for you all to know about.

I've been mentioning this on our regional call and I think it's something that we should all know more about, including myself from the State Broadband Leaders Network from BroadbandUSA as well as the Digital Inclusion Leaders Network. Our colleagues from NTIA will talk about both of these things and bonus, the new funding they received in the '21 Appropriations Bill.

So I'm really excited to learn more about that. So let me just introduce our speakers in order of appearance. Gilbert Resendez will speak first and he joined NTIA and the BroadbandUSA program as a broadband program specialist in July 2019 shortly after finishing his master of science and public policy management at Carnegie Mellon University.

His work at NTIA focuses on state government partnerships and outreach. Prior to coming to NTIA Gilbert worked as a legal assistant helping clients and community foundations with the state planning and business issues. Our next speaker who I've had the privilege of working with for many years is Emy Tseng. She's a senior program specialist with NTIA's BroadbandUSA program.

Emy provides technical assistance to local and state governments on their digital inclusion strategy and initiatives. Her work focuses on expanding broadband adoption, use and digital skills in underserved and vulnerable communities across the country. I am pleased to have them both with us today and I want to thank them for taking time to do this today. So with that, I will turn it over to you, Gilbert.

Gilbert Resendez: Great. Thank you very much, Dina. Thank you, everyone for joining us this afternoon and a big thank you to you, Dina for inviting us and for your work with our interagency policy matters at NTIA, it's greatly appreciated. I'm just going to touch quickly through our agenda of what Emy and I have put together for everyone.

First, I'm going to give an overview of NTIA and the BroadbandUSA program in sort of the different areas that BroadbandUSA touches. I will then give an overview of our State Broadband Leaders Network before passing it off to my colleague, Emy, to discuss the Digital Inclusion Leaders Network and state and local government's roles in digital inclusion as well as giving some examples from state and local governments.

And without further ado, I'll go ahead and start us off. NTIA and BroadbandUSA, so what is the National Telecommunications and Information Administration or NTIA since that can be a mouthful? NTIA advises the government on telecommunications and policy issues, we're the principle advisor within the federal government working from the bottom-up on our mission areas.

We work to maintain that the Internet remains an engine for continued innovation and economic growth. We work on expanding the use of federal spectrum as well as expanding broadband access and adoption and that's the main mission area that Emy and I work on. With that, we work with the BroadbandUSA program.

Our three pillars are educate, convene and assist. We educate individuals and communities on the need for broadband and emerging telecommunications issues, we convene leaders at the state, local and federal level for information sharing on those issues and best practices and then we assist communities on these access, adoption and affordability issues.

One thing that we walk through with clients is -- are baseline broadband speed evaluation. As many of us know and have come to know during the pandemic, fast and reliable Internet is vital for participating fully in the economy as well as various other parts of our lives. Download and upload speeds vary depending on what you're trying to use and the number of devices you're trying to connect to.

So we try to walk through communities around what types of speed do they need when assessing their broadband goals. For example, a hospital network is going to need a different use and different amounts of download speeds than a library versus a housing development.

And the goal that we try to work through with our communities at every level is this idea of the connected community and that's where broadband is the infrastructure powering a lot of these policy goals that we've listed here, be it data collection or economic development, cost savings for cities and states, sustainability, education, healthcare, workforce development trying to get -- make sure that broadband is a piece of those policy goals.

Like I mentioned, BroadbandUSA focuses on community outcomes. Our pillars, like I said earlier, are educate, convene and assist. So we do that through partnerships, technical assistance and then products and events.

So we have -- maintain partnerships with various community organizations and governments to clarify policy issues and recommend best practices, we offer technical assistance for technical assistance programs to advise communities on infrastructure and digital inclusion issues which we'll talk a little bit more about today and then we host different products and events, such as establishing -- or publish our guidance and toolkits as well as sharing best practices.

I mentioned that we do events. We engage communities all over the country for special events and webinars. Even in FY '20 we were still able to get out and do some regional events on broadband deployment. We host our monthly broadband practical conversations webinars.

Those are monthly webinars on various broadband and telecommunications topics, be it digital inclusion or data for planning broadband and we also host regular cohort meetings, two of which we are about to talk later today. I mentioned that we do a lot of interagency coordination with broadband, one of our partners, HUD, and we work with Dina on that.

Our role is to help improve the coordination of federal broadband programs and policies as well as promoting consistent via cross-federal broadband programs and encouraging regional coordination of various federal technical assistance services depending on the agency as well as trying to act as a one-stop for information on broadband programs and permitting policies.

One thing that we do is we publish federal funding programs on our website. We update that every year and we're in the process of doing that now, but we do have information on federal programs that can be used for broadband, be it infrastructure of digital inclusion. One of our most recent endeavors that we've launched is the National Broadband Availability Map.

This is the platform for geospatial analysis of broadband data. This started as a multiyear program to improve the understanding of broadband availability and make that accessible to federal and state policy makers. Data that's incorporated comes from the FTC states and private sector.

We started with eight partner states in our pilot phase and we've now grown to opening up to other states and as of August 2020, we have 22 states participating with us and we're always

looking to grow that partnership. I did mention we do have a little bit on our consolidated appropriation backed in the broadband provisions for NTIA.

The first comes from division FS Title IX which establishes -- called the Access Broadband Act. This establishes the Office of Internet Connectivity and Growth, states that that office will track federal dollars for this on broadband streamlined application process as well as doing coordination of broadband support at the federal level.

And then the one that a lot of people are asking us lately are -- comes from Division N. This is our broadband Internet access services. This established three different [inaudible] programs, the Connecting Minority Communities Fund, the Broadband Infrastructure Deployment grants and then the Tribal Broadband Connectivity grants.

The Connecting Minority Communities Fund, as established by the $285 million fund for devices, service and adoption for digital inclusion, this does not cover infrastructure costs and is available to eligible historically-bought colleges and universities, tribal colleges, universities and other minority-serving institutions, like Hispanic-serving institutions.

Our next grant program is the Broadband Infrastructure Deployment grant, which is funded at $300 million. This is an infrastructure broadband grant program for infrastructure projects technologically neutral.

And then our third program is the Tribal Connectivity grant program, which is the largest of the 3, it's a $1 billion grant program for service on tribal land or other remote projects where telework and telehealth for other connectivity resources during the COVID-19 pandemic coming from the legislation.

Now I'm going to shift gears and talk about our first cohort program that I had mentioned and that is our State Broadband Leaders Network and this is one of the cohorts that I work primarily with. Our State Broadband Leaders Network is a cohort of state-level broadband practitioners working on state broadband initiatives.

These participants share priorities and best practices amongst one another and discuss emerging telecommunications policy issues. When we launched this in 2016, we had 15 states that participated and we now have 50 states, the District of Columbia and 3 territories that participate in some capacity with some regularity.

So we're very proud of that growth that we've seen coming from the state and territories in D.C. Most of our participants are broadband directors, managers and then staff from governor's offices mainly from departments of economic development, commerce, although, we do see people from other agencies, like community and housing developments, [inaudible] offices and university extensions.

This cohort meets monthly. Our next meeting is actually later this afternoon and then we also try to meet twice in person in some capacity. This past year we haven't been able to meet like we

had hoped in person, but we are planning a virtual winter summit as a virtual series between February and March.

And then with that, we use their support to compile information on state broadband activities, including broadband programs, plans, funding and other data collection that states have for use for broadband planning and programs that other folks can also tap into. We call that our state scan process and we publish that information on our state broadband resource page.

So I clipped Pennsylvania. I'm a little bias, like Dina said, I went to Carnegie Mellon and spent some time in Pennsylvania and if you click on any state, you'll see we post the broadband website, the primary broadband contact for that process, give their name and email if we have it, information on who the state broadband coordinator is, other various broadband programs that they may have, funding that happens annually or with some regularity for broadband and then information on that state's broadband plan.

So we just post that information so people can look at it if they're trying to coordinate on broadband issues for whatever reason or what they're trying to achieve. Like I mentioned, we do track state programs that have funding for broadband. As of March, 2020, we had 34 states that had some sort of regular funding for broadband.

It's important to include -- I mentioned that this map and the information on the website does not include Cares Act programs, although, there are many states who aren't listed that did do some sort of funding program with their Cares dollars. Additionally, we are in the process of updating this and we do update it pretty regularly from our state scan process that I talked about.

With that, I will pass it off to my colleague, Emy Tseng to talk about the Digital Inclusion Leaders Network.

Emy Tseng: Thank you, Gilbert. And I do want to thank Dina and ConnectHome for having us speak today. I actually have been with NTIA for -- since 2009 and I think I might know Dina for that long, certainly have known Dina since the inception of the ConnectHome program and I'm really excited to see the growth of the program over the years and how it's evolved.

Dina Lehmann-Kim: Thank you, Emy.

Emy Tseng: So the next couple slides will probably be review for you all since you all are part of ConnectHome and very much embedded in the digital inclusion world, but I'll just go over what we state as our definition of digital inclusion and really, our focus is on how people can use technology in ways to better their lives and better their -- improve their communities.

And so I like to say that digital inclusion is the human side of broadband. In my agency and a lot of federal agencies, the focus is really on infrastructure and -- understandably, but of course, as you all know, that unless people use the broadband they won't benefit from broadband. So what I'm really interested in is how communities take action so that digital technology helps achieve community goals around education, workforce, health, social and civic engagement, aging in place.

We see all of these things as really fundamental goals and as I like to emphasize, really the technology as the tool, but what's really important is what all of you want to accomplish using these tools and I think in that way, that we have a very -- this is one reason why ConnectHome's mission fits so much into what we've been trying to do in digital inclusion at NTIA.

So again, you all probably know this, some folks refer to the three-legged stool, I would say it's more a four-legged stool around broadband access and affordability, computers and devices, technical help and support and digital skills training. Really, again, the digital divide is a set of digital divides.

You know, a lot of times we think about this as sort of a either/or situation, but really, it's more of a set of devices and how they interact and really, the gaps between people who have access and computers/devices with the necessary skills but those who don't and these can depend on all sorts of factors, including region, whether you're in a rural area, suburban or urban area, income, of course, education level, race, disabilities and what we've seen --

Although, again, particularly with the pandemic, a lot of the focus has been on the access and devices. Really, the digital divide over the years is increasingly a skills divide. There was actually a recent article on CNN about how access in devices is not sufficient. You know, again, the whole idea of investing and human capital and human skills is very important.

So what are we doing at BroadbandUSA around digital inclusion? So I, along with my colleague, Ryan Wiegand, facilitate the Digital Inclusion Leaders Network and you can notice that it's very similar in concept and name to the SBLN, State Broadband Leaders Network. It's a community of local and state government practitioners, staff who work on digital inclusion and digital equity initiatives.

We have had regular meetings for maybe three or four years, but we just became official last year similar to SBLN and actually, ConnectHome. Participants share priorities of best practices. We really are firm believers in cohorts and peer learning. We also bring in federal speakers and different subject matter experts on different topics.

And this actually -- the interest in this topic is ever-growing amongst the local governments. Actually, I think even since I wrote this -- got these statistics a few weeks ago it might be obsolete, because we're growing all the time.

And again, the people who are in this group are mainly program staff from the different departments, the IT departments, the offices of the chief technology officer, the economic development and commerce departments, more program staff and governors and mayors offices and also community development.

And we -- this really evolved. We've been having these conversations for a while and at first, they were more on specific topics -- more informal meetings on particular topic areas, but then as time went on and this field grew, there was a need for government-to-government conversations

about digital inclusion, particularly for the staff that were responsible for implementing these programs.

So we talk a lot about implementation but implementation within a government construct, issues like procurement, different stakeholder engagement and things like that. So I just want to show you a little graphic from our -- we do have an interactive map, it's not as detailed as the state map, but we do have, on our website, a place where you can go and see what states and local governments have digital inclusion programs.

So this, I think, might be a really useful resource for you all. Just to let you know, so we list programs where either it's a government agency that heads the program or where a government agency is part of a larger coalition. I just want to actually encourage anybody who works with or is part of the state or local government who might fit this description.

Please contact us if you want to be listed, we're always looking for new programs. We don't claim that this is all comprehensive and also for any state and local government staff who might be out there please let us know if you want to join our conversations. So this field has really -- and the emphasis on this field has really grown over the -- well, it's kind of gone through different phases.

Of course, the interest has really grown because of COVID and the state and local responses to COVID. Prior to that the rise of smart city technology, state broadband funding, which Gilbert mentioned, community broadband or fiber products and then even before that, the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program, which was a grant program in the Obama Administration, really, again, established a lot of these programs.

So you see, again, the growth of the state and local government initiatives along with the public housing initiatives. And so I know that -- I'll -- again, many of you do program implementation and there are great resources for program implementation, including the ConnectHome playbook. Of course, a lot of you know the National Digital Inclusion Alliance.

So I'm actually going to focus more on what actions that I see state and local governments taking and these are things that you might be able to ask your state and local government to do or partner with you. So of course, a lot of them do provide some kind of leadership and convene stakeholders which may include and should include public affordable housing providers, education, libraries and community organizations.

They also work to educate and inform the public about not only the importance of digital inclusion but the programs that actually [inaudible]. They also -- another big role is to actually inform policymakers and elected officials about the importance of digital inclusion. They also may connect government agencies and nonprofits and housing providers to industries and to Internet service providers.

We see this a lot, because oftentimes, the department of technology negotiates telecommunication franchises and contracts that I've seen in many different cities. They're able

to leverage these contracts to bring resources to, again, nonprofits as well as public housing. They may directly fund programs through their own grant programs.

Oftentimes, they'll fund nonprofits that actually work with public housing residents, but beyond direct funding they also oftentimes facilitate funding, facilitate other federal or state or private philanthropic funding. So again, a lot of times the agencies -- in some cases, the technology agencies may have these connections that you're able to -- you know, that they may be able to leverage and bring different players together.

And oftentimes, the governments will deploy the technologies themselves, particularly local government, when they're doing their public Wi-Fi deployments. They may be able to bring connections or to at least close, if not to housing sites to very close by like a park near housing sites.

We've seen this in Brownsville and San Mateo County actually used their county fiber network to provide connections to some affordable housing and then many of you might've heard about the largescale programs in San Francisco and New York using municipal fiber resources.

Again, they're able to provide some overall strategy and planning and do some research and aggregate data. A number of these programs do some kind of technology survey to measure the digital divide. So they supplement the data that's available through Census. And then they actually spearhead a lot of the overall broadband and digital inclusion strategy of which housing authorities should be part of that process.

So I'm just going to go quickly through a couple examples. This is not meant to be actually exhaustive and the way I selected them were folks who were part of ConnectHome communities and folks that were also part of the Digital Inclusion Leaders Network. So next slide.

So many of you know about the really innovative work that the Housing Authority of the City of Austin does with digital inclusion. The actual city of Austin has a very longstanding digital inclusion program, the community technology program in their office of telecommunications and regulatory of theirs. So for example, in 2014, the city of Austin and the housing authority's nonprofit subsidiary, Austin Pathways, did a collaborative digital inclusion assessment project which really identified digital divides in the public housing.

They've actually continued to conduct technology surveys and assessments. This assessment was really useful in negotiations with Google Fiber so that when Google Fiber entered the Austin market in 2014, the company actually -- well, the city was able to negotiate with the company to provide 100 community connections, which at least some were used to connect public housing sites.

And then the housing authority created the Unlocking the Connection program to try to connect 100 percent of its residents; and my understanding is that this became one of the bases of the ConnectHome program or one of the models. Another really innovative way that the city and the housing authority partner is, as I mentioned, there's a lot more interest in digital inclusion because of smart community technologies.

So the housing authority has its Digital Ambassadors program. It has different names, the Mobility Ambassadors, City Ambassadors.

So I'll just say Digital Ambassadors where as the city rolled out different transportation applications and other smart city applications, the housing authority employed and trained residents to teach other residents how to use these applications and not only that, actually, these residents became part of the city procurement process in assessing technology that would be deployed in the city.

So again, there's a lot of opportunity with these smart -- as smart technologies get rolled out. Seattle, the Digital Equity program, is another longstanding -- I think it's over 20 years old, but they've been able to leverage their cable franchise to provide funding for digital inclusion programs to the technology matching funds, which funds different community-based organizations and many of whom who work specifically with housing residents or populations that maybe other programs may not be able to have -- reach or have the language or cultural [inaudible] to reach.

For example, Seattle has a pretty large Somali population. And so there's digital training programs for them. There's so many different programs that they've been able to partner with, Youth Media programs, broadband sign-up events, collaborations with city jobs programs that provide residents skills and experience, but sort of at the basis of this is a strong ongoing partnership.

They have a digital equity committee that meets quarterly which includes representatives from the city as well as housing representatives from resident services, finance and -- as well as the technology folks in operations. So as the housing providers undertake different digital inclusion initiatives, the city is able to provide technical assistance and also connect them to potential partners.

So these longstanding relationships really allow the city and the housing authority to partner and in a relatively nimble fashion on opportunities that come by, particularly things from like funding opportunities or public-private partnerships and similarly to Austin, they do conduct a regular technology adoption survey and do focus groups, specifically with housing residents.

So the state of Rhode Island, the office of innovation, started this Connect-Rhode Island initiative. A lot of the motivation is when they found out that over one out of five households don't connect to the Internet at home.

And so they actually became -- they partnered with the Rhode Island Housing Authority and became a ConnectHome member and really, the office of innovation has facilitated all sorts of partnerships between the housing organizations, libraries, schools, nonprofits and other educational institutions.

One example is that the Ocean State Fiber Network, which is a statewide educational fiber network, was used to connect Rhode Island housing sites to high speed Internet and again, this is

something that the state technology office was able to introduce the partners and facilitated this partnership.

They also have a program to deploy T-Mobile tablets that was funded through a grant from a financial institution and again, the state government was able to facilitate some of this -- the funding from the Community Reinvestment Act funding. The lieutenant governor signed on as a -- and provided a letter of support for the application and this whole show of political support at the state and local government level can really strengthen applications.

They've also partnered with the office of healthy aging and for digi age program to address seniors' digital needs and digital skills, to address issues of social isolation, remote work, telemedicine. Another big role, again, [inaudible], is data, this whole idea of educating policymakers using data, because digital inclusion wasn't really a policy focus until the agency was really able to provide the data and the -- that showed that digital divide was a big issue in Rhode Island.

And I think that is it; okay? So I've listed some of the resources. In fact, I will put in the chat box the BroadbandUSA website, because beyond the map of local and state programs you'll also find the Federal Funding Opportunities Guide as well as a list of federal digital inclusion publications.

So thank you. I look forward to questions.

Grace Campion: All right. Thank you. This is Grace again. And thank you both for your presentation. I just -- Dina, we'll kick it over to you, but wanted to let you know we've got four questions in the queue so far. So we can get started with those, but please throw those into the chat box and we'll spend these last 20 minutes going through those questions and answers. Dina, anything to add before we read out the first question?

Dina Lehmann-Kim: Well, thanks. You know, the one thought I had, as I heard Emy and Gilbert speaking, was that we have asked all of the communities, as part of their original application, to join ConnectHomeUSA, to partner with many of the types of organizations that they listed -- that they mentioned.

So I think that's already a good starting point. So with that, let me turn it over to you to answer -- to open up for questions and then we can speak on. Yeah. Thanks.

Grace Campion: Great. So yeah, thank you all for pushing your questions my way. I'm going to put the first question out in the chat box so everyone can see it. I know I'm a visual learner. So I'll read it out, but for those of you who want to read along, I'm putting it in the chat box now.

So our first question is, "Are you advocating for us to set service level ranges to meet the bandwidth needs of households with multiple simultaneous users? 25x3Mbits results in poor connectivity performance and interrupted learning for low-income students in a household with multiple remote learners and workers. So question here, is there a recommendation or are you

recommending service level ranges to meet the bandwidth needs where there are a lot of people trying to use the Internet?" I'll open that up.

Emy Tseng: We don't have -- we don't define broadband and we don't -- and so the definition of broadband is really set by the FCC. And I should've actually probably distinguished -- so the FCC is a regulatory agency and we're a part of the executive branch. So that is not part of our mandate, to define the regulatory definition.

Grace Campion: Okay. And I'm going to put our second question in the chat box, I'll read it out here, how can we access more information about funds for Internet access? Where is all that good information?

Emy Tseng: Go ahead, Gilbert.

Gilbert Resendez: Oh, okay. I can take the first -- I'll take the first shot at it. For federal funds, we posted that information on our website, broadbandusa.ntia.doc.gov, I know it's a mouthful. So we posted that information up like a one-stop repository for federal funds. We do post information that we have available at the state level, like if the PHA is looking to partner or do some sort of project that the state may administer and we're always happy to do an introduction with that state person.

I work on our State Broadband Leaders Network in maintaining that relationship with those state folks and I'm always happy to do an email introduction if someone -- if there's not a contact for that state or if someone just wants an email introduction. I'll hand it over to Emy if she has anything else for local.

Emy Tseng: No. I don't. You know, I think if you go to our map and our guide, some of the -- we just list a link to the program. So some of the local governments do provide funding, but you'd actually have to go to their websites to see.

Dina Lehmann-Kim: And Emy, if I'm not mistaken, and Gilbert, your website does link to those state-level websites; right? So if they were to click on a state --

Gilbert Resendez: That's correct.

Emy Tseng: Yes.

Dina Lehmann-Kim: Yeah. So it's not that far of a leap.

Grace Campion: Okay. And one quick question that came in here as a -- for confirmation on this conversation, can funds be used to pay for Internet services for residents? I'll throw that in here.

Dina Lehmann-Kim: So I can answer that a little bit. So there's Cares Act money, as I hope you know, that can be used for that purpose -- HUD Cares Act money. There's also Cares Act money that went to the department of education. So if you're working with the school district, you might want to inquire about that for families with kids.

And very recently, as of January 19th, we -- [inaudible] issued guidance saying that the operating fund could be used to cover Internet costs. So I'll put the link to that guidance in the chat and then I'll let Emy and Gilbert -- if I could talk a little bit about what Congress -- the recent appropriations through the FCC.

I don't want to put you on the spot, but -- Emy and Gilbert, can you talk about that a little bit, the FCC appropriations through the -- I think it's called the Emergency Broadband Benefit, something like that.

Gilbert Resendez: I can start. I'm still personally looking at -- to understand the Emergency Broadband Benefit more. I do know that the FCC released information on its website. They released a public notice and had a comment period that closed, I believe, yesterday and is entering the public comment -- or the reply comment period for that. I would -- I know more information will be coming soon on the Emergency Broadband Benefit program and its uses.

Dina Lehmann-Kim: Right. Just -- that's right, they had a comment period, they wanted some input into how it should be designed, but I think the overall benefit would subsidize up to $50 a month for the duration of the pandemic and 6 months beyond it for low-income Americans and I think there's also $100 one-time fee for a device too. So I'll put links to that in the chat. Emy, I don't know if you have anything else to add.

Emy Tseng: Yes. That's what the legislation says and they're administering it through the universal service at the organization that basically administers the Lifeline program. So also, Lifeline is another thing to actually also look at, because there's more interest in -- at both the state [inaudible] level with the potential of Lifeline to provide subsidies on an ongoing basis and some states actually increased the Lifeline subsidy available for broadband services.

I know a lot of people use it for telephone services, particularly mobile services and it's still very valuable for that, but you might also look at your state if there's a public utilities commission, if their Lifeline services -- if they have an additional subsidy particularly for broadband.

Grace Campion: Okay. Thank you both and [inaudible]. We do have another question, I'm going to put it into the chat and read it out loud here. The question is, would it be best to contact our local IT councils or DILN when trying to convene partners to close the digital gap? So who should we reach out to?

Emy Tseng: Well, you can certainly go to the DILN list and look and again, there's a program link. And so if there does -- if there is a DILN member, if there's a digital inclusion program listed, then you know that that state or local government is specifically focused on digital inclusion. So I think that's a great place to start.

If you're not -- if there isn't a program listed -- and again, there are a lot of cities where there are definitely digital inclusion activities happening that may not be listed on that map just because in some cases, they just don't have a dedicated website to the program, but I would definitely connect with your department of technology.

Particularly, if they're the ones that negotiate contracts, because as I've said, there's been -- or franchises, because there have been a number of examples of where they've been able to leverage those agreements. I would also say -- you know, oftentimes libraries are the convener of the -- of digital inclusion in a city or even at the state library level and looking in terms of state agencies --

Actually, I was just talking to a lead person in Rhode Island. So looking at and connecting with the state office of housing and community development, basically, the folks that control the CDBG grant funds -- and Dina can chime in here, especially as the eligibility of broadband has been expanded.

So really, working with the state in terms of -- since they're the ones that decide how those funds are allocated, then it can be really helpful to basically work with them and inform them of your potential local efforts. But yeah, the thing with digital inclusion expands so many areas.

So as I mentioned, their digital DIOR members may be -- and programs may be located in the IT department but they might be located in the -- in housing, they might be located in community development, economic development, department of aging. So you may have to do some hunting around, but workforce development --

But I usually see if a city or a state is starting up a program, that it's often housed in either technology or economic development. So those are good places to start. Oh, and then also, of course, NDIA is a great place to -- yes, I think the National Digital Inclusion Alliance is a great place to also look for partners.

Dina Lehmann-Kim: And somebody just added the link, it's www.digitalinclusion.org in the chat.

Grace Campion: Great. So --

Dina Lehmann-Kim: Emy, on that point -- I'm sorry, Grace, real quick, the map that you have, the state and local government digital inclusion program, if people were to go there and click, that would be a good place [inaudible], right, to find out who in their state is working on this?

Emy Tseng: Yes, but it's far from comprehensive. That's what [inaudible].

Dina Lehmann-Kim: Yeah. [inaudible]

Emy Tseng: But that's a good place to start.

Grace Campion: Great. All right. I've got two more questions here. I'm going to push out the question in the chat. This is kind of a bigger policy question coming your way. The question is, are you advocating for Internet service to be classified as a utility? This would allow public housing residents and housing choice voucher participants to afford the costs of broadband service. Here we go.

Dina Lehmann-Kim: That's a big question. I don't think -- I need to say that --

Grace Campion: Similar to the -- yeah, the speed question.

Gilbert Resendez: This is similar to the definition.

Grace Campion: Yeah. This isn't really part of our policy purview.

Dina Lehmann-Kim: Yeah. I think -- I mean, speaking personally not officially, this would be great, right, but unfortunately, it's not in the role of HUD and not in the role of NTIA. So we can't advocate for that, unfortunately. So sorry about that.

Grace Campion: Okay. And I will just -- I have one final question that I received, it's kind of similar but a little bit different than the previous question. So I'll throw it out there, putting that in the chat here and about to read it out.

The question is, are you able to support organizations in getting larger bandwidth for individual households, whether it's a policy or regulation thing or having conversations with providers, there are affordable options for households but often the speed is not the quality needed when there are many users at home on the Internet. So that's the question.

Emy Tseng: One thing that we see particularly with our infrastructure technical assistance is when our -- the benefits of having these conversations with the providers and this is, again, something that oftentimes the department of technology or your local [inaudible] IT department or -- can help facilitate and also are probably having those conversations.

So that's something that I would encourage you all to basically get involved with at the local level.

Grace Campion: Great. And this is Grace again, I just received a chat and wanted to throw the information out there, NDIA just established an ELL working group to share resources and there is no cost to participate in the meeting. That note came through.

Dina Lehmann-Kim: All right. Yeah. I mean, I think advocating at the local level and making Internet service providers understand that the service they're offering needs to be expanded. Again, unfortunately, it's not in the role that HUD plays, but I think if they were to hear directly from their customers and people who represent a lot of people, that could be helpful.

Grace Campion: Okay. On my end here, I'm not seeing any more questions. We've got about four minutes [inaudible]. Are there any other questions? Please shoot them in the chat and then if we don't see anything, we can move to --

Dina Lehmann-Kim: Before we close -- yeah. Great.

Grace Campion: -- close out.

Dina Lehmann-Kim: Before we close, I wanted to quickly ask -- and I don't know, this might be a little preemptive question, in other words, there might not be an answer to this from Gilbert or Emy, but I was curious about the Connecting Minority Communities Fund -- I mean, grant. Do you know, is that only going to be for minority-serving colleges and universities or would it be for other minority-serving or types of organizations? Do you know or is it too early to say?

Emy Tseng: I don't -- I'd have to look at the legislation [inaudible]. Yeah.

Dina Lehmann-Kim: Okay. Sorry, I didn't mean to put you on the spot, but I thought in case you knew you could just share.

Emy Tseng: Well, it is something to pay attention to, because even if it's -- and I think it is, but specific to minority-serving institutions, there will be partnerships and also a lot of the MSIs are serving a lot. You know, there's overlap in terms of like who you all are serving and what the MSIs are serving. So yes.

Dina Lehmann-Kim: Right. So there could be good collaboration opportunities there.

Emy Tseng: Yeah. But I just wanted to --

Dina Lehmann-Kim: Like what's [inaudible]?

Emy Tseng: -- emphasize that throughout all of this, it's really the importance of these partnerships and -- because we've seen it over and over again, especially with digital inclusion, because it expands to so many different fields, again, workforce, health, education that it does -- it really -- having an approach that includes different partners all leveraging their strength is really a good model and gives places the flexibility to sustain and to continue programs over time.

And that, again, I know a lot of people have been focused on access issues and -- which are very important, but also in terms of, again, the human component, the skills component, the support, the social infrastructures, I'd like to say, is -- should be as much of a focus as well.

Dina Lehmann-Kim: That's a great point and as I like to say, I think this complements what you're saying is that digital inclusion, it takes a village. Not one organization can do it by itself. So I think that's another reason why we encourage all of our communities to hold their convenings when they first start out and also annually, if they like.

I think that's a really good practice. And on this note of fields of the human aspect of digital inclusion, I wanted to put a plug in for our webinar next month which is going to be with the National Skills Coalition that looks at workforce issues and the visual skills that are needed moving forward in this changing economic landscape. So that's going to be on February 23rd. So mark your calendars, everybody.

And I know we're at the top of the hour. So unless there's any other questions, Grace, I want to thank our wonderful colleagues at NTIA for the great information they shared and to you, Grace and Caila for coordinating all of the tech for this webinar and thanks to our participants for joining.

Grace Campion: That's a wrap. Thank you, all.

Emy Tseng: Thank you.

Dina Lehmann-Kim: All right. Thanks, everyone. Take care.

Gilbert Resendez: Thank you.

Dina Lehmann-Kim: Thank you. Bye.

Gilbert Resendez: Bye.

(END)