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July 14, 2025

**TO:** RAILS Board Consortia Committee  
**FROM:** Anne Slaughter  
**SUBJECT:** Updates on Broadband Expansion and Digital Equity

On Thursday, May 15, 2025, the Cook County Board of Commissioners voted to approved \$850,000 for a project aimed at improving digital equity. This funding, which was awarded to RAILS by the Cook County Board of Commissioners, will go towards the design and implementation of a Digital Navigator Network in suburban Cook County public libraries. An agreement is in progress and project activities will begin shortly. More information on this project and a roundup of updates on developments with the federal and state programs funding broadband expansion are included in the attached slides.

## Additional Resources

As a supplement to the slides, the articles below provide additional context and status information as of the time of writing. Note that they largely pertain to situations that are actively evolving, and new updates will continue to become available via their original sources.

- [Here's How NTIA is Changing the BEAD Program](#)
- [Governor Pritzker's Office: Trump Administration Terminates Digital Equity Program](#)
- [The Digital Equity Act tried to close the digital divide. Trump targets it in his war on 'woke'](#)
- [What Does the Termination of the Digital Equity Act Grant Programs Mean for Libraries?](#)
- [ALA Disappointed by Senate Vote to Block Hotspot Funds](#)

For general information along with current news, these organizations are powerful library allies and excellent sources of advocacy tools and actions, policy analysis, research, and practitioner resources.

- Benton Institute for Broadband and Society: <https://www.benton.org/>
- National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA): <https://www.digitalinclusion.org/>
- Schools, Health & Libraries Broadband (SHLB) Coalition: <https://www.shlb.org/>

# Broadband and Digital Equity Updates

July 2025



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## Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program Has New Rules

- New program rules announced by U.S. Department of Commerce on June 6
- Funding for broadband expansion in all states and territories will move forward
- “Shovels in the ground” are delayed while states rework plans and redo processes



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## Connect Illinois Program Distribution of \$1.04B BEAD Funds Delayed

- Before June 6, Illinois Office of Broadband was finalizing first wave of grantees and accepting second-wave applications
- Extent of delay is pending; preliminary analysis estimated up to two years
- Possible impact on the number of eligible locations, including libraries



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## Digital Equity Act is “Cancelled”

- The need for reliable internet access, digital skills training, and Wi-Fi-enabled technology persists
- Libraries are crucial in implementing states’ Digital Equity Plans & were expected to receive funding
- This program was authorized, and funding appropriated, by a bipartisan Congress in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021
- Illinois Office of Broadband received letter on May 9 terminating the state’s \$23.7 million award



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### **Illinois Digital Equity Capacity (IDEC) Grant is Paused Indefinitely**

- IDEC Grant was set to distribute \$13.1 million of Digital Equity Act funding to nonprofits, libraries, local governments, and beyond to establish and expand programs for job seekers, entrepreneurs, farmers, seniors, students, and other residents with barriers to accessing the digital economy
- By May 8 deadline, 260 applications were received from every region of the state, requesting more than \$130 million in funds



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### **E-Rate Hotspot Lending is Threatened**

- In August 2024, the Federal Communications Commission approved an expansion of E-Rate to fund Wi-Fi hotspots for library lending
- Over 800 school districts & libraries requested approximately 200,000 Wi-Fi hotspots in this year's E-Rate applications
- On May 8, the U.S. Senate struck down the expansion. The resolution is currently pending a vote in the House of Representatives



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### **Illinois HB1062 "Libraries Connected" Legislation is on Governor Pritzker's Desk**

- This will enshrine libraries as high priorities for Illinois Century Network (ICN) connection
- ICN conducted outreach to public libraries with letters of agency to participate in bid process for FY2027 service and E-rate discounts



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### **RAILS and Cook County Partnership Activities**

- RAILS will lead the design and implementation of a Digital Navigator Network for public libraries in suburban Cook County
- Activities will include program model development, library staff training, distributing funding to libraries for implementation, and library engagement and community building
- \$850,000 from Cook County's Equity Fund
- Agreement is in progress and near-final



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### **RAILS and Cook County Partnership Goals**

- Key activity in Cook County Digital Equity Action Plan's implementation recommendations
- Equity Fund aims to create ongoing systems change, particularly in communities of color
- Project goals:
  - Improve library services
  - Create stronger connections among public libraries and County government
  - Demonstrate potential for ongoing and systemic impact

