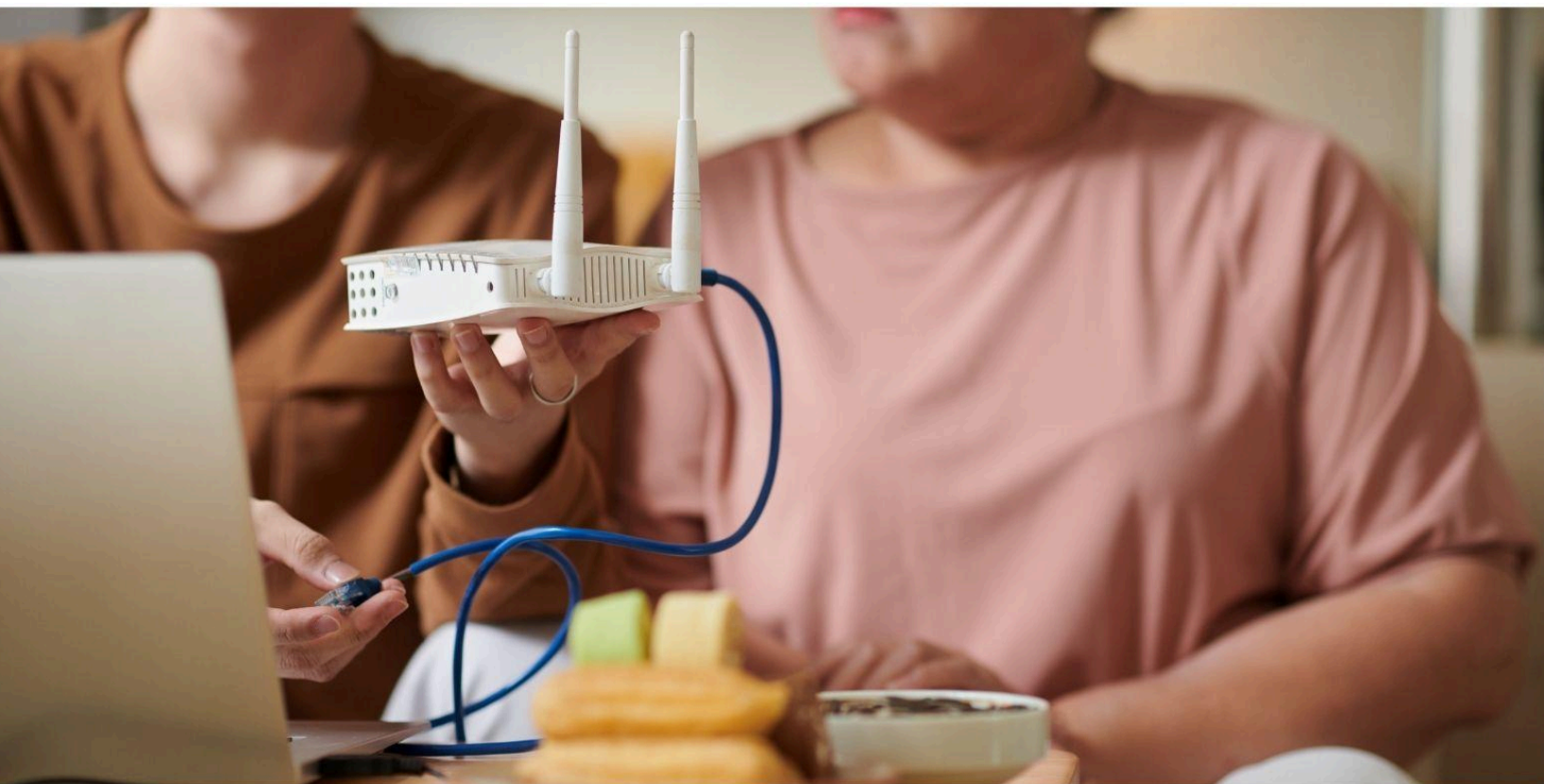


A series from the **Alternative Funding Innovation Lab**

Alt Funding Field Guide

Building sustainable funding
for digital adoption



Telecommunications

By Doug Dawson, Brian Rathbone, Samantha Schartman & Jeff Sural

The **Alt Funding Field Guide** is a series of publications produced by Connect Humanity's Alternative Funding Innovation Lab. It makes the case that digital inclusion programs create economic value across multiple sectors, and sets out how those sectors can co-invest to sustain the work.

This sector guide examines how telecommunications providers, infrastructure owners, and public broadband programs can partner to co-invest in digital inclusion. It is part of a series of sector briefs, anchored by a framework that sets out the financial logic the series is built on.

All chapters can be found at connecthumanity.fund/alt-funding-guide/

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Introduction

The telecommunications sector includes the companies and institutions that build, operate, lease, regulate, or support the networks and services used to transmit voice, data, and internet traffic, including wireless, fiber, satellite, and related communications infrastructure. This includes retail internet service providers, wholesale and middle-mile operators, spectrum and tower owners, resellers, and other entities involved in delivering digital connectivity to end users.

While few network owners have actively invested in digital inclusion initiatives, their businesses are ultimately dependent on successful digital adoption. Subscriber growth, customer retention, and successful use of service are integral to financial performance across the sector. Service affordability, effective onboarding, technical support, and digital skills development all create real economic value for telecommunications providers and their partners. That makes digital inclusion less a charitable concern for this sector than a business imperative. That alignment is real, but it does not translate automatically into financial support. How accessible these partnerships are, and how much they can yield, depends on local market conditions, provider type, and community context. Readers should approach the strategies in this chapter as a menu of possibilities to assess against their own circumstances, not a uniform playbook.

This chapter presents a set of practical pathways for partnership with sector stakeholders. It examines how operators can support digital inclusion through strategic investments and partnerships, and outlines where each of these approaches has its limits. While these models work well to support affordability, enrollment support, and customer onboarding, the scale of programs and their related partnerships plays a large role in determining the revenue-sharing opportunities available through these models and should inform community technology program design and expected returns.

Section 1. The telecommunications landscape

Telecommunications providers function through a set of interconnected layers that interact with end users in varying ways. Some sell services directly to households, businesses, and institutions. Others provide transport, infrastructure, spectrum, access rights, or regulatory conditions that make those services possible. For community digital skills organizations, the most useful starting point is understanding the key players and why each of them has a stake in whether people can get online, stay connected, and meaningfully use digital tools.

Last-mile providers

These internet service providers (ISPs) are the retail companies most people think of as their internet or mobile provider. They deliver broadband or cell service directly to households, businesses, and institutions, with revenues typically coming from monthly service charges, equipment fees, enterprise contracts, and, in some cases, public subsidy programs. Because they manage the direct customer relationship, they are the most visible part of the sector and are often the most sensitive to subscriber growth, retention, and service satisfaction. That makes them the stakeholders with the clearest direct interest in affordability, enrollment support, and onboarding: anything that helps households get connected and stay connected improves their bottom line.

Wholesale and middle-mile providers

If the last mile ISPs are the retailers, these operators are the wholesale backbone that carry traffic between local access networks, anchor institutions, internet exchange points, and other core infrastructure. They may lease dark fiber, sell transport, or provide backhaul that supports retail service delivery. They rarely have a direct relationship with end users, but they shape the economics of connectivity — determining network cost, reach, and capacity in ways that affect what retail providers can offer. Where these networks are publicly financed or mission-oriented, strong digital adoption helps demonstrate public value and connect infrastructure investment to visible community outcomes.

Infrastructure and asset owners

The sector includes tower companies, pole owners, utilities, rights-of-way authorities, local governments, and others that control the physical assets that networks are built on. Towers, poles, conduits, rights-of-way, rooftops, fiber routes, data centers, and licensed spectrum all shape how and where service can be deployed. These owners are rarely direct funders of digital skills programming, but they influence the cost, speed, and feasibility of network expansion. Crucially, where communities or public-interest institutions control key assets, that control can become leverage for negotiating affordability commitments or other community benefits.

Spectrum holders, resellers, and MVNOs

A broader set of intermediaries and public actors also influences how telecommunications functions. Spectrum holders, resellers, and [mobile virtual network operators](#) (MVNOs) occupy an important part of the ecosystem, ranging from entities connected to legacy spectrum arrangements such as the [Educational Broadband Service](#), to organizations that use wholesale access to create lower-cost or mission-aligned service models. Rather than building and maintaining their own network infrastructure, MVNOs lease wholesale capacity from facilities-based carriers and resell it under their own brand — often targeting price-sensitive, underserved, or mission-aligned markets that larger carriers do not prioritize. Because they compete on affordability and customer experience rather than network investment, digital skills support and onboarding are especially central to their model: helping users activate service, stay connected, and realize the full value of a lower-cost offering, while in some cases creating modest earned-revenue opportunities for community partners involved in delivery.

Government and program administrators

Public bodies, including federal, state, and local governments and other public agencies, shape the conditions under which broadband service is funded, deployed, and regulated. Their stake in digital adoption differs from commercial providers. Where a carrier needs subscribers, a public agency needs outcomes. When public funds have supported broadband expansion, the investment is premised on the promise that connectivity will translate into educational, economic, and social benefit for residents. Infrastructure alone does not guarantee adoption, and adoption without skills does not guarantee meaningful use. For government stakeholders, supporting digital inclusion is less about market growth than about ensuring public investment translates into public value.

Understanding who these players are and what drives them is the foundation for everything that follows. The next question is why any of them would direct resources toward digital skills work.

Section 2. Why digital adoption matters

Internet availability alone does not produce meaningful connectivity. Broadband may be technically accessible to a household, but that does not mean a family will subscribe, stay connected, or realize the full value of being online. Device access and digital skills are the core of what bridges that gap, and they matter both as a social outcome and as a precondition for whether connectivity investments translate into sustained adoption and long-term value.

For commercial providers, this has direct financial consequences. Providers invest heavily in deployment, operations, and customer acquisition, but those investments only perform when people can successfully sign up and maintain their accounts. Households with stronger digital skills complete onboarding more easily, make better use of self-service tools, and get more value from their subscriptions, translating to more subscribers, higher average-revenue-per-user (ARPU), reduced support costs, and stronger retention.

For publicly owned/operated providers, the same logic applies through a different lens. Infrastructure investments are premised on a promise of improved educational, economic, and social outcomes. Those outcomes are unlikely to materialize if residents cannot effectively use the connectivity being provided. Addressing adoption barriers is therefore part of what determines whether a deployment produces public benefit at the scale intended.

In both cases, digital adoption is tied directly to whether sector investments perform. That does not mean every telecom actor will fund adoption support in the same way or at the same depth, but it does mean those efforts can generate operational, financial, and public-value returns. That alignment is what makes telecommunications a meaningful, if partial, source of potential funding for community technology organizations and programs. The practical question is how community organizations actually convert this into partnerships and revenue, which is what the rest of this chapter addresses.

Section 3. Where partnerships fit

Telecommunications providers understand the importance of digital adoption on their bottom line but most do not seek to run digital adoption initiatives. This is not their core business and often falls outside what they are equipped to do directly.

That creates an opening for community-based organizations that are already doing this work. With trusted local relationships and on-the-ground presence, they offer something providers benefit from but cannot easily build themselves. The question is how to structure partnerships that put that value to work.

Some honest framing before diving in: while valuable, most of these partnerships are genuinely difficult to execute. Large national providers like Comcast or Verizon operate highly selective community investment programs. The number of local partnerships they take on in any given year is small, making it challenging for community organizations to make the list. Smaller and regional ISPs may be more reachable, but are often stretched thin and will only want to provide support that does not place additional administrative burden on them.

This is not a reason to stop knocking on doors. It is a reason to go in with calibrated expectations, be open to a range of strategies, and not stake your organization's future on any single arrangement. With that context, the following sections outline the main areas of partnership worth exploring:

Enrollment and onboarding support.

Providers and public broadband programs both benefit when eligible households successfully move from awareness to subscription and meaningful use. Community digital skills organizations can help residents understand service options, complete enrollment steps, activate accounts, and begin using service effectively. This is especially valuable where affordability programs, subsidized service, or low-cost device programs exist but are underused because potential users do not trust or understand the enrollment process or simply do not know they exist.

Digital navigation tied to adoption and retention.

Community organizations can provide 'digital navigators' who serve as trusted intermediaries that help residents troubleshoot early barriers, use online tools and portals, and build their digital confidence that makes them more likely to maintain subscriptions for services. Similar to onboarding, this support helps stabilize the customer relationship and can reduce friction that leads to failed sign-ups, unused service, or early churn.

Community benefit and market-building partnerships.

Telecommunications providers often rely on access to locally-controlled assets and approvals to build or expand their networks. Gaining access to rights-of-way, permitting,

public land, poles, conduit, rooftops, and similar assets carry upfront and ongoing costs, and can be causes of delay. When a community is in a position to lower those costs, expedite approvals, or otherwise reduce deployment friction, it may also have an opening to negotiate financial support for digital inclusion programming in return.

The work that community-based organizations do in each of these partnerships creates value for the telecommunications sector. Providers benefit from higher take rates, stronger retention, reduced support costs, and in publicly funded contexts, demonstrated community outcomes that justify their investments.

The case for financial support follows directly from that value. If community organizations are doing work that serves provider interests, it is reasonable to expect providers to help sustain it. The next section maps the specific mechanisms through which that support can flow; what each model looks like in practice, what it can realistically deliver, and where it runs out of road.

Section 4. Alt-funding mechanisms

Telecommunications executives have become increasingly direct about the business case for digital adoption efforts. Verizon CEO Hans Vestberg [put it](#) plainly: "It just makes business sense. More connection means larger markets. More access means more business partnerships." A recent [BT Group report](#) reads: "Building digital skills means more people are able to use our products and services, and make the most of our networks, opening the door to new growth opportunities."

The largest providers have put money behind that rationale. Comcast's [Internet Essentials](#) and [Project UP](#), and T-Mobile's [Project 10Million](#) represent significant investments in affordability, outreach, device access, and customer onboarding. These programs are business development, not charity, [supporting subscriber growth](#), improved retention, and better customer experience. For community organizations, that alignment is an opening for partnership. If providers are already spending to improve adoption outcomes, there is a case for structuring that spending as a partnership rather than a unilateral program, bringing in community organizations to share in the value they help create.

This thinking is not limited to the industry giants. Pharr Connect, the municipal fiber network serving the City of Pharr in South Texas, employs twelve digital trainers who deliver literacy programs directly to residents in English and Spanish. The city also runs a paid internship program for local students who work on the help desk and support training sessions, with some going on to become full-time employees. While these programs are currently grant-funded by Methodist Healthcare Ministries, sustaining them from network revenue is part of the long-term plan, says Innovation & Technology Director Jose J. Peña: "We're a profitable network. We use these profits to reinvest into the network and into our community. We have a plan to continue funding our digital training and digital literacy programs with these funds."

In this case, the City of Pharr has chosen to bring this function in-house. Many other ISPs, particularly smaller and regional providers without the capacity to run programs themselves, may look to achieve the same outcomes through partnership with trusted community organizations.

The mechanisms through which that can happen vary significantly. Some generate earned revenue for community organizations. Others depend on negotiated value, cost avoidance, or a blend of public and private support. The subsections below map a series of pathways to alt-funding revenue models, detailing what each model looks like in practice, what it can realistically deliver, and where its limits are.

Referral and subscriber acquisition

Providers already spend significant money acquiring new customers through authorized dealers, resellers, field marketing teams, and affiliate relationships, compensated through activation payments, referral fees, and recurring commissions. Community-based digital skills organizations are often doing work that feeds directly into that pipeline, helping residents identify appropriate service options, complete enrollment, activate accounts, and navigate early setup in ways traditional sales channels cannot replicate. That creates a straightforward case for structuring referral compensation as a revenue stream for community programs.

While acquisition fees can vary widely, ISPs typically pay anywhere from \$50 to \$150 or more per new residential connection through [affiliate](#) and referral arrangements. If a community technology program were to negotiate, for example, \$60 per new subscriber referred to a local ISP, that represents meaningful revenue for work they are already doing to help customers find the right connectivity options. However, referral and affiliate programs vary significantly by provider, change frequently, and are sometimes discontinued without notice. Before building revenue projections around a specific arrangement, verify that the program is currently active and confirm its terms directly with the provider.

A (hypothetical) example:

Consider a community program providing digital navigation and skills training, serving 100 unique participants per month. Where 10% of program participants lack home connectivity and, with program support, go on to subscribe through an affiliate ISP, the program would make \$600 per month earned revenue, at an average rate of \$60 per subscriber. At \$7,200 per year, that referral revenue can meaningfully contribute toward the cost of a navigator or trainer salary for work the program is already doing.

This model is not without risks. Where referral payments vary by provider or product, there is the danger of incentives to steer residents toward the highest-paying option rather than the one that best fits their needs. To protect against that, referral pricing and compensation decisions should stay at the leadership level and out of the hands of navigators working directly with residents. The value of a community organization in this context is its trusted status; that trust is worth more than any individual referral fee, and the model only works if it is protected.

Referral revenue is the most transactional of the models in this chapter, a direct exchange of value for value. The next model goes a step further, allowing community organizations to generate recurring revenue not just from connecting people to a provider, but from becoming a provider themselves.

Wholesale resale: the Mission Telecom model

Some mission-driven organizations have found a way to generate recurring revenue by reselling wholesale mobile broadband to program participants and community members. The enabling framework is the [Educational Broadband Service](#) (EBS), a legacy spectrum licensing arrangement in the 2.5 GHz band, originally reserved for educational institutions and nonprofits. Under this structure, T-Mobile holds a commercial lease on EBS spectrum from these licensees, and in exchange provides wholesale wireless accounts that EBS licensees such as [Mission Telecom](#), [Mobile Beacon](#), [Mobile Citizen](#), and [35 Mile Foundation](#), pass on to eligible nonprofits at deeply discounted rates. Nonprofits can earn modest but recurring earned-revenue by reselling these wholesale accounts at a small markup — assuming the underlying network (mostly the T-Mobile network) performs reliably in the communities being served. While this should be verified before developing a resale model, such a recurring revenue stream can become meaningful at scale.

For example:

A nonprofit can acquire connectivity for roughly \$7 to \$10 per line per month, based on rates offered by Mission Telecom. Reselling this service at \$10 to \$15 would provide a margin of \$3 to \$5 per line. Most programs will operate at the lower end of the scale below, but even there, when accumulating accounts year over year, the revenue adds up, as the table illustrates below.

Active lines	Annual Revenue Range
250	\$9,000 – \$15,000 per year
500	\$18,000 – \$30,000 per year
1,000	\$36,000 – \$60,000 per year
2,500	\$90,000 – \$150,000 per year
5,000	\$180,000 – \$300,000 per year

Illustrative annual earned revenue from EBS resale at a \$3–\$5 per-line monthly margin. Actual revenue will vary by reseller terms and program scale.

At sufficient scale, this model can help cover staff time, program administration, or other operating costs that are otherwise difficult to sustain through grants alone. The appeal of this approach is that it allows an organization to support connectivity access while also generating a recurring revenue stream without having to build or operate its own network.

Both models so far depend on working within existing provider relationships. The following section focuses on what communities already control, and how that control can be converted into durable investment.

Leveraging community assets

When ISPs and network builders come to a community to build or expand broadband infrastructure, they need things the community often controls. These can include permits, tax treatment, rights-of-way, and access to public land, rooftops, and utility poles. During the BEAD-funded deployment wave now underway — a \$42.45 billion federal broadband program — providers will be seeking access to these assets at an unusually high rate. This creates a window for negotiation that most community organizations do not know they have, and that closes once agreements are signed.

How much leverage a community has here depends significantly on local context. Communities with active franchise negotiations, municipally owned infrastructure, meaningful permitting authority, or strong fiscal capacity are best positioned to use the strategies described below. In deeply rural areas, particularly the lower-income and rural counties, permitting fees are often minimal. With local budgets under significant pressure, the practical leverage available may be limited. Readers in those contexts should assess realistically what their community controls before investing significant energy in asset-negotiation strategies. For communities with more institutional infrastructure, this can be a high-value opportunity.

The first step is understanding which of these assets your community controls, and who holds them. Local governments, housing authorities, community land trusts, municipal utilities, and electric cooperatives may all be sitting on negotiating leverage and community organizations with relationships across those institutions may be better positioned than anyone to help connect the dots.

The assets most relevant to network deployment are:

- **Utility poles** are generally owned by electric utilities, cooperatives, or municipalities. Broadband providers have to pay to attach equipment to them. Depending on the state, these fees may be regulated at the federal or state level. Because of this variation, ISPs contest these regulations enough that the FCC has an [ongoing regulatory proceeding](#) dedicated to them. This said, pole access is a real cost pressure for ISPs, giving pole owners (and their allies) genuine leverage.
- **Rights-of-way** are the publicly owned land under streets, sidewalks, and roads where wired networks run. Any ISP building in your community needs a franchise or access agreement with whoever manages this, usually a city or county government. It is worth finding out early whether your local government recognizes the value of this asset. ROW access agreements for new fiber

construction are the most broadly applicable leverage point available to communities today. Unlike cable TV franchise agreements, which apply only to cable television service and are subject to increasing federal constraints, ROW agreements are negotiated separately and give communities a direct opening to attach community benefit conditions before construction begins. The value is less in the permitting fees themselves, which can be nominal, but rather in the ability to streamline timelines to secure commitments.

- **Public land and rooftops** are where towers and small cell wireless equipment go. Parks, municipal buildings, water towers, and school rooftops are all assets ISPs need access to. Where sites are publicly owned, there is negotiating leverage.
- **Conduit** is the underground pathway fiber runs through. It is expensive to install and highly disruptive to put in after the fact. Communities that have existing conduit are in a strong position to negotiate with providers who would rather lease than dig.
- **Tax treatment** sits with local governments which often have real discretion over how infrastructure assets are taxed and what fees are assessed. ISPs model these costs carefully when deciding where and how to build. A community that can offer favorable treatment has something tangible to trade.

Identifying which assets your community controls is the first step. The second is understanding what to ask for in return. Offering something a provider needs — streamlined permitting, access to public land, favorable tax treatment — creates an opening to negotiate commitments that benefit residents. Those commitments might include support for digital skills programming, free connectivity at anchor institutions, subsidized service for low-income households, or direct funding for digital inclusion partners.

This is standard business in telecommunications where franchise agreements and [public-private broadband partnerships](#) have long operated on a similar logic, with providers receiving access and approvals in exchange for community-serving commitments. Less familiar for many community organizations is that they can help shape those arrangements rather than respond to them after the fact.

Example: Philadelphia, Right-of-way as leverage

When the City of Philadelphia [renewed Verizon's cable franchise](#) agreement in 2024, it used control over city-owned rights-of-way to secure concrete community benefits. Under the new agreement, Verizon committed to providing gigabit broadband at 183 Parks and Recreation facilities across the city within two years, with the city contributing \$5 million over the life of the agreement to fund the connectivity infrastructure. The result positions recreation centers, especially in underserved neighborhoods, as digital access hubs where residents can connect for job training, education, and other essential online activities.

Verizon also committed \$8 million in Public, Education, and Government grants over the five-year agreement, supporting [PhillyCAM](#) (Philadelphia's Community TV & Radio Station), the School District of Philadelphia, and [PHLgovTV](#) (formerly Channel 64, the broadcast network for City government), along with a separate \$500,000 grant to the city covering digital equity efforts, public safety initiatives, and related uses.

Philadelphia's deputy [CIO was explicit](#) about the strategy. When franchise negotiations began, his office asked how the agreement could advance digital equity. The answer was the right-of-way. Because that infrastructure is publicly owned, the city had real leverage to negotiate outcomes that served the public interest, and used it.

Example: Fort Collins, Municipal broadband with inclusion baked in

Fort Collins, Colorado, offers another clear example of community infrastructure producing a durable, recurring funding stream for digital skills work. When the city launched its municipal fiber network, Connexion, it built in a “[payment in lieu of taxes](#)” (PILOT). This PILOT mechanism directed 6% of [every subscriber dollar](#) into a fund supporting affordable service plans, outreach staff, hardware support, and digital literacy training for income-qualified residents.

What makes this model notable is that the funding is built into the operating logic of the network itself, not episodic. As the subscriber base grows, so does the funding pool. As long as the network operates, the revenue stream remains. Connexion's 2024 Digital Inclusion Trailblazer designation from the National Digital Inclusion Alliance reflects that sustained commitment.

These examples make the same point from different angles. Philadelphia used negotiating leverage at a single point in time — a franchise renewal — to secure a large, defined package of community benefits. Fort Collins built the funding mechanism into the network's operating structure from the start, creating a stream that grows automatically over time. Both depend on the same underlying principle that community asset control is leverage, and that leverage can be converted into durable investment in digital skills and equity. The window to use it is open during deployment and negotiation — and closes once agreements are signed.

One longer-term policy play worth knowing about is the BEAD program's non-deployment funding component which is intended to support uses beyond physical infrastructure, including potentially digital skills programming. Whether and how those funds get released for flexible use is still being determined at the federal and state level. Digital inclusion practitioners are often among the few people in their communities who know these funds exist which makes them well positioned to raise the issue with local officials and encourage advocacy up through the state level. It may not pay off immediately, but it costs little to plant the seed.

These asset-leverage models require negotiating sophistication and good timing. The next two sections describe approaches that are more accessible to organizations earlier in that journey. One focused on infrastructure cost and one on devices.

Shared and publicly funded infrastructure

Public middle mile infrastructure, built at significant public expense, represents an underexploited asset in many communities. Most of the 113,000 miles of fiber deployed through BTOP and ARRA grants between 2009 and 2013 came with open access requirements, obligating network operators to allow other providers to connect on nondiscrimination terms. How a community chooses to use it depends on what problem it is trying to solve.

[DigitalC](#), a nonprofit broadband provider in Cleveland illustrates one approach. DigitalC's residential service [Canopy](#) is designed as a low-cost offer for households that might otherwise remain unconnected. Its ability to offer \$18-per-month service is rooted in a decision made more than a decade earlier, when the nonprofit predecessor to DigitalC received a \$44 million federal broadband stimulus grant through ARRA to build over 1,000 miles of fiber connecting community anchor institutions across northeast Ohio. When DigitalC launched its [Connect the Unconnected initiative](#), it built off that backbone, using the publicly funded fiber as the foundation for its fixed wireless last-mile network rather than having to fund or build a transport layer from scratch. The savings that flow from that headstart are passed directly to subscribers, says [CEO Joshua Edmonds](#): "We are saving Clevelanders around \$3 million a year. We don't want to just be looked at as bridging the digital divide — we are advancing this city's economic prosperity by way of saving people money."

But affordability is not the only thing that access to public middle mile infrastructure can support. Where a community's most pressing barrier is not price but skills, awareness, or device access, the same open access provision that enabled DigitalC's low-cost service could instead anchor a leasing arrangement that generates modest recurring revenue for a digital inclusion partner. A nonprofit with rights to connect to a publicly funded backbone could lease that access to last-mile providers, with revenue directed toward navigator programs, training, or device support rather than subsidized service prices. The infrastructure conditions for this model are not new, though it has not yet been widely tested as a dedicated revenue strategy for digital inclusion. Infrastructure access shapes what is possible at the network level. At the device level, a parallel set of opportunities exists, and for many community organizations, it is a more immediate place to start.

Device access as earned revenue

Device refurbishers are a less obvious but genuinely accessible entry point into earned revenue for community digital skills organizations. The sector runs on two revenue streams: refurbishers charge businesses and institutions to accept and dispose of e-waste responsibly, then generate additional income by reconditioning devices for resale or recovering materials. Both streams depend on a reliable supply of donated equipment, which is increasingly difficult to secure. Community organizations with strong local relationships are well positioned to solve that problem, and that position has real economic value.

The most accessible model is supply-side brokering. A community organization that brokers introductions between a refurbisher and institutional donors, including employers, schools, hospitals, or local governments cycling out old equipment, is providing a service that saves the refurbisher time and acquisition cost. That creates a basis for a finder's fee or a modest revenue share on the back end. In the other direction, refurbishers can serve as a device supply channel for program participants through referral arrangements or bundled partnerships, where the refurbisher provides devices and the community organization provides training. Each party contributes what the other cannot easily build.

Example: Repowered, St. Paul, Minnesota

Some organizations have built refurbishing directly into their program model. [Repowered in St. Paul, Minnesota](#) illustrates how far this can go. The organization combines device sales revenue with a paid 18-month training program for people with barriers to employment, including those with histories of incarceration or addiction. Participants are paid to learn device repair from the start. [Revenue from reconditioned device sales](#) through the organization's retail stores funds the training program, while the workforce development mission attracts grant and workforce funding that a straight resale operation would not qualify for. The device work and the workforce mission are the same activity.

This model has limits. It requires meaningful operational infrastructure, retail capacity, and a stable supply of donated equipment. It is not a quick revenue add-on. Organizations like PCs for People, Through The Trees, and Computer Reach have built versions of the earned revenue model at various scales, but most started with the simpler supply-side brokering relationship and grew from there. The finder's fee arrangement is the most accessible starting point and the lowest barrier to testing whether a refurbisher partnership can generate reliable revenue for a program already doing this work.

The models in this section describe what is possible when partnerships are structured intentionally. The remaining question is how to get those conversations started, who to approach, what to say, and how to frame what your organization brings to the table.

Section 5. How to approach partnership conversations

ISPs have concrete business reasons to care about digital adoption and most are more open to partnership conversations than community organizations expect. The challenge is knowing who inside the organization to approach, and how to frame what you're offering in terms that resonate with their priorities.

Who does what inside an ISP

External Affairs / Government Affairs / Public Policy: Manages relationships with government and civic leaders and coordinates policy engagement at the state and local level. This is the right entry point for conversations tied to franchise agreements, permitting, rights-of-way, or publicly funded broadband investments. Come with knowledge of local regulatory context and a clear sense of what the community can offer or negotiate. See [Verizon's Government Affairs](#) page.

Community Impact / CSR / Foundation: Handles grants, sponsorships, and digital inclusion initiatives. This is the most familiar entry point for community organizations, but it is also typically the most resource-constrained and the least connected to core business decisions. Grants from this function tend to be modest and relationship-driven. The strongest pitches here align your work with the provider's stated community priorities rather than leading with a general funding request. See [AT&T's Community Engagement](#) page.

Regional Market Leadership (GM/Region VP): [Responsible for](#) subscriber growth, retention, and revenue in a defined territory. This is an underused entry point for community organizations. These leaders care about take rates and customer experience, which means they have a direct stake in anything that improves adoption outcomes in their market. A pitch framed around subscriber acquisition costs, churn reduction, and local market performance will land differently here than one that leads with community benefit, and the budget authority tends to be larger.

Public Sector / Enterprise Sales: Manages contracts with government agencies, educational institutions, and other large organizations. For community organizations with strong anchor institution relationships, this can be a useful entry point. These teams are already working with the schools, libraries, and housing authorities you may be partnering with, and a shared institutional relationship can open the door to broader collaboration.

Marketing / Field Marketing: Drives local subscriber acquisition through campaigns, events, and community outreach. Where providers are running affordability programs or adoption initiatives, field marketing is often the team tasked with partner engagement and

community-facing delivery. If a provider already has an outreach program underway, this is frequently where implementation decisions are made.

Network/Construction/Engineering: Leads buildouts and manages relationships that affect deployment schedules and permitting. For communities that can streamline permitting, provide access to public assets, or reduce administrative friction, this is the team that feels that value most directly. Where infrastructure negotiations are in play, this team can be a strong internal advocate for community benefit commitments in exchange for the access the provider needs.

These roles reflect how large and mid-size ISPs are typically organized. Departments within large ISPs rarely coordinate well with each other. A relationship with Community Impact does not automatically translate to awareness in Government Affairs or Regional Market Leadership. Where possible, build relationships across more than one function, particularly if the partnership you are proposing spans both community benefit and business value.

Smaller regional and local providers, including rural telcos, electric cooperatives, and community-owned networks, often operate with much flatter hierarchies where one or two people may cover several of these functions. That can be an advantage since the person who controls the budget is often also the person who answers the phone, making partnership conversations faster and more direct. For the smallest providers, the general manager is almost always the right starting point and often the only decision-maker who matters.

Electric and telephone cooperatives are worth approaching separately from commercial providers. They often have a stronger community orientation and more stable finances, but meaningful financial commitments typically require approval from a member board or the broader membership, which can be a slow process.

ISPs are often far less embedded in local community spaces than you might expect. It is not unusual for a local ISP to have little awareness of, or relationship with the community organizations, anchor institutions, or local government offices operating in the same area. Do not assume they know who you are or what you do. An outreach conversation may need to start with a basic introduction before it can become a partnership conversation.

What to pitch

Before reaching out, research whether the ISP has existing community initiatives or philanthropic activities. Knowing what they already fund helps you frame your pitch in terms of their stated priorities rather than asking them to start from scratch.

The strongest pitches connect your work to their business interests and incentives. If the ISP funds a local health initiative, frame digital skills around telehealth adoption and reduced care barriers for low-income households. If workforce development is their focus, make the case that a more digitally skilled local population strengthens their long-term market: better talent pipeline, stronger local economy, more connected customers. The goal is to make clear that what you are offering has operational value, not just reputational value.

Come prepared with data: how many people you have trained, what populations you serve, completion rates, and outcomes like job placement or first-time internet subscriptions. A proven program with documented results reduces perceived risk and signals that a partnership investment will produce returns worth measuring.

Rather than presenting a general funding request, come with a specific value proposition tied to what the provider is already trying to accomplish. The models elsewhere in this chapter suggest several directions that go beyond traditional sponsorship. If the provider is actively acquiring subscribers in your market, a structured referral arrangement connects your outreach work directly to their customer pipeline and creates a basis for ongoing earned revenue rather than a one-time grant. If they are running an affordability program that is underperforming on enrollment, positioning your organization as the trusted community delivery partner for that program turns their existing budget into a sustainable contract. If infrastructure negotiations are on the table, your organization may be positioned to help broker the community commitments that get built into the deal itself.

The common thread is that you are not asking for philanthropic support. You are offering something the provider needs and proposing a structure that compensates your organization for the value it creates. That framing tends to reach further into the organization and hold up better over time than a sponsorship that depends on an annual renewal decision.

Section 6: Conclusion

The partnerships described in this chapter share a common premise: that community organizations doing digital inclusion work are already creating value for the telecommunications sector, and that value can be structured into compensation rather than left on the table. Referral arrangements, EBS resale models, ROW and infrastructure negotiations, franchise negotiations, and infrastructure leverage are not out of reach. They are available to organizations willing to reframe what they are offering and to whom.

None of these models is a complete funding solution, and most take time to develop. The more durable path is to layer mechanisms over time, moving from modest transactional arrangements toward structural relationships built into network operating logic or negotiated at key infrastructure decision points. None of it happens without someone in the organization to make the first call, show up to the meeting, and keep coming back. That requires organizational capacity that many digital inclusion programs will have to build.

That is where philanthropy can play a more targeted role. Beyond funding program delivery, foundations can invest in the capacity that makes co-investment possible: support for legal and negotiation assistance, technical expertise for structuring agreements, and the organizational runway to pursue partnerships that take longer than a grant cycle to close. Funding the infrastructure for partnership, rather than just the programs themselves, is a meaningful way to extend the reach of philanthropic dollars and create conditions for more sustainable sector investment over time.

The window for some of these conversations, particularly around BEAD deployment and ROW access agreements for new fiber construction, and franchise renewals, is time-limited. Organizations that develop this capacity now will be better positioned to negotiate community benefit commitments before agreements close.

WHAT TO READ NEXT

The series

The Framework, *Samantha Schartman & Brian Vo*

The case for change and the financial framework the series is built on, including Connect Humanity's approach to structuring co-investment partnerships.

connecthumanity.fund/alt-funding-guide/framework/

Education, *Dr. Jen Vanek & Samantha Schartman*

How digital access drives outcomes across K–12, postsecondary, and adult education — and why co-investment is needed to sustain it.

connecthumanity.fund/alt-funding-guide/education/

Healthcare, *Dr. Amy Sheon*

How digital access and literacy shape patient outcomes and health system costs — and the financial case for health sector co-investment.

connecthumanity.fund/alt-funding-guide/healthcare/

Housing, *Catherine Crago Blanton*

How housing authorities and affordable housing providers can build digital access into their core operations.

connecthumanity.fund/alt-funding-guide/housing/

Local government, *Aaron Schill & Abi Waldrup*

How local government investment in digital inclusion generates returns across public services — and the case for municipal co-investment.

connecthumanity.fund/alt-funding-guide/local-government

Workforce development, *Samantha Schartman & Dr. Roberto Gallardo*

Employer and workforce system investment in digital skills as a talent and economic development strategy.

connecthumanity.fund/alt-funding-guide/workforce-development/

Get in touch

If you are a practitioner exploring co-investment partnerships, a sector partner thinking about how this framework applies to your organization, or a funder considering supporting pilots, let's talk: info@connecthumanity.fund

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