

Digital Opportunity for the High Country:

Connection and Engagement for all

Who We Are

A regional council of governments located in the High Country of Northwestern North Carolina focusing on rural serving rural.

What is Digital Opportunity

Assisting in the journey that leads people and households to answer "Yes" to the questions below:

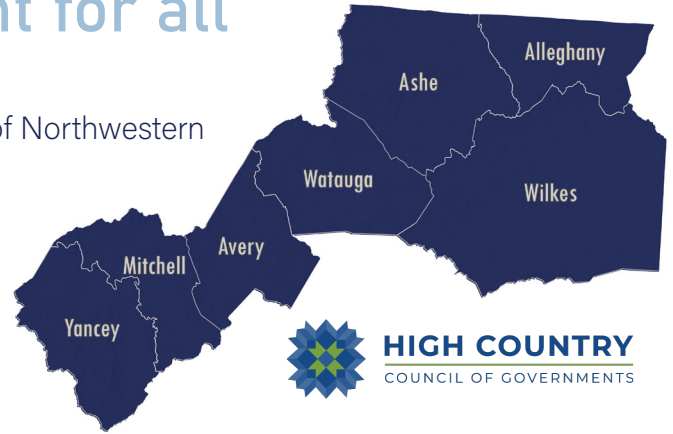
Is high-speed Internet (broadband) available?

Are you subscribed to a broadband plan?

Is the monthly cost affordable?

Do you have access to an Internet-enabled device that fits you and your households needs?

Do you know how to comfortably and safely navigate the device and use the Internet how you need to?



Internet availability is over-reported by Internet Service Providers

Rural adoption rates fall behind non-rural adoption rates at both the State and National level

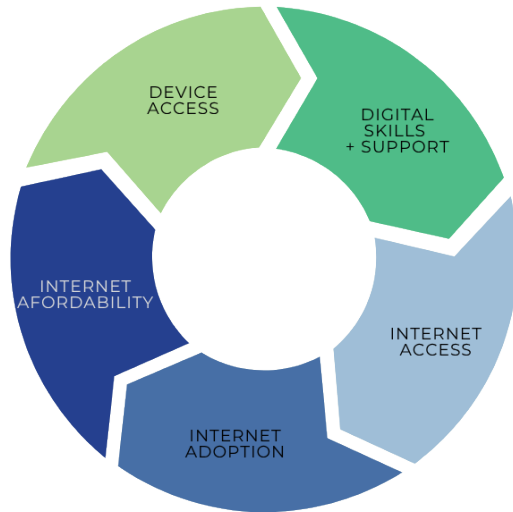
40% of HCCOG device recipients said the cost of internet was preventing them from subscribing

FCC defines affordable as 2% of monthly income

2/3 of adoption in rural areas is not because of lack of access but due to affordability device access, and skills and support issues

*from the Benton Institute

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Impact

We engage in a full spectrum of digital opportunity activities

Device distribution (*laptops, tablets, smartphones, hotspots*)

800+ refurbished laptops acquired through E2D and Kramden Institute that are distributed to local partners and ultimately given at an individual-level.

Digital Skills programs in our communities

50 digital skills events serving 300 residents from January-May 2025

Local Partner Support

Identifying and supporting local-level projects like:

- creation of sound-proof telehealth rooms
- continuation of hotspot programs with lower subscription costs for eligible entities
- supporting digital skills courses within our local partners to meet people where they are physically

Support

Funding support has come from:

NC Department of Information Technology
Dogwood Health Trust (*Avery, Mitchell, Yancey*)
NC State Employees Credit Union
Institute for Emerging Issues

Device acquisition partners include:

E2D - Eliminate the Digital Divide
Kramden Institute
Carolina West Wireless
Mission Telecom
Nova Labs

Intra-organizational collaboration with the High Country Workforce Development Board, Area Agency on Aging, and Planning and Development Department.

Active Partners

Agricultural Extension Offices, Buladean Community Center, Center for Rural Health Innovation, High Country Community Health, Hunger and Health Coalition, Mediation and Restorative Justice Center, NCWorks Centers, OASIS, Regional Library Systems, Senior Centers, W.A.M.Y. Community Action, Wilkes Community College, Wilkes Recovery Revolutions, and more.

A Holistic Approach

Six months to the day after Hurricane Helene, a laptop basics class was held at the Buladean Community Center in hard hit Mitchell County. The laptops given to the class participants were supplied via the device distribution program while the skills class was provided via the digital navigator initiative. **This illustrates the full circle capabilities of our digital opportunity efforts.**

Ongoing Projects

NC Department of Information Technology Digital Champion Grant - High Country Region

- Awarding, administering, and supporting grantees of the High Country Digital Opportunity Fund (supported by the NC Department of Information Technology). Grantees represent all 7 High Country counties. Grantees with geographic and project scope overlap have participated in group meetings to **ensure transparency, foster collaboration, and share resources in a process that oftentimes keeps applicants uninformed of one another's initiatives.**
- Supporting High Country Workforce Development as Digital Skills are Workforce Skills.

Dogwood Health Trust's (Dogwood) Digital Opportunity Cohort - Avery, Mitchell, and Yancey

HCCOG along with W.A.M.Y. Community Action, Avery County, and Toe River Valley Library System (formerly known as A.M.Y. Regional Library System) have attended regular sessions hosted by Dogwood, cohort-specific meetings, and community listening sessions with local partners to narrow down digital opportunity projects and strategies to implement.

Core themes of the cohort:

Public Wi-Fi areas, Telehealth/Telehealth tools, Re-entry Tech Supply + Support

Completed Projects

Institute of Emerging Issues

Creation and adoption of a **region-wide Digital Opportunities Plan**. The adoption of this Plan was the beginning of our ongoing Digital Opportunity initiative. Since then, coalition building, stakeholder engagement, and impact has grown. Implementation funds provided by Dogwood Health Trust and NC State Employees Credit Union.

Project examples include:

Internet Access & Adoption: Expanding hotspot loaner programs and Affordable Connectivity Program sign up assistance.

Digital Skills: 1 on 1 tech support, hiring of a digital outreach librarian, and digital skills classes.

Device Access: expanding access through device distributions of **800+ laptops and 300+ cellphones** directly to people to allow access to virtual recovery support, job applications and interviews, and more.

“
This phone is a blessing and will help me achieve my goals. I can have steady contact with employers. Thanks a million!
”

“
You cannot even apply for a job without a device now.
”

“
Textbooks, exams, and most of our assignments are all accessed online. My old computer was really struggling with it, so I was having to stay at school longer to complete assignments.
”

Braided funding, or a combination of different funding sources, is key to sustain and expand the High Country's Digital Opportunity initiative.

Our internal organizational collaboration with the High Country Workforce Development Board, Area Agency on Aging, and Planning and Development Department coupled with our cross-sector region-wide partners allows us to have a large-scale impact within our 7 county High Country region.

We aim to create systems that are designed for, and make sense to, our rural High Country communities.

Access to, connections with, or information on potential funding sources that intersect with the High Country Digital Opportunity Initiative is key to move forward, together.

If you have a connection, question, or would like to learn more, please reach out:

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