EQUITY 'N POLICY
TRAINING INSTITUTE
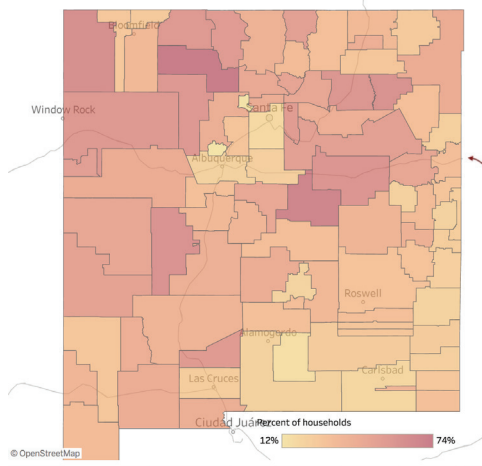### Equity. Evidence. Engagement.

Closing the Digital Divide and Advancing Health Equity in the Border Colonias

KEY MESSAGES

THE PROBLEM

› **The lack of access to broad-band is a structural determinant of health that impacts education, access to health care, employment, financial well-being and social inclusion in the New Mexico-Mexico border region, especially in the colonias communities.**

- ***Colonias** along the United States–Mexico border region suffer from some of the greatest digital divides in the country, as well as some of the gravest health inequities.

- About one-half of Doña Ana County's population resides in the 37 colonias and the surrounding rural areas.

- Limited broadband infrastructure prevents the region from using telehealth widely to improve health outcomes.

- Within Doña Ana County, colonias residents continue to be less likely to have access to affordable broadband. Rural families and communities struggle the most, especially in Berino, Chamberino, La Mesa, Mesilla Park, Mesquite, San Miguel, Vado, and outer edges of Chaparral. Here, there are very limited options for internet service and the options that are available are usually priced too high to be affordable.

- About 66,200 (21%) of students in public schools live in a household without internet access:

  - In Dona Ana County 54% of households in the Hatch Valley Public School District have no internet subscriptions.

  - In the Gadsden, Independent School district up to 41% of households have no internet subscriptions, and within some census tracts it is as high as 56%.

› **The COVID-19 pandemic has created additional barriers from the digital divide, leaving generations of families and entire areas of southern New Mexico in a chronic state of economic, social and educational hardship.**

- Community members have expressed concerns about needs and challenges they are encountering with internet access now that essential services such as schools, social service agencies, and clinics have limited access.

Percent of households with no internet subscription by New Mexico school district

Impact of the Digital Divide on Border Communities

College Student in Radium Springs, NM
"When the college campus in Las Cruces closed in March, I still had school work to do. So, I went to the community center but it was closed. So, I would sit outside the center to access the internet to study and finish my school work. A couple of times I was approached by the border patrol and sheriff deputy as to what I was doing outside the center…"

Working Aunt in Butterfield, NM
"I take care of my 4 nieces and nephews in elementary school because their father, my brother is in jail and their mother left them to start another family. They live with me in the colonia of Butterfield. One of the biggest issues I encountered was that my personal Wi-Fi was too slow. We have 4 laptops for each kid's online class, I have my personal and work computer; 3 cell phones, my personal phone, my work phone, and the kids cell."

POLICY CONTEXT

Clusters of unserved areas within Doña Ana County colonias have been identified in the State of New Mexico's 2020 Broadband Strategic Plan as high priority. Areas where service is not yet offered but where existing infrastructure might be expanded to better meet the growing need are named in the plan. Efforts to narrow this digital divide, known as digital inclusion, will be essential in order to achieve any sustainable gains in health outcomes. Over the long-term, digital inclusion may also help create pathways out of poverty and ensure the region makes a complete economic recovery post COVID 19.

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The State of New Mexico's DoIT started addressing broadband challenges in 2009 and 2010 using federal funds awarded under the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act. Since 2015, state and federal investments totaling over $300 million have succeeded in connecting schools, hospitals, and other institutions, but the costs of infrastructure are high and many rural areas remain unserved. During the COVID 19 pandemic efforts to increase connectivity in the public and private sector have accelerated and there is heightened attention by state and federal policymakers on the problem. The majority of recent funding to New Mexico for broadband is federal, including through the CARES Act, serving to bridge the student digital divide by supporting the Public Education Department's Broadband for Student's Initiative in close collaboration with NM internet service providers. NM DoIT announced a $2 million federal EDA CARES Act grant for broadband project feasibility and advanced technical planning services. By leveraging federal E-Rate funds, New Mexico has dramatically improved connectivity to public schools throughout in a short period whereby now all school districts in NM have broadband connections. New statewide public safety wireless capabilities have been pioneered by leveraging federal public safety broadband funding.

According to the NM Legislative Finance Committee, piecemeal implementation of broadband initiatives has led to inconsistent outcomes and persistent obstacles. However, steps to improve broadband connectivity statewide continue and have yielded some success. These efforts have ramped up during the COVID 19 pandemic. Yet, new stakeholders are also becoming engaged. Business and industry associations are advocating for statewide broadband policies and resources and the philanthropic and not-for-profit organizations are mobilizing around the need to align resources and invest funding and become more active partners at the state and local levels in order to expand access to broadband. Dona Ana County government is actively working to pursue funding for a county-wide BB feasibility study and has signaled its intention to engage with regional stakeholders to collaboratively address the county's specific broadband challenges.

POLICY OPTIONS

Option 1: **Pilot a Colonias Homework Gap Project grounded in the concept of digital equity and inclusion that increases household connectivity and boosts the digital literacy skills of families and students.**

Option 2: **Make broadband more accessible and affordable by developing public-private partnerships in clusters of unserved areas within Dona Ana County that are primed for fiber to the home projects.** These clustered groups of homes are the most attractive and cost-effective areas for providers to offer new or expanded service. These areas are often outside cities and towns that have service (and thus where existing providers might expand their existing infrastructure). (NM BB Plan)

Option 3: **Fund a county-wide broadband feasibility study with digital equity at its core that identifies concrete engineering and design solutions for connecting Dona Ana County colonias with high speed internet and short, medium and long-term strategies.**

ADDITIONAL POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Strategic intersectoral and multi-jurisdictional government responses are needed as well as public-private investments.
While many actions are being taken, the input of communities are not part of the design or development of policies. So, it is critical to Establish Community Task Forces in unserved and underserved areas to help shape innovative models of infrastructure delivery and future state policies and to support sustainable adoption. Finally, policy makers at all levels have the power to: incentivize build-outs of private networks to connect difficult-to-reach places or encourage government to support publicly owned broadband networks, or what are commonly called "muni networks"; and encourage the public sector to operate equipment purchase or leasing programs.

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*NOTE: Colonias are communities on the U.S side of the international border with Mexico that have been formally designated as lacking critical infrastructure and services such as potable water supplies, sewage systems, and decent, safe, sanitary housing, and more recently, broadband.

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