



ALLIES  
FOR CHILDREN

# COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Connecting Families  
to High-Speed Internet



JANUARY 2022

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# PURPOSE

As a component of the Regional Engagement and Data Collection for the Connected Equitable Broadband Access initiative led by Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission (SPC) with Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) and Allies for Children (Appendix A), 17 community conversations occurred across SPC's 10-county region. The purpose of the conversations was to understand how and where community members access the internet, what they need from their internet service, and how to address the gaps in their needs.

This report is divided into three sections: Discovery and Overarching Themes, Urban vs. Rural Theme Summary, and Recommendations from residents. To illustrate these themes and the real impacts of limited access, stories that represent the challenges and desires within the communities were gathered and are reproduced throughout the report. By analyzing global themes in the context of the rural-urban divide, we are better able to see the challenges that each population faces as well as various interventions that will create broader internet accessibility.

The overarching themes are divided into six categories, listed from most prevalent to least prevalent, and are as follows:

1. The internet helps people to connect and learn
2. Connectivity is expensive and unreliable for many residents
3. Many people connect to the internet via a mobile device
4. Rural communities feel left behind
5. Connectivity impacts the local economy: Neighborhoods and Businesses
6. People connect to the internet where they can and when they can

## *Heard in conversation:*



I had six daycare facilities and now have two! The lack of staffing and COVID had taken its toll. In addition, I cannot submit my state required paperwork (that takes 3-4 hours each week) because of lack of internet access at my home office. When the state's certifier came to my house, he told me, 'it's easy to submit your paperwork.' When I asked him how, he tried to get online at my home and realized it was not 'easy'. He couldn't get access either. I finally had to resort to paying someone to take care of my taxes because of the difficulty in submitting them myself.



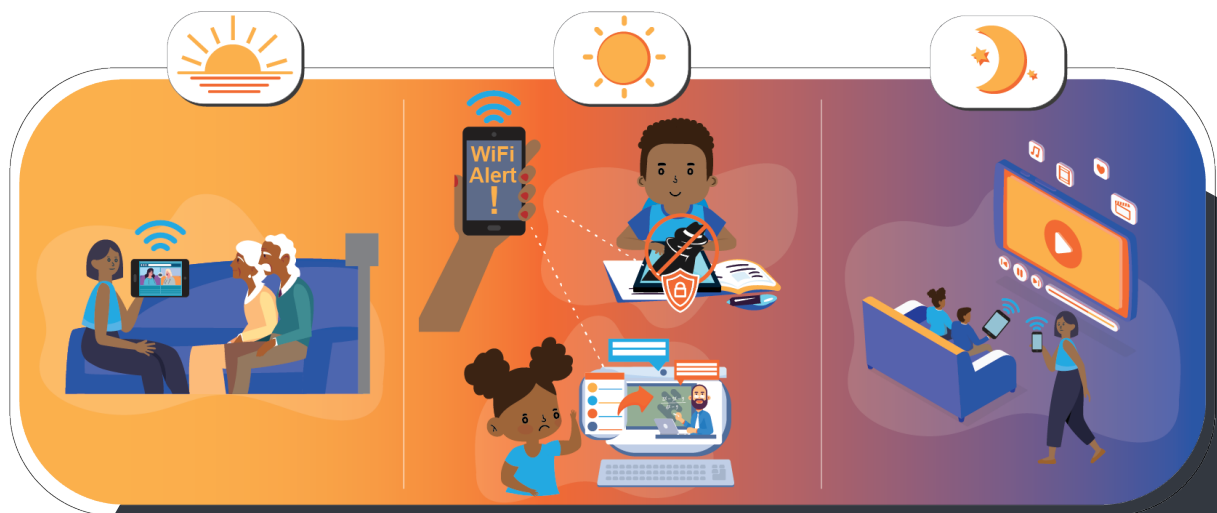


## The Challenges Of Limited Connectivity

Dasia is a woman from Beaver who has two young children. She works in social services and often uses Google Maps to get to her clients' houses while traveling. During her time at work, she notices that the senior citizens she works with have been feeling rather depressed and isolated due to the pandemic. She thinks that the internet would help them connect with family and friends if they had access to the technology and could understand.

While she is working, her children use the internet for distance learning. They don't have issues using the internet right now, but she felt that her daughter (who was in third grade at the beginning of the pandemic) wasn't adequately onboarded to the school's remote learning platform before having to use it for class. When her daughter was having trouble, there was no support provided. Dasia also worries about what her children may encounter online while she isn't present, so she keeps specific settings on her devices to ensure her children's safety. Furthermore, she uses the internet to track her children.

When Dasia comes home from work, she and her family use the internet to stream movies, play games, use banking apps, and watch videos. Her connectivity to the internet is good; she uses Comcast's Internet Essentials program as her internet provider since Verizon does not provide internet in her area. She is grateful because she has been through worse internet situations as Dasia had to purchase mini-mesh networks because of connectivity problems. However, she worries about her mother, who is on a fixed income but pays over \$100 a month for internet service — something that she feels is exceptionally unfair.



Dasia's story is unique but shares commonalities with many other residents of southwestern Pennsylvania. The availability of good quality internet is critical to ensuring the success of our community, but there are many barriers to quality access.

**This report sets out to uplift voices from our community to aid in providing equitable internet access for all.**



# METHODOLOGY

Conversations were held between October 20th and December 15th, 2021 at frequently accessed and accessible community hubs. Refreshments and incentives were provided to attendees (via Gift Cards). Through these 17 conversations, the total attendance was 123 individuals, and the breakdown of participants by county and location can be found in Appendix B. Facilitators guided the conversations by introducing SPC and Allies for Children's outreach to communities. After a project overview, the conversations focused on three questions:



How does the internet help you?

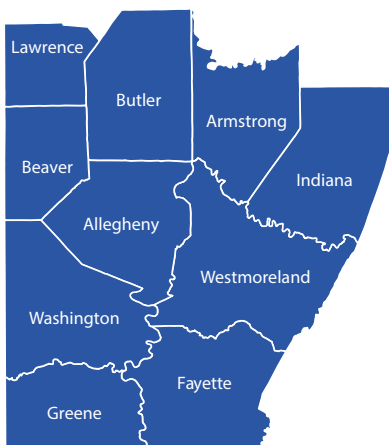


Where can you and do you use the internet?



What terminology is most familiar to you?

(Appendix B lists commonly-known phrases in the community)



Depending on the number of participants, attendees posted their responses to each question at feedback stations. Then, leaders facilitated group conversations and explored individual stories. With smaller groups, researchers held more casual or one-on-one conversations to gather the same information.

Community Conversation Events		
Lawrence	10/20/21	New Castle Public Library, New Castle
Beaver	10/27/21	B.F. Jones Memorial Library, Aliquippa
Beaver	11/3/21	Darlington Township Building, Darlington
Armstrong	11/8/21	Redbank Valley Library, New Bethlehem
Butler	11/9/21	Butler Area Public Library, Butler
Allegheny	11/10/21	Hosana House, Wilkesburg
Westmoreland	11/16/21	Jeanette Public Library, Jeannette
Westmoreland	11/17/21	Westmoreland Intermediate Unit, Greensburg
Allegheny	11/18/21	Senator James R. Brewster Community Center, McKeesport
Allegheny	11/18/21	Latino Community Center, Beechview (virtual)
Indiana	11/22/21	Purchase Line High School Library
Fayette	11/22/21	German-Masontown Public Library, Masontown
Allegheny	12/1/21	The Jeron X. Grayson Center, Pittsburgh
Greene	12/6/21	4-H Building, Waynesburg
Allegheny	12/7/21	Homewood Children's Village, Pittsburgh
Washington	12/15/21	Blueprints, Washington
Fayette	12/15/21	Carnegie Free Library, Connellsville

# DISCOVERY AND OVERARCHING THEMES

These conversations revealed that the internet is primarily used for work and school, highlighting the importance of reliable access for individuals' livelihoods. Entertainment was a secondary purpose, including streaming television, movies, and music, as well as online gaming. In light of the pandemic, telehealth has also become an important function of the internet, as it connects individuals to their health care providers in a safe, contact-free environment. Using the internet to connect with family was another theme and several indicated that it was the only way they were able to communicate with family members living outside the United States. To a lesser extent, individuals also use the internet to look up information or access online adult learning programs, including English classes and parenting classes.

The internet was helpful for those who had to work and attend school remotely during the pandemic. Families found the internet a helpful source of entertainment, using it to stream movies and music, play games online, and stay connected with

friends and family. Using the internet for day-to-day tasks was also helpful, including reading the news, shopping, and attending telehealth appointments.

In terms of concerns about the internet, the overwhelming majority expressed frustration with

- **poor connectivity,**
- **speed,**
- **and service.**

Unequal access to the internet was brought to light during the pandemic as schools moved online and those without reliable internet were **left behind**.

The individuals also suggested that the cost of internet service was too high, especially given its consistent unreliability. Many indicated that the internet was so **cost-prohibitive** that they did not have it in their homes and only accessed the internet in public places using free Wi-Fi, which brought up concerns about **privacy and cybersecurity**. Others expressed the need for **additional support** for internet use, particularly students attending school virtually and senior citizens who may have a learning curve when it comes to new technologies, such as Zoom.








# ATTENDEE RESPONSES to Focus Group Questions

## How do you use the internet?

-  Work
-  School
-  Telehealth
-  Look for Work
-  Shopping
-  Watch TV/Movies
-  Gaming
-  Learning/ Information
-  Online Classes (Adult Learning)
-  Connect with Family








## Other themes heard from stories:

-  Connection
-  Social Media
-  Only one provider
-  Communication
-  Virtual Learning

## How does the internet help you?

-  Working from home
-  Keeping up with the news
-  School
-  Looking up information
-  Online classes
-  Communicating with friends and family
-  Dating
-  Source of entertainment: TV, movies, music, games

## What are your concerns about the internet?

-  Poor service
-  People needing more support using the internet, especially seniors
-  Connectivity / Speed
-  Cybersecurity / Hacking / Privacy
-  Unequal Access / Lack of Access
-  Negative feelings about virtual learning
-  Cost / Too Expensive

## Below are overarching themes heard in the Community Conversations:



**Elias, from Pittsburgh,** uses the internet to preserve his community. He is a volunteer for a local organization called MAD DADs, a group of Black fathers who help monitor social media activity for any signs of violence in the community. The internet allows him to interrupt violence in real time.

**Eva, a woman who lives in Pittsburgh,** is originally from Mexico and uses the internet to maintain relationships with her family abroad through WhatsApp. She also likes that the internet is a resource that can help her children complete schoolwork and answer important questions.

**John, who lives in Beaver County,** is a mental health counselor and conducts telehealth work at the library. He speaks with families in their homes via counseling sessions online. He is also an avid board game player and uses the internet to play chess online with others. This year, he virtually participated in a gaming convention that he regularly attends in-person, and he shared how enjoyable the experience was for him. He doesn't have the internet in his home—he feels that his points of access, at the

### *The internet helps people to connect and learn*

The internet allows those from near and far to connect with each other, learn from one another, and sustain community. Many residents shared that they use the internet to call family and friends or participate in activities that they would otherwise miss during the pandemic. Connectivity has increased their ability to build relationships and be in community with each other.

library, and at a local office for mental health counselors, are enough. The cost for him is too expensive.

**Susan, from Butler County,** believes the internet is amazing for finding information on anything. Her connection has enabled her four-year-old son to attend a preschool in NYC virtually. She thinks their children's socialization hasn't been negatively affected by virtual school. Last year, she and her husband both worked from home via the internet. Her husband works for an internet provider so they have had free, reliable internet for years. She can't get fiber in her area; she thinks Armstrong is DSL. She admitted it's very expensive for those who must pay for it. She would be willing to pay \$50/month for internet, but shares that high-speed internet available through Armstrong is probably \$130/month—which is what her family needs while they are at home. Her family's internet is pretty expensive—her parents stopped bundling phone, internet, and cable because their bill was nearly \$400/month. Since the pandemic, she has been ordering groceries online and doing curbside pickup, and she has no plans to shop in-store anytime soon.





**Carolyn, a retired nurse from Greene County,** shared that she used to complete many of her work tasks online, like documenting case notes. She has access to the internet and doesn't mind paying for a more expensive internet service if it is of good quality. However, tasks that should only take 15 minutes to complete, with the speed of her internet connection, can take up to three hours. She uses Verizon for cellular service, Windstream as her internet provider, and Dish Network for cable, which costs her about \$300 a month. She would like to bundle her services if it would save her money, but she lives on a farm and feels isolated because she can't access what she needs.

**Dawn, an assistant librarian from Armstrong County,** sees many people come to the library for internet access, sometimes even sitting outside after hours to use the service. The library gets free service from Comcast and has service from Windstream. She noted that Windstream received a grant to upgrade facilities, so they selected one of the more rural areas in the county. Now, that area gets 50 MBPS download speeds, whereas other areas, like Seminole, get 2 MBPS. She expressed disappointment that Comcast offers low-rate service in the area that only lasts for the first two years, and then prices are increased to \$200-300 a month - prices, she states, her neighbors cannot afford.

## *Connectivity is expensive and unreliable for many residents*

Several community members indicated that their connection is not reliable, even though they pay a monthly fee as high as \$300 for multiple services - internet, cable, and mobile. Depending on the location, residents face slower speeds, internet freezes, and service disruptions. When there is an issue with service, residents don't always receive the best customer service. The lack of competition between service providers worsens the issue, driving up internet prices and causing residents to feel "cheated out of their money" and left without a choice. In addition, residents repeatedly voiced concern that internet prices start out affordable then increase exponentially over time.





## *Many people connect to the internet via a mobile device*

Several residents expressed that if there was trouble with a connection in their home or in a public space, they could lean on their mobile device for connection. Rural community members especially, shared that they often relied on their mobile connection, when they could, to connect to the internet, play games, or stream.

**Walter, from Beaver,** accesses everything through his phone. He goes to the library to use the computer to limit the use of data on his phone. He watches YouTube videos and says that they use a lot of data. Using his phone for all internet access could be expensive. He has “good” service. He mainly accesses the internet from his phone for research and communications with friends, including emails. In the past, he used it for his business. He is concerned about cybercrime; he worries about the theft of confidential information being collected by hackers. He has been hacked before and is concerned about “addiction to the internet.” He doesn’t have Wi-Fi at home and feels the internet is a “heck of a tool.”

**Marina lives in Washington County** and frequently loses her internet connection due to wires being cut in her low-income housing complex. Managed by Washington County’s Housing Authority, when maintenance cuts the grass in the community, her wires are constantly in need of repair—this happens frequently in warmer weather. Her son gets upset when there’s no internet connection because he enjoys playing learning games on his tablet and watching shows on TV. She also takes classes online, and it’s much easier to have the internet at home so she can do classes on her own time and not have to take her son with her to the library. Marina utilizes Internet Essentials by Comcast, as she learned that they will drastically

reduce the cost of the internet for families with school-age children. She received a notice from Internet Essentials that they were increasing their speeds, and she hasn’t noticed any issues even though she has five televisions in her home that are frequently used. She stated that she doesn’t pay her cell phone bill, because she can still access Xfinity hotspots for free through her phone in Washington County. She feels that she’s fortunate to have good connectivity because she struggles to pay her bills and relies on affordable internet. Since the pandemic, she has done more shopping online and has accessed virtual doctor appointments for her mental health.

**Lynn, from Westmoreland County,** said the internet is most like a cheetah - it’s everywhere and it’s fast. Most of her internet experience relates to her work with the library. The county recently extended the library’s broadband, so it can reach outside the building. This change was prompted by the pandemic. She has noticed a lot of people in the parking lot, accessing the library’s internet on their phones. Lynn said there used to be internet classes offered at the library but were discontinued because of lack of interest. She said that perhaps the library would resume the classes if they knew there was a demand for them. She also knew of a six-week program that gave computers to participants, if they finished the entire six weeks. She was unsure who offered the program.



## *Rural communities feel left behind*

Residents expressed concern that internet companies do not see value in supplying access to rural communities, which results in them being left behind - a common sentiment echoed across participants. Lack of adequate access results in children being behind in their coursework due to remote learning, individuals being unable to complete job tasks, and a general stifling of educational and career growth. These stories are among many that participants told that revealed the struggles of community members and the result of insufficient efforts to bridge digital equity gaps.

**Amy, from Greene County**, is a teacher with one child who was obligated to use the internet during the pandemic. She teaches at a cyber school, but internet service doesn't reach her home because she lives between two service providers. When she first called one particular service provider to add service to her home, they stated that her address was an address of a different county and that the provider didn't serve that address. However, her address is in Greene County, and she can access other services for her county, but not the internet. She has trouble completing basic job duties because she can't access the internet at her home. She uses her phone when she can and pays a monthly fee to access the local recreation center to use the internet. She also encourages her child to stay late at school so that she can access the internet.

**Joann, from Lawrence County**, manages a household with multiple children, including one with special needs. The pandemic caused her special needs child to fall behind in school due to lack of access and unaffordable internet. Now, they are forced to go to the public library for school and personal business needs. They often must wait for a computer and worry about getting hacked.

**Mary, an older resident from Armstrong County**, was used to going to the hospital to see her doctor and paying her medical bills in person. However, Mary is overwhelmed with the shift to tele-medical services and online management of documents, schedules, and bills. Learning how to use the internet is already a challenge, and now Mary must learn many different interfaces and tools to keep up.

**Jack, a senior veteran from Jeannette**, has Comcast for his internet service, which was \$60 a month but grew to \$200 before he downgraded from a bundle. Jack also uses the internet at the library. He believes the internet and computers are our future, so he bought himself a computer to learn how to use the internet. He considers his generation to be internet illiterate and wishes there would be more opportunities for senior citizens to learn how to use their computers and the internet. Jack watches the news a lot and he heard that many kids couldn't get connected at the start of the pandemic. He sees other countries are more connected to the internet and feels that the children of America are falling behind. He believes very strongly that everyone should have adequate access to the internet.



**Ava is an older resident from Jeannette** who shared that she doesn't know much about the internet but is trying to learn. For her, the internet became essential for everyday life during the start of the pandemic to access information, order groceries, and for telehealth appointments. She has many friends who rely on the internet to order groceries because they are unable to leave their homes. She expressed frustration that there were not many classes or ways for senior citizens to learn about the internet. The classes that are available (or used to be pre-pandemic) were expensive and usually at

night when she didn't like to drive. She has tried to use the public transportation system to get to classes, but the bus schedule doesn't coincide with the class schedule. She said that the library used to offer internet classes for anyone who wanted to learn how to use the internet - she was hopeful these classes would resume due to the pandemic and more people needing to use the internet. She emphasized the importance of affordable internet access for everyone and thinks internet prices should be on a sliding scale.

These stories are among many that participants told that revealed the struggles of community members and the result of insufficient efforts to bridge digital equity gaps.

**Older residents also feel overlooked.** Many older residents noted that they have trouble navigating the internet, causing them to feel left out of society. Older residents also noted that the limited training that is available to build their digital literacy is not accessible. One Westmoreland County resident noted classes at the local community college were out of reach due to the 2-hour commute each way on public transit.







## *Connectivity impacts the local economy: Neighborhoods and Businesses*

Business owners face unique challenges due to a lack of adequate internet access and are having trouble carrying out the essential duties of their business. Additionally, some business owners expressed limitations with conducting e-commerce because many of the payment systems, i.e., credit cards, require internet access. It was also expressed that reliable internet is becoming a factor in where people choose to buy homes and which neighborhoods they tend to avoid.

**Monte is a real estate agent** who works from home in Connellsville. As a real estate agent, Monte sees the impact of the pandemic on property trends. He notes a considerable shift away from guest rooms and more toward home offices, meaning that buyers are looking not only for a spare room but specifically for a room that is comfortable and accessible as an office. Buyers are requesting good infrastructure, including water, sewer, and broadband – all of which are lacking in many older homes and more readily available in new developments in adjacent counties. Reliable internet is essential for attracting and retaining individuals who can work remotely. Monte sees that Fayette County is losing out on new buyers and attracting growth because buyers prefer the more advanced infrastructure and “ready” housing markets elsewhere. On a day-to-day basis, Monte also noted that the lack of reliable internet impedes showing some properties in the first place. The agency uses an app to unlock and access properties for showings, and when there is no signal, the app can’t be used. The only remedy is to call a phone number for support but making that phone call is also impossible with no cell service.

**Trevor lives in Mariana in Washington County.** He owns a small law firm and is the town supervisor. The service at his home is fine, but there is no cell service on “90%” of the

roads in his area. He feels that it is impossible to make calls or get online if he is out of the house. He is concerned when there is an emergency, especially if there was a road closure due to an overturned truck. He worries about the inability to communicate with anyone because of his lack of connectivity. His provider is Consolidated Communication - the only service available at his house - and his television service is through AT&T. Many people in his area are forced to pay for landline and cell service because they don’t get cell service at their home. If people can afford to install internet in their home, it’s good service, but if they are relying on their cell service, it’s terrible. He believes that the politicians in Greene County are doing a lot more than Washington County in terms of improving the internet service. He wishes there was a map online where he could see service providers and the areas they operate. He also doesn’t quite understand the information currently available to him about connectivity.

**Carmel is a business owner** that has questioned whether she should stay in Greene County because of her poor service. She often uses her phone as a backup for many of her virtual meetings. She tries not to stay on the meetings too long, however, as she is afraid that she will lose connection or that her service will time out.



## *People connect to the internet where they can and when they can*

Because of issues mentioned previously, residents must take advantage of internet access wherever they can find it. Community members access the internet from sources such as friends and family members, libraries, retail store parking lots, fast food restaurants, and Xfinity hotspots. Residents are often unaware of good quality, affordable internet options because of language barriers; usually, information about free or low-cost internet is only disseminated in English. Borrowing internet service and finding Wi-Fi from various community centers is the only option for many families, who understand the privacy risks of public internet access.

**Grace, from Butler County,** uses her brother's Wi-Fi to look for work because she can't afford access or a hot spot. She must go to the library to submit job applications and upload required documents. Privacy of personal information is an issue, but she has no choice and must take the risk.

**Katherine, from Allegheny County,** uses the internet to help her with her baby and learn different parenting tips. Her English classes are online, and she needs the internet to go to the classes. She doesn't have internet in her house, so she borrows it through La Lineria de Pittsburgh (her local library) which she received as a part of her English classes.

**Charlie, from Butler County,** has the internet at home but likes to go to the local library to stream because it works better than his home service. He uses the internet for entertainment, movies, and creates content for YouTube. He previously used the internet for telehealth visits. He has Armstrong internet service and rated it a 9.5/10. The 9.5 score is because storms can easily knock his service out. He is in charge of seven YouTube channels. He feels that \$150 would be affordable as a fee for the internet each month.

# URBAN VS. RURAL THEME SUMMARY



**BOTH URBAN AND RURAL AREAS** reflected work and school as the primary use of connection, though rural areas had a higher instance of using the internet for online classes for adults.

- Individuals from urban areas spent more time streaming TV and movies.
- Communicating with friends and family was important to those in both rural and urban areas, though individuals in urban areas used the internet to communicate with family members who live internationally.
- Individuals in rural areas also relied on the internet more for telehealth appointments, due to a longer driving distance from medical providers.
- The internet was helpful to those in rural areas who were looking for work, and those in urban and rural areas used it to work remotely during the pandemic.
- Families in both urban and rural areas enjoy using the internet for entertainment, such as using it to stream movies or music and playing games online.
- Both areas also think the internet is helpful for researching information and staying connected with friends and family.
- In rural areas, using the internet for telehealth appointments and ordering groceries online was helpful due to their distance from commercial centers.

Concerns about the internet were similar across both urban and rural areas, but the primary concern in urban areas was cost, while the primary concerns in rural areas focused more on cost and access. Rural areas were frustrated with a **complete lack of service, unreliable connectivity, and slow speeds.**

Many indicated that they lived in an area where internet service providers did not provide service at all, or there was only one service provider, so they had no way to shop around for better prices. Additionally, those in rural areas could only access the internet at their local library, recreation center, fast food locations, or by sitting in the parking lots of local businesses that provide free Wi-Fi. Some went so far as to sit in an open field to find a reliable signal.

Individuals in urban areas demonstrated higher levels of concern about the negative impact of virtual learning, which highlighted inequity in their communities. Those with reliable (and usually expensive) internet access had an unfair advantage over those students who did not. Individuals in rural areas had a higher level of concern for cybercrime, hacking, and online privacy, primarily because those individuals had to rely on public Wi-Fi access to utilize the internet. Both rural and urban areas also indicated concern that there were those in the community who needed more support in accessing and using the internet, particularly senior citizens.



## Urban Area THEMES



## Rural Area THEMES

How do you use the internet?

- Work
- School
- Streaming TV/Movies
- Connecting with Family

- Work
- School
- Online Classes
- Communicating with Friends
- Telehealth Appointments

How does the internet help you?

- Working from Home
- Keeping up with the News
- Source of Entertainment
- Looking up Information
- Community Service

- Working from Home
- Look up Information
- Communicating with Friends
- Source of Entertainment

What are your concerns about the internet?

- Cost /Too Expensive
- Poor service / Connectivity / Speed
- Negative feelings about virtual learning during the pandemic

- Poor Service / Connectivity / Speed
- Cost /Too Expensive
- Unequal or Lack of Access
- People needing more support, especially seniors
- Cybercrime, Hacking, Privacy



# RECOMMENDATIONS FROM RESIDENTS

Residents overwhelmingly expressed the importance and support of having reliable connectivity in their home and their community. Between acknowledging concerns and issues in many of the counties, several residents posed a few recommendations to improve connectivity:



As new housing is being developed, ensure that the new development has reliable access to the internet.



As road paving, gas repairs, or other operational improvements happen in areas, use that time to prioritize and install fiber connections.



Increase the number of hotspot locations in rural areas and use anchor institutions (universities, libraries, schools and hospitals as places of connection and starting points for boosting signals).



Increase cooperative agreements among internet service providers.



Find ways to keep internet service providers accountable for quality service and troubleshooting.



Maintain older lines especially in places where they are overgrown with plants.





# APPENDIX

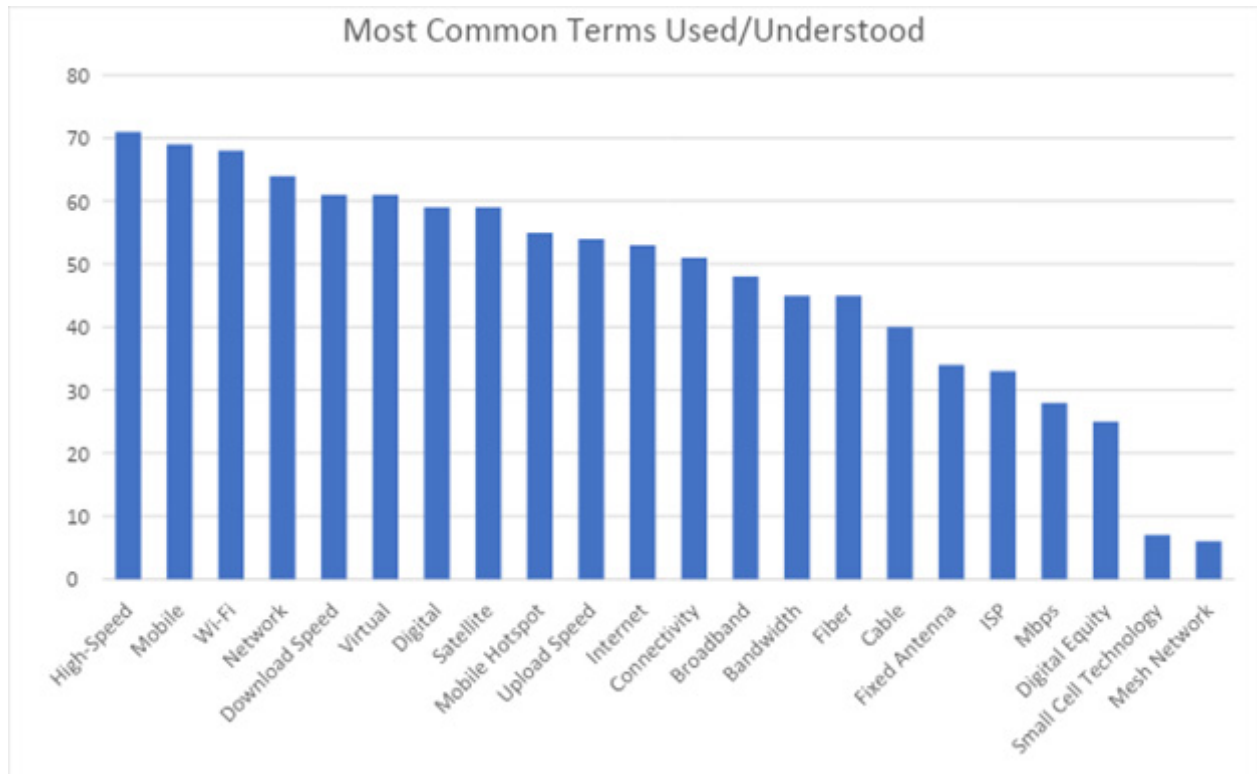
Appendix A:  
Makeup of Participants

Appendix B:  
Common Terms Used/Understood

Appendix C:  
Personas/Stories

County	Attendance	Attendance
Allegheny	Wilkinsburg	4
Allegheny	McKeesport	2
Allegheny	Hill District	1
Allegheny	Virtual/Latino Community	18
Allegheny	Homewood	11
Armstrong	New Bethlehem	3
Beaver	Aliquippa	5
Beaver	Darlington	5
Butler	Butler	3
Fayette	Masontown	5
Fayette	Connellsville	2
Greene	Waynesburg	26
Indiana	Purchase Line	15
Lawrence	New Castle	5
Washington	Washington	5
Westmoreland	Jeannette	11
Westmoreland	Greensburg	2
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>123</b>

Although there were 123 total participants, a few of the meetings varied in format. Some were more conversational and did not complete the dot exercise. In a small number of meetings, individuals were asked to rate the extent of their understanding (good, some, little) so there was no actual tally.





## Allegheny County - Hill District

### Key Themes: Affordability; Staying Connected; Inequity for Children

**JANE**, an older resident, said if the internet were an animal, it would be a snake - it's lurking among us and doesn't care what it does to people. Prior to the pandemic, she used the internet mainly for work. Now, she uses the internet to watch movies, shop, and connect with her family all over the world. She believes the internet is very expensive - her home has cable and internet, and she has been trying to downsize in different ways to decrease the price. Her cell phone provider is Verizon. She doesn't have connectivity issues at work, but sometimes experiences slow service at home due to the number of devices connected to the internet and living in a brick row house. She is concerned that the internet is the new babysitter, and that children are accessing things they shouldn't be exposed to. She recently learned that when schools shut down during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, some students never got access to the internet and weren't able to participate in school. The pandemic leveled the playing field for some and gave them access to the internet and devices when they didn't have it before, but increased the disparity for others. She remembers a time when there were no computers and no internet access, and it's astonishing to think how far technology has come since then. The pandemic revealed the disparities in digital equity, as some students were not equipped to shift to online learning and cable/internet bundle prices rose. She did hear of a Walmart who boosted their internet connectivity so people could sit in the parking lot and access the internet. She describes herself as an advocate for correcting existing infrastructure, similar to electrical wiring.

## Allegheny County - Homewood

### Key Themes: Remote Work & Job Search; Community Service

**RAY**, a workforce development professional, lives in Braddock and uses the internet mostly for work. Since the pandemic, he has worked from home and has appreciated the flexibility of remote work. He keeps track of the news and social media through the internet, and he also does a ton of shopping. Many of the clients that he works with need help accessing the internet. He feels that there could be more services for them.

**JEROME** is currently looking for a new job; he is into NFTs and blockchain technology. He feels the internet is necessary. He is a musician and uses the internet to stream and upload music. He has Cricket as his mobile provider and feels that his phone bill is really affordable. Cricket doesn't have great phone service. He feels that he has pretty good service for the internet done in his home, unlike his brother, who lives less than a mile away in Wilkinsburg and has trouble accessing his internet. He has Verizon.

**ELIAS** uses the internet where he can. He doesn't have much of an issue connecting to the internet. He is a volunteer for a local organization called MAD DADs, which is a group of Black fathers who help to monitor social media activity for any signs of violence in the community. The internet helps him interrupt violence as it arises.

**TAMIKA** is an elected Committee Women in Homewood. She uses the internet daily. She worries that there aren't enough positive things shared online, and wishes that there were more hopeful news items, including on social media. She uses the internet to check email, pay bills, network and do research.

## Allegheny County - Latino Community Center

**Key Themes:** Connecting Abroad; Remote Learning; Remote Work

**ROSITA** uses the internet to communicate with her family and her mother in Honduras. She also uses it to speak with her son's doctor. She uses it for work as well as a source of entertainment for her son when he wants to watch TV.

**KATHERINE** uses the internet to help her with her baby and to learn different parenting tips. Her English classes are online, and she needs the internet to go to the classes. She doesn't have internet in her house, so she is borrowing it through La Lineria de Pittsburgh (her local library), which she received through her English classes.

**SYLVIA** uses it at work every day, and during COVID used her internet at home for work. Her internet is pretty slow, and it normally doesn't work in certain parts of her house. Both her son and she use it for classes and work, which slows it down even more. She lives in North Versailles and works in McKeesport School District.

**LUISA** works at the Latino Community Center, and during the Pandemic she typically connected with families over video calls. She uses it to connect with her parents in Peru over the WhatsApp video call.

**MARILYN** mainly has the internet for her kids to use for studying and for her to take English classes. She has a two-year old son and he can see his extended family via Zoom. She lives on the Southside.

**ELENA** uses the internet to help her kids find the information they need for school – whenever they have a question, they can just open up the internet and ask it. She also uses it to 'transport' her to other places, such as visiting museums virtually in Paris. She is from Mexico and her daughter doesn't know her family in person, they only know each other through WhatsApp.

**SHEILA** works for the Latino Community Center and says the internet is very important for her, especially with working from home. She also uses it to connect with her family in Guatemala – from any event from birthdays to reunions – and it is like being there with them.

**ROSAMARIA** is the CEO of the Latino Community Center, during the Pandemic she saw how hard it was for families without internet to access services (i.e., healthcare, school, etc.), and how those families that did have internet (and paid a lot for it) received better services in terms of medical, education, etc. She also observed that while companies like Comcast were promoting free or low-cost internet, these promotions were typically only in English and when they called to get more information there were no translation services available. The Latino Community Center ended up hiring someone to help families navigate the process of getting free internet.

## Allegheny County - McKeesport

**Key Themes:** Remote Work; Social Media and Surfing; Connecting; Virtual Remote Learning; Affordability; Gaming and More

**HEATHER** is from the Braddock Area and is currently a senior at Passport Academy. She uses the internet for social media, surfing the web, and to work on her business as she is an entrepreneur in the beauty industry. She said if the internet were an animal, it definitely wouldn't be a house pet - maybe a bear. Virtual school was difficult for Heather because she is more of a tactile learner. Her ability to connect to Wi-Fi also affected her ability to learn. However, she stated that if she didn't have the internet, she wouldn't know how to function. She expressed frustration with the cost of the internet (it can be too expensive at times), and connectivity. Her sister used the internet a lot for games, which often require increased bandwidth. In her experience, different neighborhoods that she is familiar with have different levels of connectivity.

**KEN** uses the internet mainly for work, as well as for staying in touch with friends and looking up information. He said if the internet were an animal, it would be a spider. Ken's concerns include the cost of the internet, as he believes it is too much. He is also concerned about people who don't know how to use the internet (specifically seniors), as there is a learning curve when using tools like Zoom for the first time.

**SHEILA** uses the internet a lot for tracking the news and staying up to date with current events. She also uses a Roku to watch television with Wi-Fi and uses apps such as Viber to talk with her family. Internet connection is very important to Sheila, and she says life is not possible without the internet. There are a lack of providers in her area, so she finds it hard to compare prices for quality internet connection. She has also noticed some dead spots around the McKeesport area.

**JOSEPH** uses the internet mainly for work, as well as for staying in touch with friends and looking up information. He said if the internet were an animal, it would be a spider. Joseph's concerns include the cost of the internet, as he believes it is too much. He is also concerned about people who don't know how to use the internet (specifically seniors), as there is a learning curve when using tools like Zoom for the first time.

## Allegheny County - Wilkinsburg

**Key Themes:** Streaming; Safety; Remote Learning; Affordability

**DASIA** is from Beaver but works in Wilkinsburg and all over the County. Dasia has two young children. Her family uses the internet every day for streaming movies, playing games, banking, and watching instructional videos. Her kids use the internet for virtual school. She also can use the internet to track her children and monitor where they are. She works in social services and uses the internet for Google maps to get to her client's houses when traveling. In terms of worries about the internet, she is concerned about who her kids could encounter online. She worries about human trafficking, so she keeps certain settings on her devices so that she knows who is in contact with her children. During the pandemic, her children were learning remotely. They don't have issues using the internet now, but she felt that her daughter (who was in third grade at the beginning of the pandemic) could have been onboarded to the technology before having to use the computer for remote learning. Her daughter needed help turning the computer on and logging onto the platform for school, and support was

not provided to her. Her connectivity to the internet is good. She uses Comcast's Internet Essentials program as her internet provider since Verizon does not provide internet in her area. She spoke about her mother having to pay over \$100.00 for the internet even though she is on a fixed income, something she finds unfair. They have had connectivity problems within their home when they lived in Avalon and have had to purchase mini-mesh networks.

She also shared that the seniors with whom she works have been depressed and feel isolated because they're missing family interactions since the start of the pandemic. She feels the internet could help them completely connect with others if they had access to the technology and could understand it all. If the internet was an animal, she thinks it would be a killer whale, because it is a very friendly animal, but you can't underestimate it because it can kill a shark.

## Armstrong County - Redbank Valley Library

**Key Themes: Access-Poor & Unreliable Service; Affordability**

**DAWN**, as assistant librarian, sees many people that come to the library for internet access. They even sit outside after hours and use the service. The library gets free service from Comcast and has service from Windstream (that provides service anywhere there is a phone line). Communities throughout the region have unequal access. Windstream received a grant to upgrade facilities so selected one of the more rural areas in the county. Now, that area gets 50 Mbps download speeds where other areas, like Seminole, closer to the town get 2 Mbps.

Comcast offers service in the area, giving people a low rate for the first two years and then jacks it up to \$200-\$300/month and people can't afford that.

**MARY'S** husband works for Windstream and knows that there are areas with really poor service. He gets calls on his home number in the evening from people that know he works for Windstream to fix their service. It's gotten very corporate though. There must be a trouble ticket for anyone to get help.

**REBA'S** significant other enjoys playing video games online. Reba enjoys streaming shows online. There is not enough bandwidth to support both activities, and they must choose one or the other.

**BEVERLY** has multiple children in different grades with different curriculums. She must plan her busy schedule around homework, allowing children to use precious internet time after work because learning is more important than other internet needs. It would be great if parents and kids were able to work simultaneously.

**BRENDA** is located in an area that has limited fiber connections, but those connections only reach key institutions. She is left with the often-unreliable service that is supplied by the ISP, which is not sufficient. Being on the "end of the line", Brenda must rely heavily on expensive mobile data plans to compensate for the lack of coverage.



## Beaver County - Aliquippa

**Key Themes: Remote Learning; Gaming; Poor Connection; Safety**

**WALTER** accesses everything through his phone. He goes to the library to use the computer in order to limit the use of data on his phone. He watches YouTube videos and says that they use a lot of data. Using his phone to access too much is expensive to him. He has “good” service. He mainly accesses the internet from his phone for research and communications with friends, including emails. In the past, he used it for his business. He is concerned about cybercrime; he worries about theft of confidential information being collected by hackers. He has been hacked before and is concerned about “addiction to the internet.” He doesn’t have Wi-Fi at home and feels the internet is a “heck of a tool.”

**JASON** is a young business owner. He graduated last year and uses the internet to accomplish a lot. He has appliances in his home connected to the internet, including the lights in his room. Last year, he used the internet for asynchronous, remote learning as well. He accesses zoom meetings, and additional learning for his insurance certification online. If the internet was an animal, he shared that it would be a dog— “your friend, but it could turn on you.” He also does not think that Wi-Fi is a big need. He has Verizon as his internet provider in his home, and AT&T for mobile service.

**JOHN** is a mental health counselor. He doesn’t have the internet at home. He comes to the library to use the internet and has always used the libraries to access the internet in his work as a counselor. Since COVID, he has been performing telehealth work, speaking with families in their homes via counseling sessions online. He sees the internet as a way to access knowledge, like the trades. He is also an avid board game player and uses the internet to play chess online with others. Prior to COVID, he would attend a gaming convention every year. This past year, the entire convention was online. To participate, he would go to a private clinic (where he can work) in the region, where there was Wi-Fi, and watch others play games virtually. He has to get online to document his sessions with youth, and at times, the internet, specifically in Ambridge High School gives him trouble. One reason that he doesn’t have the internet in his home is because he thinks he would spend too much time on it. He did say that if the internet were \$20, he would purchase it for his home.

**DAVID** graduated high school in the Spring of 2021. He uses the internet for researching things, to play video games, and to access his classes. He has friends who live in Independence, PA where the internet does not work. They can’t use cell phones and have a hard time connecting to the internet. COVID has not changed the way he uses the internet. He said the internet and service is pretty good everywhere. He also feels that if he doesn’t have access to the internet, he will be ok, and find other ways to occupy his time.

## Beaver County - Darlington

**Key Themes: Remote Work; Remote Learning; Access-Poor & Unreliable Service; Affordability; Inequity**

**KRISTIN** is able to work from home often but finds that unreliable internet often gets in the way of a productive day. She sometimes takes her phone and/or computer out into an open farm field and sits there to take calls or do work, because sometimes the flat open area is the only place she can get a proper signal. Kristin needs Wi-Fi to be able to work and stay in contact with people she works with. Her coworkers in Ohio have much better service than she does, despite living in similar geographic areas, and Kristin noted how astonishing it is that local hi-speed internet is so far behind compared to our neighboring state.

**PATRICK AND STEPHANIE** consider themselves well-informed about internet services and options, yet are frustrated that so little is available to them. Until recently, there was only one provider available which meant no opportunity for consumers to compare prices and seek better deals. Patrick suggested that in his view, affordable hi-speed internet means under \$100 per month – a high cost that reflects how much beyond that he currently pays. Patrick has considered switching to another service provider that is new in the area, but the network is still incomplete and none of his neighbors use it, so he has no testimonials from anyone to guide his decision. Patrick and Stephanie recognize that beyond their own needs, many other people depend on the internet for basic daily functions and requirements: for example, many social services and county services are operated online with online applications and registrations now, so those without internet are locked out.

**ANNA** is a teacher and mom, who has seen firsthand the impact of digital learning on her students and within her own home. Her family's use of the internet has shifted in the past few years as her kids do schoolwork online, as well as watch TV and play games online for entertainment. When multiple people are online at the same time, service often becomes slow and unstable. Anna also shared that rates have changed without notice, so some months she gets unexpectedly higher bills. Anna lives in an area with limited service and relies on a land line phone as well to ensure she has communication available at home. When she goes shopping, she knows she'll be unreachable for a while because if she's shopping in Chippewa she is in a dead zone and may not receive messages sent during that time until days later. Anna goes to her mom's house when she needs reliable internet because despite paying for cell service, she knows she won't get it at her house.

**KELSEY** is an alternative education teacher. During the pandemic, she has seen her students struggle with internet service. While the district provided hot spots and laptop computers to all students who needed them, she still had students who had to knock on neighbors' doors to use their internet when the hot spots weren't cooperating, but they had to get online for school. These students are already facing barriers such as abuse, addiction or depression. Struggles to afford and/or connect to the internet could be the last barrier that leads them to dropping out of school or being held back a grade.

**RAYNA** is a full-time employee of a company that lets her work from home, provided her internet allows her to get her work done. It has been a huge help during the time of COVID to be able to work from home but is somewhat imperiled by internet outages. If her internet service slows down her work too much, she won't be able to continue benefiting from her employer's work from home policy. She drives to the office on some days to work there, especially when her home internet is insufficient for her job or she can't risk an outage occurring. Rayna appreciates that home internet lets her do her job more efficiently and safely, but the loss of work and connectivity during outages can be substantial. As more and more of her work and personal communications occur online, when outages occur, she loses access to all her contacts.

## Butler County

**Key Themes: Safety; Remote Learning - Wider Access; Poor Service**

**SUE** has a computer at home but uses the library computers for internet access to remain anonymous. She doesn't want to receive ads or have her information captured based on her internet history. She used the internet to work from home last year, and also to shop and find information. She didn't enjoy working from home, as it was too isolating, but she understood the benefit of having a remote option. She doesn't use social media. As a government contractor, she's concerned about using unsecured Wi-Fi networks; she worries about privacy, if her computer is used on a public network, she can be reprimanded. She said that if the internet was an animal, it would be a spider, due to the web and being connected with everything.

**SUSAN** said if the internet was an animal, it would be a goldfish because you can easily forget what you're looking for and become distracted. She believes the internet is amazing for finding information on anything. Her four-year-old son attended a preschool in NYC virtually. She thinks their children's socialization hasn't been negatively affected by virtual school. She and her husband both worked from home, using the internet last year. Her husband works for an internet provider (Armstrong), so they've been able to have free, reliable internet for years. She can't get fiber in her area; she thinks it's DSL. She admitted it's very expensive for those who have to pay for it. She would be willing to pay \$50/month for internet but shares that high-speed internet available through Armstrong is probably \$130/month—which is what her family needs while they are at home. Her family's internet is expensive—her parents stopped bundling phone, internet, and cable because their bill was nearly \$400/month. Since the pandemic, she has been ordering groceries online and doing curbside pickup, and she has no plans to shop in-store anytime soon.

**CHARLIE** has the internet at home but likes to go to the local library to stream because it works better than his home service. He uses the internet for entertainment, movies, and creates content for YouTube. He previously used the internet for telehealth visits. He has Armstrong internet service and rated it a 9.5. The 9.5 score is because storms can easily knock his service out. He is in charge of seven YouTube channels. \$150 would be affordable as a fee for the internet each month.

## Fayette County - Connellsville

**Key Themes: Remote Work; Affordability; Inequity; Remote Learning - Wider Access; Poor Service**

**MONTE** is a real estate agent who works from home in Connellsville and represents properties around the county. His internet is pretty good, and he is able to work efficiently from home, but the costs are quite high. Between cellular plan, home internet, and TV he pays around \$500 per month. He bundles several services so he's not sure exactly how much goes to each feature, but it adds up quickly. This also includes a hotspot that he uses for work and carries with him especially when he's working outside of home or visiting properties. The hotspot allows him to carry Wi-Fi with him, although even that is limited to where cell service is available. But he recognizes that some areas are being left behind and wonders what will happen to the children living in areas with poor service or households that simply can't afford the cost. As a real estate agent, Monte sees the impact of the pandemic on property trends. There is a huge shift away from extra/guest rooms and towards home offices, meaning that buyers are looking not only for an extra room but specifically for a room that is comfortable and accessible as

an office. Reliable internet is impacting where buyers choose to look and which areas they avoid. It's essential for flexible work locations and to attract and retain workers with the ability to work remotely. Buyers are requesting good infrastructure, including water, sewer, and broadband – all of which are lacking in many older homes and more readily available in new developments in adjacent counties. Monte sees that Fayette County is losing out on new buyers and missing out on attracting growth because buyers prefer the more advanced infrastructure and “ready” housing markets elsewhere. On a day-to-day basis, Monte also noted the lack of internet impedes showing some properties in the first place. The agency uses an app to unlock and access properties for showings, and when there is no signal the app can't be used. The only remedy is to call a phone number for support, but with no cell service making that phone call is also impossible.

**MINDY** works for her district's PA House representative. She has poor internet access at the office. Perryopolis and Mount Pleasant are only 1 mile away, but the ISP sees no benefit to extending service. Mindy hasn't seen a major shift in needs or requests during the pandemic, though they do offer online services and forms. Due to her office's slow connection, their own pages and portals are often slow to load. She finds that most often people call her office to seek help filling out forms rather than filling out online forms themselves. She or other staff members talk with their constituents and fill out online forms for them during the conversation. School struggled last year with internet access and the support they received from legislators such as Kristin Phillips and Pam Snyder was instrumental in getting funding directed to the area. Chromebooks and hot spots were given to families to support online learning, but that has largely been stopped as kids are back in school now. Mindy noted that in her role working for the government, having support from higher levels in government is critical since it's very hard to implement projects at the scale needed (and infrastructure always requires scale and is expensive) without substantial funding, which often only comes in a trickle.

## Fayette County - Germantown

**Key Themes:** Remote Work; Unreliable Service

**KATE** is a librarian. The library decreased from seven to three active computers due to the need for social distancing. Typically, they are all in use with patrons waiting. At Kate's home, she has Atlantic Broadband, but it keeps going up - \$53 a month just for internet with \$10 off for auto-pay and 20% discount for a year. She's not sure about other providers. Atlantic Broadband is one of the best. Kate uses the internet to pay bills and do internet searches.

**THOMAS** is a dairy farmer. Atlantic Broadband just came to the end of the road for the longest time and then finally this year it came to Thomas' house. He had Verizon before, but it was very slow and if it rained it went out. He uses the internet for work and his daughter's schoolwork and looking for recipes

## Greene County

**Key Themes:** Remote Learning; No Service Providers; Access-Poor & Unreliable Service; Affordability

**ANDY** is a mechanic who works on race cars. His shop does not have a good internet connection so he needs to take engines home to run computer diagnostics and download data before he can proceed with repairs. This creates undue time, effort and impacts to home life.

**AMY** is a teacher with one child who was obligated to use the internet during the pandemic. She teaches at a cyber school. Internet service doesn't reach her home because she lives in between two service providers. She has trouble completing basic job duties because she can't access the internet at her home. She uses her phone when she can and pays a monthly fee to access the local recreation center just so she can use the internet. She encourages her child to stay late at school just so she can access the internet.

**CAROLYN** is a former nurse, who is used to completing many of her tasks and case notes online. She has access to the internet, but tasks that should only take 15 minutes to complete, with the speed of her internet connection, can take 3 hours. She lives on a farm and feels pretty isolated because she can't access what she needs. She uses Verizon for cellular service, Windstream as her internet provider & Dish Network for cable. That runs her about \$300. She would like to bundle her services if she could and save some money. However, she doesn't mind paying for pricey internet service if it works.

**TONY** is an active and engaged citizen who attends many community meetings and shares with his representatives about the needs of his neighbors. He strongly believes that more Township and Borough supervisors of Greene County should be attending the conversations on connectivity. He feels this issue has been raised over and over again. He wants to see more competition between the internet providers.

**MELINDA** has been working with the local paper for over 15 years. She needs the internet to do her job. She has called Windstream several times when something needs to be fixed or repaired, however, the company can take up to two months to get back to her on needed repairs. She is frustrated.

**ANGEL** is angry about the cost of her service. She brought her phone bill to the meeting. She thinks her internet speed is terrible and that Windstream needs to display some truth when advertising. She pays \$109 a month for service.

**CARMEL** is a business owner that has questioned whether she should stay in Greene County because of her poor service. She often uses her phone as a backup for many of her virtual meetings. She tries not to stay on the meetings too long, however, as she is afraid that she will lose connection or that her service will time out.

## Indiana County

**Key Themes: Remote Learning; Lack of Providers; Access-Poor & Unreliable Service; No Service Providers**

**RACHEL**, a preschool teacher, said that in order to provide her students their virtual training, she had to record my videos for the week. She had to travel to the school parking lot to upload her videos for the children to view.

**KAREN** has three children at home and only one of them can be online at any given time. We can't use the video and audio for virtual meetings at the same time. My home is surrounded by Amish homes, so there is no market need in my location.



**PENNY** worked in the school district for 25 years. Every year, they did a Technology Report to determine how many children do not have access to the internet. The information has been there for years and not one has done anything about it. Students can't even explore career pathways because two miles from the school, there is no access.

**HELEN** takes online courses of interest and often has to yell to her husband "Hey you're not on the computer? She doesn't have good access." She really depends on the internet more than I thought I would when retired.

**CARRIE'S** husband's family has their own small business and paid a lot (\$12,000) to have access installed near their business. Not everyone has deep pockets to do that. Another wealthy neighbor could afford to put a receive on top of their house. Fortunately, they share it with their neighbors.

**SELMA** had six childcare facilities that decreased to two due to the lack of staff and the COVID. "I cannot submit my state-required paperwork (which takes 3-4 hours each week) because of a lack of access at my home office. When the state's certifier came to my house, he told me, 'it's easy to submit your paperwork.' When I asked him how he tried to get online at my home and realized it was not 'easy' He couldn't get access either. I finally had to resort to paying someone taking care of my taxes because of the difficulty in submitting them myself."

**JEFFREY'S** adult son and daughter moved back to the area. My daughter lives outside of Punxsutawney and battles with Verizon. My son lives in the town of Punxsutawney borough because he has to have a connection for his work. He'd rather live in a location with more property but cannot and still be able to do his work. Internet access determines real estate values in our region.

**ANITA** cares for her school-age grand-niece every Wednesday. Her niece has good internet access at home but not at Anita's house. It's hard to explain to the niece why it's not working the way she is accustomed.

## Lawrence County

**Key Themes:** Access-Poor & Unreliable Service; Affordability; Inequity

**GRACE** uses her brother's Wi-Fi to connect to the internet to look for work because she can't afford access or a hot spot. She must go to the library to submit job applications and upload required documents. Privacy of personal information is an issue, but she has no choice and has to take the risk.

**DEVON** has to move around to access the internet because it is often down at home and the speed varies depending on the time of day. He uses the library, McDonalds and Dunkin to access the internet. Some restaurants require him to buy a meal to use the space. Downloads speeds are slow there as well.

**MELANIE** works for the state and has a lot of problems connecting to the internet due her local connection and bandwidth problems. It is too expensive to have FIOS. Other cities offer free Wi-Fi as a benefit to taxpayers. Why can't we have that?

**JOANN** is managing a household with multiple children including one with special needs. The pandemic caused her special needs child to decline due to lack of access and unaffordable internet. She is forced to go to public library for school and personal business but have to wait for a computer and then worry about getting hacked.

**FONTANA** travels a great deal for work and needs a strong and secure connection to work remotely.

## Washington County

**Key Themes: Remote Learning; Lack of Service Providers; Access-Poor & Unreliable Service; Affordability; Inequity**

For **THERESA'S** family, the internet is life. During the pandemic, her children have been participating in virtual school. Her provider is Xfinity, and they have been extremely helpful during the pandemic - even crediting her account, so she hasn't paid for the internet in a while. She lives in the city, and with two of her children constantly playing video games and everyone on their phones, she hasn't had any trouble with her internet speed. If the internet were an animal, it would be a lion because it's fierce. Since the pandemic, many of her doctor appointments and meetings have gone virtual. While working from home, her boss was concerned about productivity, so she participated in an 8AM team meeting with her work every day. At 8:30 her boss's internet connection would lag because his kids were logging on to virtual school. One of her friends lives in Mariana and it's hard to video chat with her because the connection is bad.

**MARINA** thinks that if the internet were an animal, it would be a tiger, because it's very aggressive. She lives in Washington County, and frequently loses her internet connection due to wires being cut when the Housing Authority maintenance is cutting the grass - this happens frequently in warmer weather (it would be fixed quickly). Her son gets upset when there's no internet connection, because he enjoys playing learning games on his tablet and watching shows on TV. She also takes classes online, and it's much easier to have internet at home so she can do classes on her own time and not have to take her son with her to the library.

She utilizes Internet Essentials, as she learned that they will drastically reduce the cost of the internet for families with school-age children. She received notice from Internet Essentials that they were increasing their speeds, and she hasn't noticed any issues even though she has five televisions in her home that are frequently used. She stated that she doesn't pay her cell phone bill, because she can still utilize Xfinity through her phone and access the number of hotspots in her area- Xfinity has free coverage to any Xfinity hotspots. She's fortunate to have good connectivity because she struggles to pay her bills and relies on affordable internet. Since the pandemic, she has done more shopping online and has done virtual doctor appointments for her mental health.

**TREVOR** lives in Mariana, which is a very rural area. He owns a small law firm and is the town supervisor. The service at his home is fine, but there is no cell service on 90% of the roads in his area. It's impossible to make calls or get online if he is out of the house. It's a concern when there is an emergency, especially when there was a road closure due to an overturned truck and he couldn't communicate with everyone. His provider is Consolidated Communication - it's the only service available at his house. His television service is through AT&T. He's also aware that HughesNet is in other places. He said if the internet were an animal, it would be a Tasmanian devil. There are many low-income people in his community who can't afford bundles that can cost \$300, and he worries

for the children in those families that are missing out due to their inability to connect to the internet. Many people sit outside the library to use their internet. Many people in his area are forced to pay for landline and cell service, because they don't get cell service at their home. If people can afford to install internet in their home, it's good service, but if they are relying on their cell service it's terrible. He believes that the politicians in Greene County are doing a lot more than Washington County in terms of improving the internet service. He wishes there was a map online where he could see service providers and the areas they operate. When the pandemic first began, the town council meetings went virtual. The court system had a hard time at the beginning of the pandemic because they were never prompted to do many things online. However, the pandemic has allowed him to connect with friends and family all over the world on Zoom.

**KATHY'S** internet provider is Comcast, and the connection drops frequently. This is very frustrating, as she has a child who enjoys watching shows on a tablet. She only pays for the internet, as the internet/cable bundle is too expensive. Not much has changed with her relationship to the internet since the pandemic. She didn't know about internet essentials as an affordable option.

## Westmoreland County - Jeannette

**Key Themes:** Learning Curve for Seniors; Inequity; Job Search; Lack of Service Providers

**JACK**, a veteran and senior, said if the internet were an animal, it would be a cheetah or a rabbit, because it needs to be fast. He has Infinity internet service, which was \$60 a month but grew to \$200 before he downgraded from a bundle. Jack also uses the internet at the library. He believes the internet and computers are our future, so he bought himself a computer to learn how to use the internet. He considers his generation to be internet illiterate and wishes there would be more opportunities for senior citizens to learn how to use their computers and the internet. Jack watches the news a lot, and he heard that a lot of kids couldn't get connected at the start of the pandemic. After seeing a story about computerized classrooms in China, he believes our children and our country are falling behind. He very strongly believes that everyone should have adequate access to the internet.

**AVA**, a senior citizen, doesn't know much about the internet, but is trying to learn. For her, the internet became essential for everyday life during the start of the pandemic to access information, order groceries, and for telehealth appointments. She has many friends who rely on the internet to order groceries because they are unable to leave their homes. She expressed frustration that there were not many classes or ways for senior citizens to learn about the internet. The classes that are available (or used to be pre-pandemic) were expensive and usually at night when she didn't like to drive. She has tried to use the public transportation system to get to classes, but the bus schedule doesn't coincide with the class schedule. She said that the library used to offer internet classes for anyone who wanted to learn how to use the internet - she was hopeful these classes would resume due to the pandemic and more people needing to use the internet. She emphasized the importance of affordable internet access for everyone and thinks internet prices should be on a sliding scale.

**KARA** thinks that if the internet were an animal, it would be a rabbit due to its erratic nature. She wonders if it's inequitable for some people to not have access to the internet.

**LYNN** said the internet is most like a cheetah - it's everywhere and it's fast. Most of her internet experience relates to her work with the library. The county recently extended the library's broadband, so it can reach outside the building. This change was prompted by the pandemic. She has noticed a lot of people in the parking lot, accessing the library's internet on their phones. Lynn said there used to be internet classes offered at the library but were discontinued because of lack of interest. She said that perhaps the library would resume the classes if they knew there was a demand for them. She also knew of a six-week program that gave computers to participants, if they finished the entire six weeks. She was unsure who offered the program.

**HARRY** lives in Penn Township, and mainly uses the internet for streaming. He is currently looking for a job, so internet access has been very important to him. He also had his license suspended during the pandemic, and he thinks Telehealth visits would be really convenient for him if his internet access was stable enough. He relies on his cell phone a lot for internet access, but it sometimes drops from 4G coverage to 2G coverage, which slows everything down and is frustrating. He has Simple Mobile and pays about \$50-60 a month for unlimited service. Harry heard that QLink was sending SIM cards to their customers, which are useless without phones – he believed the same company was also offering free internet at one point. He also understood that Comcast was offering internet for \$10 a month to anyone with an EBT card. He expressed frustration with good quality internet for a good price.

**DARLENE** stated that if the internet were an animal, it would be an octopus because its arms reach everywhere, but you can get wrapped up. She started doing computer classes in second grade, so she feels pretty savvy. She has been teaching grandparents, who can become easily frustrated with trying to learn something new. She was afraid her grandparents were scammed when they bundled Comcast TV and internet because of a security and installation price that they were unaware of. She recently bought Comcast internet, which cost \$58 a month for one terabyte. Unlimited access is an extra \$30. The price was concerning for her, as she thought of entire families who would go through their data too quickly. She also expressed concern for children trying to do virtual school with parents who aren't knowledgeable about the internet..

**JIM AND SHELLY** enjoy living in the country, but the lack of internet service is frustrating. They currently use their cell phones for internet service, and they had to buy two plans through Consumer Cellular and AT&T even though the connection is still slow, limited, and unreliable. Through their search for internet access, they learned that Consumer Cellular LTE offers unlimited data, but it's actually limited to 35 gigabytes. AT&T offers 4G, but it's not very good in their area and they require their customers to buy 100 gigabytes at a time. They expressed concern that internet companies didn't see value in supplying access to rural communities, which results in them being left behind. Many of the companies around them (Armstrong was named) stated that there has to be a certain number of houses within a certain radius for them to install. There is access a mile down the road from their house and at a friend's house, which is even more remote than theirs. They feel frustrated because of their lack of access. Sometimes, Jim goes to Starbucks, 15 minutes from his home to access his email, and download any updates for his phone.

## Westmoreland County - Greensburg

**Key Themes: Safety; Remote Work; Remote Education; Inequity**

**CARLY**, an accountant, believes that if the internet were an animal, she thinks it would be an octopus – a main hub with different paths. She mainly uses the internet through her phone hotspot, even though it uses a lot of battery. Her cell phone provider is Verizon, and they recently doubled their data for the same price. The hotspot works for her needs, as she mainly uses the internet to shop, date, and look up information. Privacy is a concern, but she understands that complete privacy online is probably not possible. She has several credit cards saved at different online retailers, and so far, they have all been safe. She also keeps a sticker on her camera when it's not in use. When the pandemic began, she worked from home. She has returned to in-person work at her office, and her employer uses Comcast internet.

She thinks a reasonable monthly price for the internet would be \$10, and free for rural areas or people who can't afford it.

**CECELIA** is a former teacher who has taught both virtually and in-person since the pandemic began. Her partner is in school. She agrees that privacy is a concern, but she still uses PayPal even though it's not completely trustworthy. She keeps a sticker on her camera when it is not in use. She doesn't particularly enjoy using her personal devices for virtual meetings, as one Zoom meeting can drain half her cell phone battery if it's not plugged in. She uses the internet at work, and at White Rabbit Coffee Shop. During the pandemic, she has taught online and in-person simultaneously with 15 five-year olds with five different curricula. She used Owl to record herself, which is a device that tracks a person as they move around the room. She also used Seesaw to do activities online as well as grading. She said the virtual students had a hard time interacting virtually. As a teacher, she saw a clear inequity when it came to virtual learning; entire families were attempting to share devices for virtual school, and it was too much for their internet. Her school provided all students with iPads, and if they hadn't, it would have been a horrible experience. The school administration reached out to families that didn't have internet access, and some families had to utilize a learning center for access. She believes we are in a technological boom, like with the introduction of print, and individuals who don't have access are falling behind and creating a large digital divide. She thinks a reasonable price for internet that can be accessible to everyone is \$10 a month.





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# COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Connecting Families  
to High-Speed Internet

PREPARED BY

**Michael Baker**

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