

RVBAT Meeting - May 7, 2025

Meeting Purpose

Discuss digital equity initiatives, challenges, and opportunities in Southern Oregon counties.

Key Takeaways

- Libraries face challenges with hotspot programs, including device loss and rural connectivity issues
- T-Mobile's network improvements may expand rural coverage, especially after acquiring U.S. Cellular
- Funding uncertainties and program cuts (e.g. e-rate hotspot checkout) are impacting digital equity efforts
- Innovative solutions like pharmacy lockers are being explored to improve healthcare access in rural areas

Topics

Hotspot Programs and Connectivity Issues

- Jackson County Library experiencing 40% loss rate with hotspot devices, considering sunsetting program
- Josephine County Library continuing hotspot program successfully, seeing increased demand
- Rural areas still face significant connectivity challenges even with hotspots
- T-Mobile network improvements:
 - Acquired Sprint system, building out "world's finest 5G network"
 - Recent acquisition of U.S. Cellular (~4,000 towers) may improve rural coverage soon
 - Future integration with Starlink satellites could provide 2-20 Mbps in areas without traditional coverage

Funding and Program Challenges

- Oregon Digital Equity Program grant (\$500k minimum) has restrictive requirements
- E-rate hotspot checkout program for schools/libraries voted down in Senate, likely to be cut
- Organizations seeking creative funding solutions and partnerships to continue digital equity work

Innovative Solutions for Rural Access

- Pharmacy lockers with video/audio capabilities being tested in Wheeler County
 - Could improve prescription access in areas with limited pharmacy hours
 - Raises questions about security, HIPAA compliance, and appropriate locations
- Libraries extending Wi-Fi coverage to parking lots for after-hours access
- Community health workers using library hotspots to connect homebound clients with healthcare providers

Digital Literacy Initiatives

- Josephine Community Library:
 - Graduated 15 participants from 6-week computer basics class in Cave Junction
 - Partnering with U.S. Cellular for smartphone training sessions
 - Success story: Cave Junction resident completed training, now helping teach classes and becoming library assistant
- Jackson County Library partnering with AGE+ for digital literacy classes

Next Steps

- Christina to continue updating funding resource page on Oregon Broadband Equity Coalition website
- Ryan to share any new T-Mobile Foundation funding opportunities
- Explore potential for pharmacy locker pilot programs in Southern Oregon
- Continue collaboration and information sharing among regional partners on digital equity initiatives

Action Items

- Send Christina any new T-Mobile grant info for OBEX website resources page