

ASU-led project brings internet connection to thousands in Arizona

\$34 million Maricopa County Broadband Initiative provides devices, digital literacy training

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
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Hunter Amerine, a recent Arizona State University graduate, was at his job teaching people how to use the internet a few weeks ago when a man walked in and asked for help with a job application.

“A lot of times, people are not used to how all of that's digitized now. He had no idea how to get the application going, but we walked him through the process,” said Amerine, who graduated in December with a degree in communications.

“He came in the next day to check his application status and then three days later he had gotten the job, which was awesome.”

That story is just one example of the kind of impact ASU hopes to replicate across the state through a \$34.6 million, five-year initiative, in partnership with the [Institute of Digital Inclusion Acceleration](#) and [Sun Corridor Network](#), focused on delivering internet access and digital-skills training to underserved communities.

Heading into its fourth year, the [Maricopa County Broadband Initiative](#) is the country's largest university-led project to improve digital access.

So far, the project has:

- Laid more than 80 miles of fiber infrastructure.

- Distributed nearly 10,000 internet-enabled devices.

- Provided 30,000 hours of digital support.

All of that is driving the true impact — the personal transformations of community members who are successfully applying for jobs online and connecting with nurses during telehealth appointments.

The Maricopa County Broadband Initiative has three parts:

ASU students and staff identify gaps in internet connection.

The Sun Corridor Network lays broadband infrastructure to close those gaps.

The Institute for Digital Inclusion Acceleration, a nonprofit working to eliminate the digital divide since 2021, leads efforts to provide devices and digital-skills training in newly connected communities.

The institute runs seven community centers, or [Hives](#), plus two RV-style solar-powered, mobile Hives where digital navigators teach everything from how to open a laptop to how to connect to a nurse online.

The project, [approved](#) by the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors in 2022, tackles a modern-day crisis — digital inequity. While many people in the county are connected to internet continuously for jobs, school and social media, large swaths — many in unincorporated and poor areas — had no access.

It's a crisis that Lev Gonick, ASU's chief information officer, has been working on for nearly 40 years — long before he came to ASU.

"For the first 35 years, it was largely a call in the wild. It seemed to be a bit too nerdy or a little bit too marginal or peripheral," he said.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic hit, highlighting the fact that many people in Arizona did not have access to the internet or devices.

"And even if they had access and devices, there really wasn't much community-based practice to help people learn overnight how to do schoolwork or talk to a health care professional or complete any number of public services that were now only available online."

Gonick and his ASU team had already been educating policymakers and elected officials about the importance of broadband infrastructure and how Arizona was behind other states, but the pandemic sparked action.

"We needed to bring access to something on the order of 20% of households in Maricopa County," he said.

"We used our public investments from the county to help subsidize access to mobile homes and to unincorporated parts of greater Maricopa County area, as well as some of public housing facilities and community centers."

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'There was need everywhere'

Gonick said the mapping work disputed the perception that most of Maricopa County was connected to the internet.

“There was need everywhere. In [Maryvale](#), one of ASU’s long-term community partners, we found neighborhood blocks that had 70% with no internet,” he said.

Ciera Parkhurst started on the [mapping project](#) as a student worker at ASU and is now a staff data analyst. She worked with many open-source data sets, such as from the U.S. Census and the Federal Communications Commission, to pull out data points that she could make relevant in map form.

The interactive maps display broadband availability, types of computers and demographic information such as population, education and income.

“The fun part is making it look pretty visually so people can understand it and it has some kind of impact,” said Parkhurst, who earned a degree in sustainability with a certificate in geographic information systems.

Kelly Mukherjee is director of program management for the initiative. She described how the mapping project partnered with the [Next Lab Storytelling Guild](#), whose student workers brought the map data to life through articles and illustrations. Their project, Broadband Stories from the Arizona Community, [drew national attention](#).

Lakshya Dharwal, a biomedical engineering major, created a [multimedia story](#) on a man with Parkinson’s whose life improved when he was able to access therapy and classes through Zoom, thanks to his new internet connection.

Shelby Cavanaugh Toft, along with Dharwal, [highlighted a program](#) that trains job seekers with skills for the fiber optic industry.

Mukherjee said that community partners can use the stories to seek out grant funding to sustain the broadband initiative.

“We really wanted to showcase how important it is for this to keep being supported because it’s affecting our community, and we won’t realize that unless we have good storytelling to help bring light to all of the great work,” Mukherjee said.

A digital lifeline

Connectivity is meaningless if people don’t have the appropriate online skills, devices and support. Since the beginning of 2024, the Hive community centers have reached 83,000 people, according to Erin Carr-Jordan, president and CEO of the Institute for Digital Inclusion Acceleration.

The institute owns and operates brick-and-mortar Hives in Phoenix, Guadalupe, Tempe, Mesa, Chandler and Superior — plus its mobile Hives. Another brick-and-mortar Hive will open in southern Arizona in August.

The Hives provide access to tablets, laptops and desktops, plus workshops and one-on-one assistance with 3D printers, machine learning, coding, robotics, podcasting, language translation

and AI.

The institute partners with organizations to distribute devices, and everyone who gets a device gets trained in online safety, including how to identify scams and protect their personal data.

Besides job applications, another critical use for community members is the telehealth appointments, Carr-Jordan said.

“We had a gentleman here the other day, he's 70, and he had his first telehealth appointment. He had never opened the computer before and up until the moment that the computer screen opened, he was absolutely not bought in. He was like, ‘I don't think this is for me.’

“The computer opens, and then he sees the faces that are familiar, and he was like, ‘I get it.’”

There are 20 part-time “digital navigators” who rotate among the Hives and who come from the communities they serve.

Many are current or former ASU students — like Amerine — and trained in everything from computer science and biomedical engineering to graphic design and ecology.

He said his communication degree is helpful in his job.

“We listen to them, see what their frustrations are, what their troubles might be and let them know what the solutions might be,” he said. “It's helping people feel more comfortable with the technology that they have. We do smartphone classes because those can be very complicated for older people.”

Since January, the Guadalupe Hive (where Amerine works) has served 1,438 people in the community, according to Stephanie Dreux, head of community activation for the Institute of Digital Inclusion Acceleration.

The Hives also offer free coffee and snacks to draw community members in.

“We go for more of a living room vibe than a computer lab, and that's very purposeful,” Dreux said.

“Sometimes you don't know what you don't know, so you're not sure what to ask. We want to make sure that people feel comfortable in this space and are asking the questions that they want to ask, whether they want to know more about virtual reality or 3D printing.”

While many community members are learning basic internet skills at the Hives, it's also important to offer skills such as storytelling, editing and production, Carr-Jordan said.

“We have tons of mechanisms that get people to feel like they belong here and that go directly into the workplace based on things that we know are relevant right now,” she said.

“And we have mechanisms to adapt so that people are constantly prepared for what is coming — not just what is today.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Reneé Moody, an ASU English major, coaches Betty Kreis, 9, on a computer game at the South Mountain Community College Guadalupe Center, as part of the Maricopa County Broadband Initiative led by ASU. The \$38 million project is aimed at increasing internet access and digital literacy. Moody, who graduated from South Mountain before transferring to ASU, decided to work as a "digital navigator" in the program to stay connected to the South Mountain community. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



Seven-year-old Josiah Herrera shows his stop-motion animated movies to ASU alum Hunter Amerine, who works as a digital navigator at the South Mountain Community College Guadalupe Center, as part of the Maricopa County Broadband Initiative led by ASU. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU news



Stephanie Dreux (left), head of community activation for the Institute for Digital Inclusion Acceleration nonprofit, chats about 3D printing with ASU student Renee Moody, who works as a digital navigator at the South Mountain Community College Guadalupe Center, as part of the Maricopa County Broadband Initiative led by ASU. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News