

2021 Regional Broadband Workshop: Key Takeaways

Presented by BizFed Institute & LA/OCRBC

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FULL WORKSHOP RECORDING: youtu.be/dONR52d2seY

I'm humbled by the comments we received following our **2021 Regional Broadband Workshop**. I want to thank the 180+ friends and partners who registered to attend this forum. Your participation marked an important step toward our collective goal of closing the Digital Divide because it gave us an opportunity to convene our sharpest thinkers and most-connected stakeholders in a single Zoom gallery. Together, we have the leadership, expertise, and resources to open more doors to economic mobility for all Southern Californians. I'm confident our newly formed alliances will do just that — and help shape tomorrow's leaders, thinkers, and innovators.

Thank you for being a difference-maker,



Kevin Harbour
BizFed Institute President
Los Angeles/Orange County Regional Broadband Consortia Executive Committee Chair

BizFed Founding CEO **Tracy Hernandez** kicked off the program by rolling in a virtual cake for BizFed Institute's 11th birthday and recognizing BizFed Institute Chair **Jonathan Parfrey**, immediate past chair **Steve PonTell**, and key Institute partners for dedicating their resources, voices, and strategies to tackling the Digital Divide.



Sup. Hilda Solis cut straight to the point with her opening remarks. “Internet access is no longer a luxury for just the rich; it is a fundamental basic need,” she declared. Most Angelenos have cell phones — “but you can’t do your homework or apply for a job on a cell phone,” she said. According to pre-pandemic Census data from 2019:

- More than 182,000 households across LA County do not have computers.
- Nearly **356,000 households lack internet access.**
- 1.1 million households earn less than \$50,000 a year.

Although the county is actively working to tap into all available resources to shrink the Digital Divide, Solis explained how **connectivity and infrastructure issues vary across jurisdictions**, creating multifaceted challenges unlikely to be addressed by a one-size-fits-all approach. For example, Solis's district is home to dense living conditions and high poverty rates, while the neighboring district to the north is largely rural and home to different infrastructure needs.

Solis outlined three motions she introduced to create options for immediate connection in the neediest pockets of the county, while encouraging **investment in broader, regional strategies** in the long term. Her motions have established empowerment programs for youth and small businesses in underserved communities; centralized resources for residents adversely affected by the Digital Divide; and launched a pilot program for eligible young adults to earn technical certificates, find paid internships, and shadow working professionals.

- **The end goal:** Creating good-paying jobs and improving quality of life for all residents.
 - **Her game plan:** Exploring all options, including **public-private partnerships**, a **municipal broadband service**, and the possibility of more broadband funding under the Biden and Newsom administrations.
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Sup. Andrew Do, Chair of the Orange County Board of Supervisors, recognized the pressing nature of establishing digital equity long before the coronavirus pandemic spotlighted – and widened – the Digital Divide. Expanding high-speed broadband access was among Do’s top priorities during his first supervisory term almost 7 years ago. He described how watching his two daughters navigate school and work in the Digital Age – an era drastically different from his early days in this country as an immigrant and refugee – made him realize that **broadband access is now integral to education and success** in Southern California.

“An Andrew Do of 45 years ago facing that need today; given my family’s former economic situation, how would I fare?” he asked. **“How would I compete?”**

Tomorrow’s Andrew Do – an educator, prosecutor, policymaker, and community leader – could be a child in a digitally underserved community today, struggling to turn in homework or submit college applications without internet access. Do, who represents Orange County’s poorest and most diverse district, spearheaded a **“WiFi On Wheels”** program during the coronavirus pandemic to meet the immediate needs of the most underserved residents – namely students. He was driven to launch the mobile program after encountering a man who said he went to a neighborhood every week to turn on his phone hotspot so kids could download, complete, and turn in their homework assignments. Their parents didn’t have the devices or data plans for them to do their schoolwork. **WiFi On Wheels features a trailer-transported system that can serve up to 150 users within 300 yards.** It was established with the support of public works and IT staffers who made an immediate launch possible, without the studies, negotiations, and delays often associated with building out infrastructure.

He also led the implementation of common-sense measures during the coronavirus pandemic to create immediate access for Orange County residents in need of free, reliable WiFi:

- Upgraded coverage at county libraries so people don’t have to enter the building to connect.
- Hotspot units available for checkout so people can borrow and use at home.

In addition to basic educational needs, Do believes broadband access is key to tapping into **self-training options that can be the basis for good-paying technical careers.** Some students are “reconsidering going to a junior college or college to learn trades or a skill,” he said, noting that people are increasingly learning **marketable skills online through YouTube videos** to both start and change careers. These are “tools that we need for our economy going forward,” Do concluded. In the long term, he believes a **holistic system comprising partnerships between government, schools, and the private sector** will be most impactful.

PANEL #1: Municipal Success Stories



Kome Ajise, Executive Director at SCAG, opened the first panel of the workshop with a fast-paced “energy bar” of a discussion. The panelists’ quick take of municipal examples to learn from covered a wider breadth of concerns and potential solutions than a “full breakfast-style” deep dive.

LA City Councilmember **Bob Blumenfield** illustrated his three-pronged approach to tackling connectivity issues by comparing the Digital Divide to a “**three-legged stool**.” The legs represent access, affordability, and digital literacy, and must hold equitable weight for the stool to stand steady. People need devices and infrastructure to access broadband, as well as the ability to overcome financial barriers and technical skills to use broadband devices. The city’s efforts to address all three legs include:

- Reducing barriers for providers and figuring out ways to make it as easy as possible to lay physical infrastructure (microtrenching incentives)
- Investing in subsidy programs and initiatives to bring services to underserved communities (connecting housing projects, refurbishing old computers, public WiFi, loaning out hotspots)
- Creating spaces and programs where people can learn access free digital literacy training (stipends for students in tech support, library carts, park programs)

Crown Castle Government Affairs Manager **Rex Richardson** – who is also immediate past president of SCAG and finds time to “moonlight” as Long Beach Vice Mayor, Ajise joked – brought a unique, three-legged perspective to the table. He represents a city with communities of great need and remarkable privilege; he worked to advance regional approaches during his time at SCAG; and he is on the frontlines of the private sector’s fight to close to Digital Divide at Crown Castle. Understanding need is the first step to serving people from any vantage point. “Imagine if you are already behind on your utility bills, behind on your rent, and now you’re faced with completing and uploading documents through your cell phone to get that much-needed relief,” Richardson said. “Imagine if you have a language barrier. All those things help exacerbate a problem that already exists, which is economic exclusion.” He believes engaging both public and private sector stakeholders is key to finding a path forward, but said local government is “really where the rubber meets the road. He sees cities doing the brunt of the work to execute on broadband solutions, including **microtrenching**, **term permits** for aerial fiber, and **batch applications** to reduce redundancy.

Huntington Beach City Councilmember **Dan Kalmick** described a three-pronged Digital Divide in his city affecting:

- Homes (especially Huntington Beach’s large and underserved Latinx community).
- Government (which often struggles to access disparate resources around the city).

- Businesses (which have different levels of connectivity due to neighborhoods’ varying rates of growth, development, and infrastructure installation).

Rather than speaking broadly about regional connectivity issues, Kalmick zeroed in on Huntington Beach and outlined his plan to **leverage excess capacity** from the city’s transit fiber; allow multiple stakeholders to tap into **aerial conduit** while continuing undergrounding efforts; and actively **close infrastructure gaps** to help lower costs, ensuring incumbent broadband providers don’t have an unfair advantage. Broadband connectivity should be treated as a utility provided to all homes and businesses, he said.

PANEL #2: Regional Leadership



Steve PonTell, president and CEO of National Community Renaissance, opened his panel on county-led solutions by challenging his guests to answer the simplest and most challenging of prompts: “What can we do now?”

Joel Golub, Orange County’s Chief Information Officer, called for “**partnerships on steroids**” between agencies, jurisdictions, private carriers, equipment providers, citizen groups, funding partners, and more. Bridging the Digital Divide is fundamentally a **business strategy, not a technology project**, Golub said. He listed eight guiding principles that can serve as measures of success: equity, performance, quality, affordability, security, choice, partnerships, sustainability, and simplification. He believes technology should be leveraged to “support the business” of expanding broadband access. Orange County stakeholders are working to answer questions about funding, next steps, and how to balance diverse perspectives before they take coordinated action. *We wish you a speedy recovery from COVID-19, Joel!*

Selwyn Hollins, Director of Los Angeles County’s Internal Services Department, called for an immediate pivot to emergency efficiency and resourcefulness. Supporting the sheer number of households that didn’t have broadband during the coronavirus pandemic (often curtailing access to medical services) prompted LA County to streamline pre-pandemic processes so more people could be serviced faster. Departments tapped into **shared buying power**, modified contractual setups, created **master agreements**, and began strategizing how to squeeze more out of the county’s existing infrastructure assets. Hollins acknowledged the value of reserving brain share for long-term planning but made his position on immediate action clear: “Constituents need help today and we have to do more with what we have to make services available.” Moving the dial to create sustainable change beyond an emergency model will require a united vision and collective bargaining power, he said.

PANEL #3: Academic Perspectives



Kevin Harbour kicked off the workshop’s third panel by asking educators and university representatives to detail the devastating and widely varied impacts of the Digital Divide on teaching, learning, and educational success – and how addressing broadband inequity from an academic perspective presents many of the same challenges seen at the municipal and regional levels.

Lev Gonick, Chief Information Officer for ASU, pinpointed **broadband adoption** as a critical and often overlooked issue. Like Blumenfield – whose push for increased investment in digital literacy reflects an understanding of the human and physical components of the problem – Gonick recognizes the necessity of investing in a “ground game” of **training and ambassadorship programs, door-to-door outreach, neighborhood surveys, and intergenerational learning communities**. “You can’t just think, ‘If you build it, they will come,’” he said, explaining that infrastructure and affordable service alone are not enough to close the Digital Divide. There must be a commitment to educating the community at the micro-level, with targeted programs to bring seniors, minorities, and underprivileged residents up to speed. Students and educational institutions can play an important role here. Gonick also pointed to customized regional strategies that take geographical differences into account. Maricopa County, for example, covers more ground and has vastly different topography than LA County.

Dr. Christine Olmstead, Associate Superintendent of Educational Services for Orange County’s Department of Education, urged businesses to explore partnerships that can help school districts **support students and their families outside of the classroom**. She said the initiative to provide free WiFi on buses in Santa Ana was made possible by one such partnership. The level of need across Orange County makes it challenging for schools to make a difference without robust funding; more than half of OC students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. Understanding individual needs and engaging with the family unit as a whole is crucial, Olmstead said. The district teaches families how to use hotspots during parent-teacher conferences and explains how devices are used in the classroom so children have the best shot of streaming videos, retaining knowledge, and submitting assignments from home. Unfortunately, even providing every student with a hotspot does not solve the problem; some children take them home to families where multiple children and adults need to connect to a single device at the same time for e-learning and work. “Why does it have to be a tiered system? Why can’t all families have the best high-speed internet?” Olmstead asked.



Douglas Brown, principal of the Boys Academic Leadership Academy, also spoke about the importance of investing in adoption strategies and serving students away from school. He described how offering students and parents access to the “Delete the Divide” program wasn’t enough; getting them to understand its value and sign up was the final hurdle. He also works with teachers to ensure they’re sensitive to situations involving students who fail to turn in assignments because “the internet was down.” Students sometimes can’t access their curriculum when they need to because the school-provided device and hotspot they were sent home with had to be shared with other household members. Brown challenges his students to be proactive problem-solvers: if they can’t access the internet at home at get an assignment done, how can they find ways around the problem and still achieve their goal? He suggests going to local businesses with free, reliable WiFi. Administrators lead by example at school. “We’re in an area where the internet is in some days and out some days,” Brown said. “We try to find ways around it.”

LA/OCRBC Subregion Projects: Public-Private Partnerships

Mitchell Vieyra, BizFed Institute’s Senior Program Director, walked attendees through LA/OCRBC’s subregion projects and introduced each of the subregion lead organizations tackling the Digital Divide with various partners in their assigned areas. LA/OCRBC has **six subregional consortiums** serving the 88 cities in LA County and the 34 cities in Orange County.



SIX SUB-REGIONAL CONSORTIUMS		
Serving the 88 Cities in Los Angeles County and the 34 cities in Orange County		
Central West The BizFed Institute	North County Antelope Valley Chamber	San Gabriel Valley MADIA Tech Launch
Gateway Cities Southeast Community Development Corporation	South Bay Manchester Community Technologies, Inc.	Orange County Orange County Business Council

Orange County: Infrastructure & Affordability

Jennifer Ward & Wallace Walrod, Orange County Business Council

OCBC works with government and academia to support the county's economic development. Members include ISPs, local governments, and anchor institutions in the health, education, and business sectors. They identify broadband as a key component of Orange County's current economic development strategy. The pandemic highlighted three key areas of broadband strain: telehealth, work from home, e-learning.

Alicia Berhow, Charter Communications

Charter's partnerships with municipalities advance creative initiatives including rebate programs, undergrounding, and adoption strategies. Charter provides full coverage with capability of 1 GB download speed in Orange County and invests in community initiatives such as Spectrum Community Assist, Spectrum Digital Education Grant, and Spectrum Employee Community Grant.

Carl Fong, Orange County Department of Education

OCDE serves more than 500,000 students. Each school district within the county is a separate legal agency with varying technology infrastructure (1 GB-10 GB) depending on student body size. OCDE currently has two high-capacity circuits (100 GB) and is planning to increase capacity to match growing need.

South Bay: Catalina Island

Revlyn Williams, Manchester Community Technologies

Areas of focus include digital literacy, telehealth, workforce development, broadband deployment, grassroots advocacy, and adoption programs focused on giving non-adopters a reason to connect. Goal: explore oceanic cable solutions.

Lisa LaVelle, Avalon City Councilmember

Avalon is the only incorporated city on Catalina Island. Its weekday population of approximately 4,000 can grow to 10,000+ on weekends and over the summer. E-learning and remote work presented the greatest connectivity challenges during the pandemic.

Michael Piasecki, Catalina Island Broadband

Catalina Island Broadband is the incumbent ISP franchise holder for Avalon and is exploring all options for next-generation connectivity, including the possibility of undersea fiber to the mainland.

Jim Luttjohann, Catalina Island Tourism Authority

The nonprofit aims to attract visitors and advocate for commerce on Catalina Island. Connectivity issues exacerbated by the pandemic have impaired residential quality of life, deterred visitors, and cost local businesses hundreds of thousands of dollars. Challenges in funding major infrastructure projects include return on investment.

Crown Castle has proposed a canvas-style small cell network. They can deploy low-powered antennas or "small cells" connected by fiber optic cable that handle large amounts of data at high speed. The small cell network will immediately relieve network congestion and pave the way for next-generation networks.

Gateway Cities: BB Infrastructure – Coverage Mapping

Emma Hernandez, Southeast Community Development Corporation

SCDC has been working for the past decade to close the Digital Divide. Partners include AT&T and Spectrum, both of which provide low-cost options that range from \$10 to \$18 a month. Overlooked barriers that must be considered as part of a comprehensive solutions include available infrastructure (*is it the right type of infrastructure*

for the target connection speed?), device compatibility (Chromebooks often do not connect properly), router functionality (are they too old?), and location (work crews are unable to enter some buildings).

Graciela Ortiz, Mayor of Huntington Park

30% of Huntington Park residents are unconnected or under-connected. Ortiz, a former educator, has years of experience grappling with digital inequity. She recalled trying to help a single school parent connect to Zoom: “She starts crying on the phone and tells me, ‘It’s hard enough for me to be a high school dropout and not be able to help my child out with her homework. But I can’t even give her the resources she needs to be able to get the free education that she deserves.’ Being able to provide technology to her was one stop. The other issue? They couldn’t get service where they were staying. They lived in a garage.” Ortiz is backing a plan to provide internet to all Huntington Park residents but says the city cannot execute on the plan without resources.

Rami Dababneh, Lan Want Enterprise Inc.

Phase one of a three-phase solution is set to be completed by the end of 2021. The pilot project will provide connection to underserved areas throughout Huntington Park. Phase two is expansion of existing WiFi infrastructure for all homes in Huntington Park, using a hybrid approach. Phase three involves embracing “smart city” technology and using artificial intelligence sensors to power and connect various services and functions. Other immediate solutions can include bulk subscriptions, wireless infrastructure, and participation in low-cost programs. Dababneh defines broadband access as more than an essential tool; he considers it a human right in this day and age.

San Gabriel Valley: Duarte Expansion

Brenda J. Trainor, MADIA Tech Launch

MADIA Tech Launch is an educational nonprofit that supports the entrepreneurial technology community in the Angeles foothills along the 210 Freeway corridor. MADIA enjoys the support of six cities in the region and is actively partnering with Duarte to assess current internet service options, as well as resident and business broadband service and satisfaction levels, and to explore potential partnerships with key public and private sector partners to encourage greater competition and services to underserved parts of the community.

Victoria Rocha, City of Duarte

Duarte is a small city with limited staff, contract services, and a population of approximately 22,000. They launched a “Flash Vote” survey exploring (and eventually mapping out) how a small contract city can more effectively serve residents. Next steps include learning more about infrastructure locations, funding opportunities, community needs, and diverse economic drivers.

Mark Haverkate, Giggle Fiber

The internet service provider has served homes in Monrovia and Arcadia, adjacent to Duarte, for seven years and is now interested in expanding to other areas and starting a dialogue about partnering with cities. Giggle data reveals internet use more than doubled per customer since the beginning of the pandemic. Haverkate is hopeful increased competition will drive prices down while improving quality of service.

Central West: Delete the Divide

Keith Alexis, ICC Networking

LA County’s “Delete the Divide” project provides an opportunity for ICCN, an international tech developer and manufacturer, to help connect underserved areas identified through gaps in coverage mapping, community surveys, wireline testing, root-cause analysis, and other boots-on-the-ground work. The initiative initially focused on areas along the underserved 110 and 105 Freeway corridors, and has now expanded to include all areas across LA

County. ICCN has moved forward in at least one area, signing an agreement with the city of Bellflower to provide region-specific technology that will address underserved areas in that city.

The ICCN approach is built around public-private partnerships that include elected officials, municipal leaders and staff, ISPs, community-based organizations, and consortia members like LA/OCRBC. In addition to the technology, ICCN is committed to providing outreach and support for adoption, digital literacy, affordability, devices, and ways to overcome other broadband barriers. There will also be a workforce development component central to the plan that will identify digital stewards within target communities, framed in 24/7 customer service.

North County: Palmdale

Mark Hemstreet, Antelope Valley Chambers of Commerce

AVCC covers Lancaster, Palmdale, and small unincorporated areas of LA County. The chambers brought in local government officials to meet with One World Link and BizFed Institute leaders. Hemstreet says available microwave technology is the most realistic way to extend service to outlying areas, due to the cost prohibitive nature of laying cable.

Marilyn Adjangba, One World Link

The private internet service provider aims to expand its footprint in LA County, especially in mobile home parks and the telehealth sphere. OWL is a wireless network provider that specializes in buildout using microwave technology. Current project plans involve point-to-point deployment, followed by microtrenching if necessary.

I closed the program – and I’m now closing this recap – with a call to action. Stakeholders must do more than merely establish partnerships to make a difference. We must actively seek out and secure more sources of funding to close the Digital Divide. My hope is that these presentations inspire a tidal wave of similarly inspiring and innovative projects in each of our subregions. With the talent present at our forum, I have no doubt that will happen. Let’s work together to make sure we have the funding to support those projects.



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