



More Than a Connection: Building Digital Opportunities in Eau Claire County

Situation

In Eau Claire County, Wisconsin, broadband access had reached an impressive 98–99% coverage by 2023. However, local leaders quickly realized that access alone was not enough. Many residents, particularly low-income individuals, seniors, and people with disabilities, still face barriers to fully participating in the digital world. These barriers included the cost of internet service, lack of devices, limited digital literacy, and insufficient technical support.

Recognizing that digital opportunities are essential for everything from telehealth and education to workforce participation and social connection, the United Way of the Greater Chippewa Valley stepped in to address these gaps.

Response

The United Way of the Greater Chippewa Valley launched a digital opportunity initiative in partnership with the Eau Claire County Broadband Committee. The initiative focuses on what they called the “four-legged stool” for creating digital opportunity:

- **Affordable Internet Access**
- **Devices**
- **Digital Literacy**
- **Technical Support**

The team secured a Nonprofit Access Grant from the Wisconsin Public Service Commission to jumpstart the work. Early steps included:

- **Community Asset Mapping:** Partnering with libraries and senior centers to inventory existing digital resources and training opportunities.
- **Resource Guide Creation:** Developing a county-wide digital guide to help residents locate services and support.
- **Advisory Council Formation:** Bringing together stakeholders to guide the initiative and foster collaboration.
- **Device Distribution:** Launching a pilot program with the Department of Human Services to provide computers to 27 families.
- **Digital Literacy Training:** Offering workshops tailored to a wide range of skill levels, from basic smartphone use to online banking and telehealth.
- **Community Engagement:** Hosting digital resource fairs and launching the **Chippewa Valley Digital Inclusion Partnership**, a 40+ member coalition working collaboratively to expand digital access and support.

Outcomes

- **Individuals Served:** 675+ individuals have been served through affordable broadband access, device distribution, and digital literacy support.

- **Refurbished Computers:** 300 computers have been distributed to low-income households, including students, seniors, and workers.
- **Diverse impact stories**, including:
 - A cancer patient accessing telehealth services.
 - A homebound individual managing finances and shopping online.
 - A 94-year-old learning to text and pay bills digitally, staying connected with family.

Six months into the grant, the initiative has more than doubled its reach of the prior year, signaling strong community demand and growing momentum.

Lessons Learned

- **Collaboration is Crucial:** The initiative's success hinges on partnerships with libraries, service providers, human services, and community members. No single organization could have done this alone.
- **One Size Does Not Fit All:** Participants' digital literacy needs vary widely. Some are learning to use a smartphone for the first time, while others want to master advanced features. Programs must be flexible and responsive.
- **Meet People Where They Are:** Whether it is a senior learning how to text or a family accessing online education, the work must be grounded in empathy and tailored support.
- **Sustainable Infrastructure Requires Human Support:** Broadband infrastructure is vital, but without devices, skills, and support, it remains underutilized.

Learn More

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