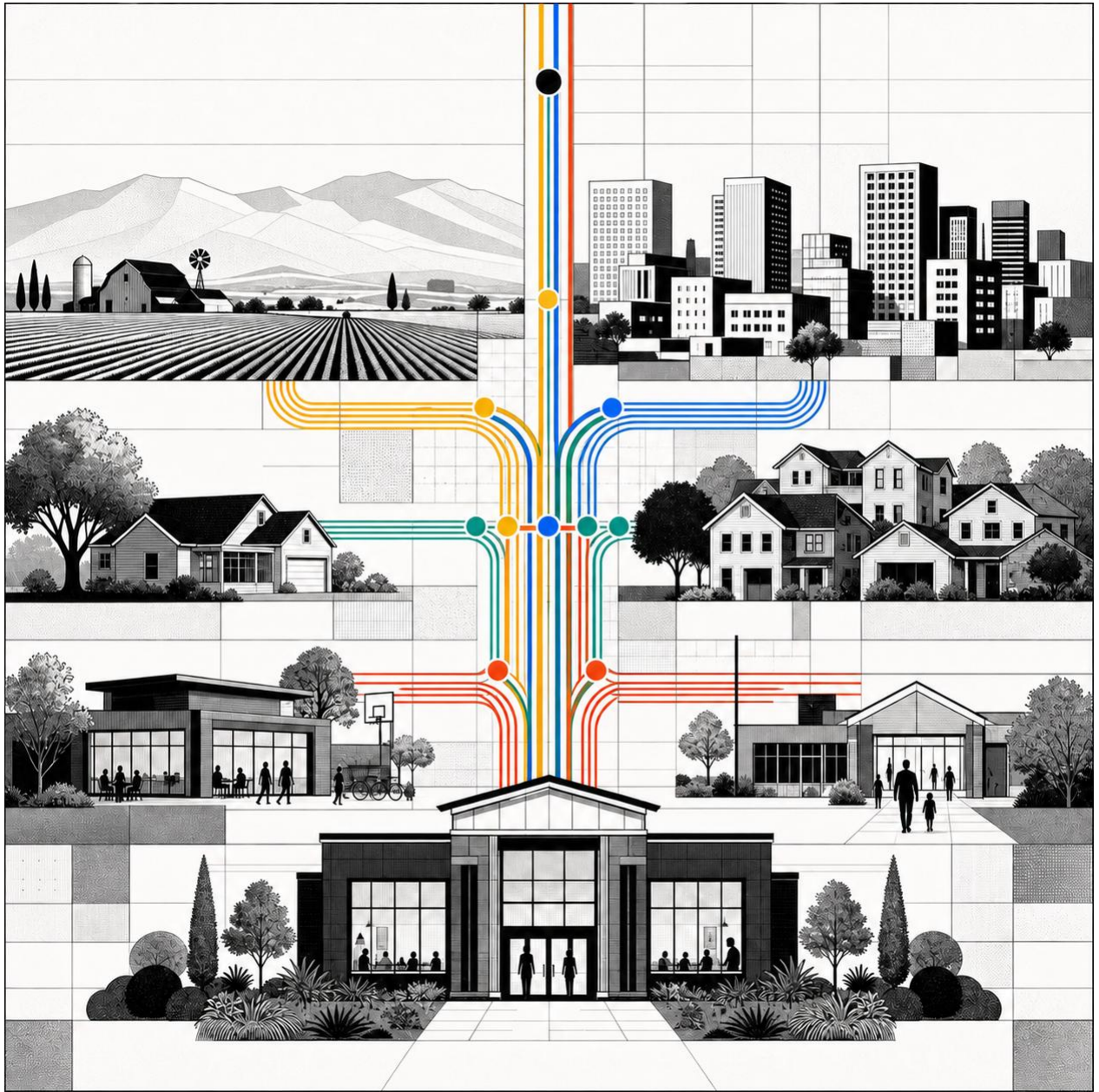


POLICY BRIEF

Closing the Digital Divide in Fresno County:

Why Broadband Infrastructure Is Not Enough



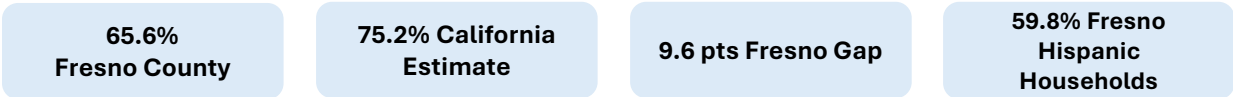
Oliver Lopez | Central Valley Community Foundation Intern | 2026

Executive Summary

Fresno County needs a coordinated strategy that addresses the full set of barriers households face: service availability, affordability, device access, digital literacy, and hands-on support from trusted community partners.

Broadband access is now essential for education, employment, healthcare access, public benefits access, and participation in the local economy (Junod et al., 2025). Yet Fresno County continues to fall behind the state in household digital access. According to the Digital Access metric in the Fresno Mobility Metrics Data Dashboard (2023), 65.6 percent of Fresno County households had both an internet-capable device (a computer or tablet) and a home broadband subscription, compared with 75.2 percent statewide, a gap of 9.6 percentage points. Access was even lower among Hispanic households, at 59.8 percent.

These figures suggest that Fresno County's digital divide is a complex issue that will require solutions targeting not just infrastructure, but also affordability, device access, and digital literacy. This mirrors national research: a systematic review of over 100 empirical studies found that socioeconomic factors like income and education often explain more of the broadband adoption gap than infrastructure availability, and that infrastructure-only policies have shown limited success in closing digital divides (Mack et al., 2024). International evidence reinforces this point: a difference-in-differences study using 42,500 rural Chinese observations found that broadband construction improved reported well-being, but benefits were larger for higher-income households, underscoring the need to pair buildout with affordability support (Hu et al., 2024). This policy brief assesses digital access barriers across the Central Valley and proposes evidence-based solutions drawn from other regions.



Share of households with a computer and broadband internet subscription in the home

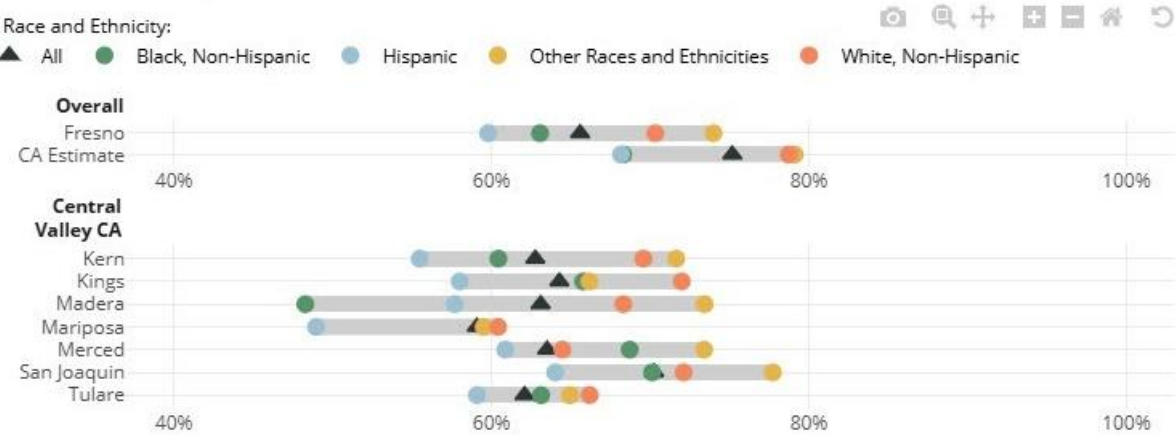


Figure 1. Figure 1. Household digital access by race and ethnicity in Fresno County, compared with the California estimate and neighboring Central Valley counties (Fresno Mobility Metrics Data Dashboard, 2023).

Strategic Thesis: Fresno Needs a Coordinated Digital Inclusion Strategy

Fresno County should align DRIVE investment and program support, available public funding, and local partner networks around one practical goal: help households connect, afford service, access an internet-capable device, build digital literacy, stay safe online, and use technology effectively (Junod et al., 2025).

Infrastructure still matters

Reliable service remains essential, especially in rural and lower-density areas, where coverage is harder to achieve. Carter (2024) identifies fragmented federal, state, and local permitting as a source of additional time and cost, underscoring the need for predictable interagency coordination as projects move from funding to construction.

Availability does not guarantee adoption

Households may remain offline when service is too expensive, enrollment is difficult, or they lack an internet-capable device.

Skills and community support sustain use

Residents may need practical training, help avoiding scams, privacy and security guidance, and hands-on support from trusted community partners to use new digital tools.

The goal is effective use

The value of connectivity is realized when residents can use it for education, employment, healthcare access, public benefits access, business, and civic engagement.

Fresno Trails California in Household Digital Access

The Fresno Mobility Metrics Data Dashboard counts a household as digitally connected only when it has both an in-home broadband subscription and a desktop, laptop, notebook, or tablet. Smartphone-only access and service delivered only through satellite, dial-up, or a cellular data plan do not qualify as digitally connected. The data come from the 2019–2023 American Community Survey PUMS, processed through IPUMS and the Missouri Census Data Center’s Geocorr 2022 tool.

Hispanic Households with Access to a Computer and Broadband

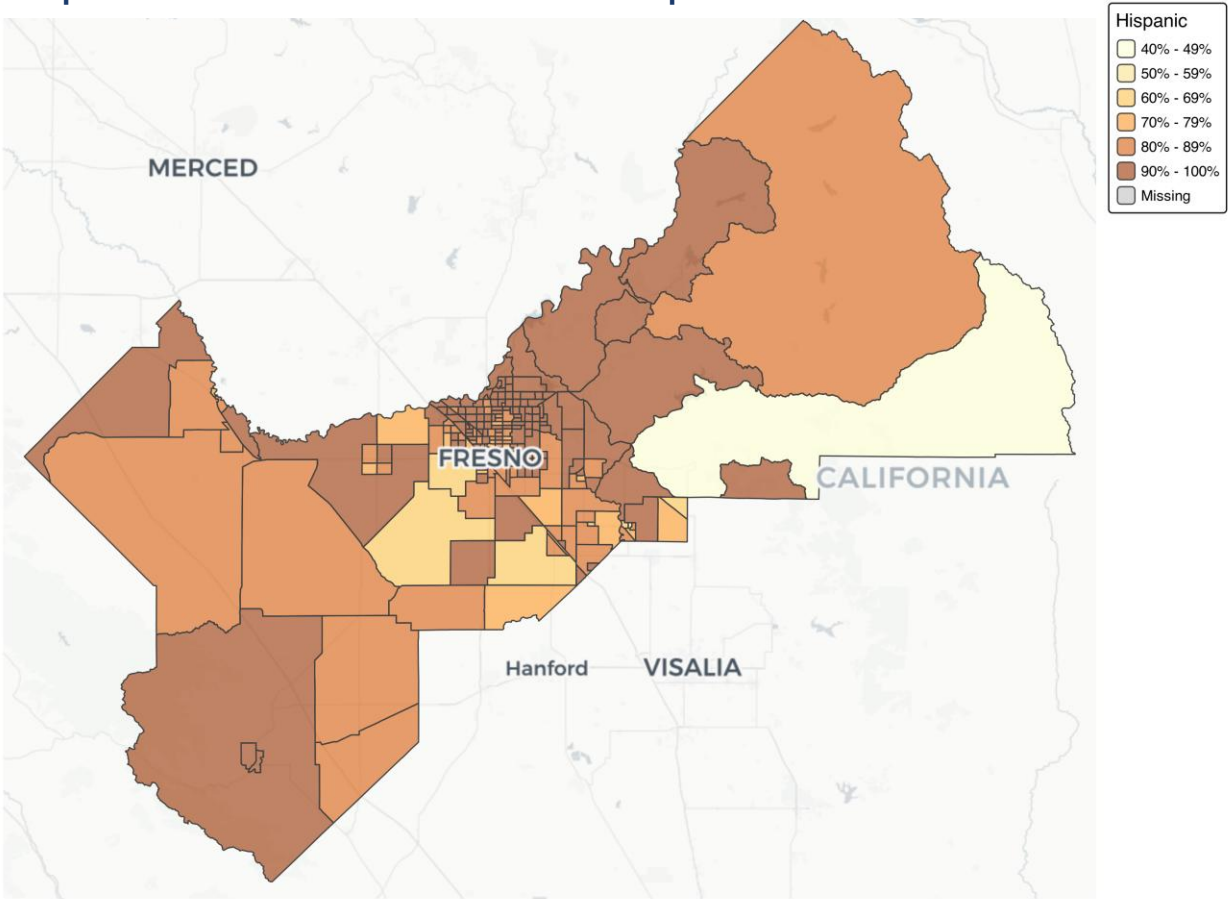


Figure 2. (Above) Household digital access among Hispanic residents by census tract across Fresno and neighboring Central Valley counties, compared with the California statewide estimate (Fresno Mobility Metrics Data Dashboard,

65.6% Fresno County Overall	75.2% California Statewide Estimate	59.8% Fresno County Hispanic	70.3% Fresno County (White), non-Hispanic
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Key Analytic Takeaways

Why targeted action is needed

The gap between Fresno Hispanic and White, non-Hispanic households shows that there are barriers and factors disproportionately impacting Hispanic households that should be investigated in order to address this disparity.

Why regional coordination makes sense

Several Central Valley counties report similar access rates and racial disparities, creating an opportunity to share tools, funding strategies, and program models.

What the measure shows

A household can remain digitally excluded even when a network is nearby if it lacks either home service or an internet-capable device.

Why Households Remain Disconnected

The Urban Institute's five-pillar framework helps explain why. Households need reliable infrastructure, an affordable subscription, an internet-capable device, practical digital literacy, confidence using online services, and support navigating privacy, security, and misinformation. The framework organizes these needs into five areas — develop infrastructure, get connected, learn digital literacy, navigate safely, and use effectively — which map onto the four barriers below: infrastructure availability, affordability and adoption, device access, and digital literacy and trust (Junod et al., 2025).

The Operational Pillars

Develop Infrastructure

Expand reliable service in the Fresno County census tracts with the lowest digital access, particularly those where Hispanic household access falls below 70 percent and coverage or performance remains inadequate (Central Valley Community Foundation, 2026, Maps tab).

Get Connected

Address subscription cost, enrollment, adoption, and device barriers.

Learn Skills

Provide practical, culturally relevant training that builds confidence.

Navigate Safely

Help residents manage privacy, cybersecurity, misinformation, and AI-related risks.

Use Effectively

Support residents in using technology for school, employment, health services and civic engagement.

Why Trusted Support Matters

Access alone does not guarantee that residents can use the internet confidently or safely. Misinformation, uneven digital literacy, technology barriers, motivation, and AI-driven content systems are common challenges (Yu et al., 2024). Digital Opportunity Centers provide equipment, internet access, and training. Evidence suggests that trusted local support can reduce computer anxiety and build confidence (Chao & Yu, 2016).

Strategic Roadmap: Four Priorities for Fresno

Priority	Barriers	Recommended Fresno Action	Why it Matters
1. Prioritize unserved and unreliable areas	Infrastructure Availability	Use tract-level data to target Fresno County communities with limited service, especially where Hispanic household access falls below 70 percent (see Figure 2, Maps tab). Coordinate design, funding, outreach, and permitting across local, state, and federal jurisdictions (Carter, 2024; Fresno Mobility Metrics Data Dashboard [Maps tab], 2023)	Directs infrastructure funding to the places with the clearest gaps, particularly for Hispanic households, while reducing avoidable delays between award and construction.
2. Expand affordability and enrollment support	Affordability and Adoption	Include low-cost plan enrollment, benefits screening (checking eligibility for programs such as Lifeline and other assistance that offsets connectivity costs), multilingual outreach, and retention support in every infrastructure and device program	Helps households turn available service into a stable home connection. Comparative evidence from rural China found that the well-being gains associated with broadband construction were larger at higher incomes, reinforcing the need for low-cost access and enrollment support for lower-income households (Hu et al., 2024).
3. Improve device access and support	Device Access	Provide low-cost or loaned laptops and tablets, along with repair, replacement, technical support, and accessible-device options.	Reduces dependence on smartphones and gives residents the tools needed for school, employment, healthcare, and public services.
4. Build Digital Opportunity Hubs and navigator services	Digital literacy and Trust	Use libraries, schools, colleges, housing sites, and community organizations as trusted locations for multilingual training, technical assistance, cybersecurity, AI literacy, and service navigation.	Creates a clear local entry point for residents who need hands-on help and ongoing support.

Funding Principles & Near-Term Opportunities

Use Public Funding Carefully	Near-Term Funding Opportunity
The Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF) case study found that an auction-based approach reduced subsidy spending on rural broadband deployment compared with initial engineering-cost estimates (cost projections made before construction begins based on materials, labor, and terrain). For Fresno, the practical lesson is to track the public cost per household connected, not just the total amount awarded, alongside project completion, adoption, reliability, and resident outcomes (Núñez, 2025). A systematic review found mixed results across rural broadband policy evaluations and emphasized the importance of understanding program incentives, further supporting an outcome-focused approach (Mack et al., 2024).	In June 2026, the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) approved infrastructure, regional planning, device, and digital-literacy grants, including \$50,000 for a Fresno County parent and caregiver project and \$50,000 for Central Valley adult digital-skills training. This type of funding could support the programs recommended under Priorities 1–4. (CPUC, 2026).

Proposed Partner Network

Central Valley Community Foundation	Fresno Coalition for Digital Inclusion	Fresno Housing / GetConnected Fresno	United Way Fresno & Madera Counties + CBOs
Fresno State and Fresno Pacific Universities	Fresno County Libraries & Schools	San Joaquin Valley Regional Broadband Consortium	Merced & Neighboring Central Valley Partners
Comcast (Project UP)	PIQE (Parent Institute for Quality Education)	Central California Legal Services (CBO)	FRESNO EOC (CBO)



Real-World Implementation Examples

Public infrastructure, private delivery partners, and trusted nonprofits each address a different part of the digital divide.

Business Name	Business Type	Coalition	Results
Fresno Housing / Sequoia Courts Network	Public-private nonprofit partnership	Fresno Housing (owns/maintains network), Fresno Coalition for Digital Inclusion (FCDI), United Way Fresno & Madera Counties, Central Valley Community Foundation (CVCF). A \$471,000 grant (CPUC Digital Divide Grant Program plus California Advanced Services Fund), ~\$1,000/unit build cost, enterprise-grade wireless mesh network, >100 Mbps down/20 Mbps up.	More than 350 residents connected at no cost, 160+ school-age children gained access, ~\$80/month saved per household. Source: Community Networks / ILSR, June 2026.
Pro: free to residents, publicly owned. Con: grant-funded, capital-intensive, site-specific unless replicated.			
B3 Broadband / Community Broadband Initiative (CBI)	Public-private partnership	Anthony Bailey's CBI program (Bailey Inc. Foundation) pairs public agencies and private ISPs to offer discounted internet to small businesses, nonprofits, and residents. The program uses Taranan gFWA wireless technology and supports a broadband launch near Sequoia Courts.	Results to be determined; coalition work is in progress
Pro: leverages existing private infrastructure, fast to deploy. Con: depends on one company's continued participation and pricing.			
Fresno EOC Access to Technology	Nonprofit initiative	Free, multilingual digital literacy classes all ages (smartphones, computers, tablets, safe internet use). Run by Fresno EOC, one of the largest Community Action Agencies in the U.S.	Results to be determined; coalition work is in-progress
Pro: directly addresses the digital literacy pillar and provides ongoing, free support. Con: does not address infrastructure or affordability by itself.			

Key Implementation Risks & Mitigations

Identified Risk	Mitigation Strategy
1. Measuring Only Coverage	Track active home subscriptions, device access, and digital literacy program participation, not just infrastructure built.
2. Short-Term Funding Gaps	Require a recurring funding and sustainability plan before scaling any pilot program.
3. Low Trust / Participation	Embed multilingual navigators within familiar, trusted community sites (libraries, housing, CBOs).
4. Privacy & Safety Concerns	Integrate cybersecurity, misinformation defense, and AI literacy directly into all literacy courses.

Human Impact, Next Steps & Conclusion

A Fresno Example

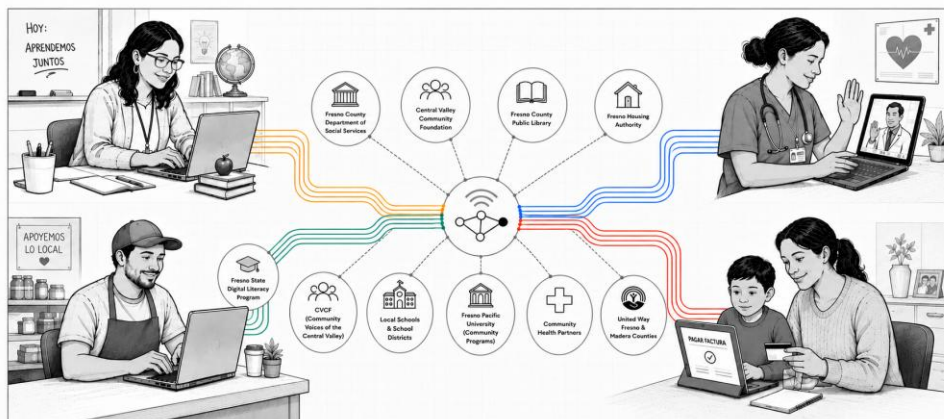
Vadi's profile of Fresno resident Vinson Fernandez shows how local web-development training and a paid apprenticeship can improve a family's economic prospects. His experience is illustrative rather than representative, and it also shows how gains can remain fragile as housing and living costs rise (Vadi, 2021).

Recommended Next Steps

Fresno County has the data, local partnerships, and community institutions needed to become a model for digital inclusion. Local leadership should immediately convene key partners to execute this roadmap. Immediate next steps include:

- Convene the proposed partner network CVCF, FCDI, Fresno Housing, United Way, county libraries and schools, Fresno State and Fresno Pacific Universities to formally launch the coordinated strategy.
- Apply for the near-term CPUC digital-equity grants.
- Use tract-level dashboard data to prioritize infrastructure investment in census tracts where Hispanic household access falls below 70 percent
- Pilot a Digital Opportunity Hub at one trusted site, such as a library or housing location, that integrates enrollment support, device access, and digital literacy training in one place.
- Establish shared outcome metrics for active subscriptions, device access, and digital literacy participation across all partners so progress can be tracked consistently.

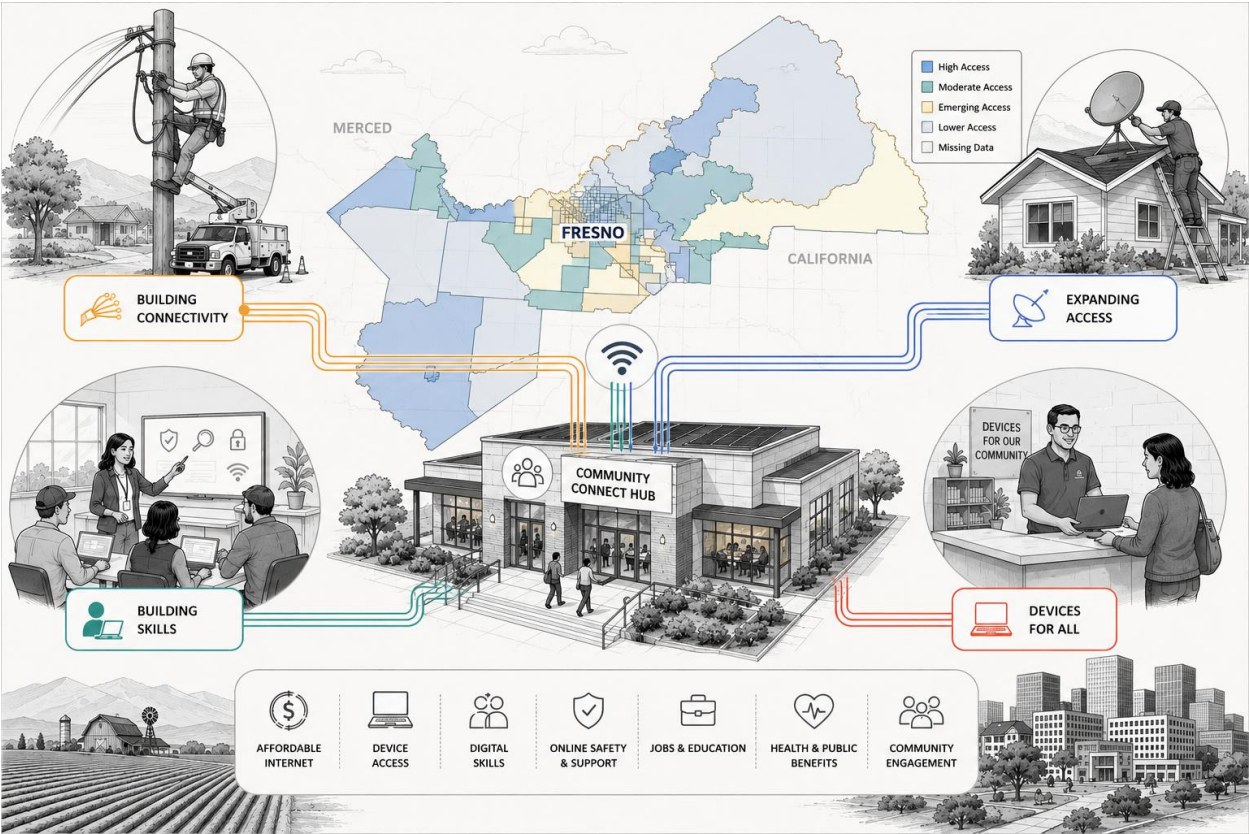
Success should ultimately be judged not by linear feet of fiber laid, but by narrower access gaps and measurable improvements in education, employment, healthcare access, public benefits access, and civic engagement across Fresno County.



The Path Ahead

Building internet lines is an important first step, but cables and cell towers alone will not fix Fresno County’s digital divide. Having fast internet nearby does not help a family if they cannot afford the monthly bill, do not own a working computer or tablet, or feel unsure about how to navigate the internet safely.

To close Fresno County’s 9.6-percentage-point gap relative to the California estimate and the 10.5-point gap between White, non-Hispanic and Hispanic households, the county must address more than infrastructure. National research finds that income and other socioeconomic factors explain more of the broadband adoption gap than infrastructure alone, and that lower-income households gain less from connectivity without affordability support (Mack et al., 2024; Hu et al., 2024). Fresno should pair infrastructure investment with affordability and enrollment support while collecting local data to identify which barriers most affect Hispanic households.



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