

impact

University of Idaho Extension programs that are making a difference in Idaho.

Improving rural access to tech skills and job access in Elmore County

AT A GLANCE

Supporting community members across 3,101 miles with computer skills and online job training.

The Situation

Elmore County faces a significant digital divide, with many residents lacking reliable access to high-speed internet. According to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), approximately 20% of households in the county do not have access to broadband Internet services, impacting education, healthcare and economic opportunities. As a rural area covering a vast geographical distance, residents often travel to Boise, which can take from 45 minutes to four hours, depending on their location within the county, to receive services. The lack of access to an internet-enabled device or digital skills leaves many residents unable to access online resources and tools that could help reduce the geographical barrier to resources and opportunities.

Our Response

To help empower Idahoans to build confidence in using technology, University of Idaho Extension's Digital Economy Program (DEP) began looking for ways to provide resources to support rural and underserved communities. Through a partnership with the American Connection Corps (ACC), engaging AmeriCorps members to serve as local digital navigators with the DEP became a solution.

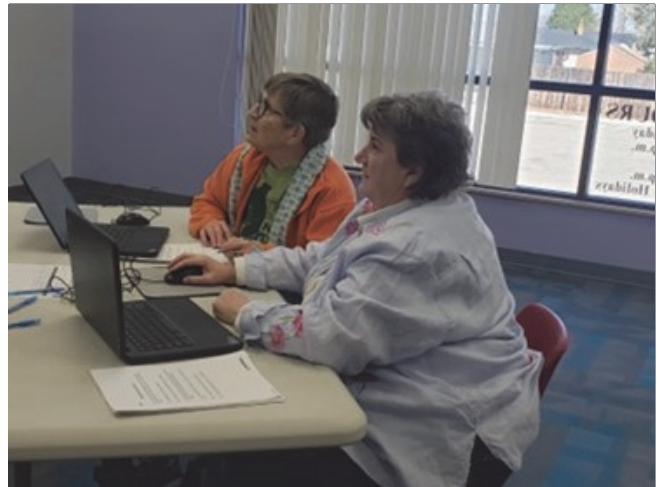


Image of participants in a computer basics class at the Mountain Home Public Library. Photo by A. Granatir.

An AmeriCorps member was recruited to serve as a digital navigator at the Mountain Home Public Library in Elmore County from January to August 2024.

In developing a scope of work, key partners were identified, including the rural economic developer in King Hill, Glens Ferry Library, Three Islands Senior Center and Mountain Home Senior Center. The services offered encompassed walk-in tech help sessions, tech assistance for various communities and a range of classes and workshops.

Classes at local libraries and senior centers addressed numerous topics, such as job skills, computer basics, artificial intelligence (AI) and affordable home internet access, utilizing resources from Senior Planet and NorthStar Digital Literacy.

Additionally, the digital navigator aided individuals with finding resources for low-cost internet plans and refurbished smartphones and computers. A key service was helping folks learn how to utilize digital tools to gain access to job skills, local housing, health portals, childcare services, utilities and benefits programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

In June 2024, the digital navigator assisted the Elmore County Broadband Action Team in helping rural residents complete internet speed tests to capture data on the performance of the currently available internet infrastructure. This data will help the county seek investments to expand and update broadband infrastructure to bring high-speed internet access to more locations and people.

Program Outcomes

Digital skill development and internet access positively impacted on the quality of life for participants. One library regular who was unemployed and lacked home internet and transportation began one-on-one tech help sessions with the digital navigator that continued over months. Through this tech assistance, the patron learned how to access different online resources, developed their digital skills, attended numerous classes and honed their resume. With increased confidence in technology, they could complete online training, obtain certifications to further expand their skills and knowledge, and secure employment.

Another unemployed patron with limited formal education was facing housing insecurity and got help signing up with a local training academy to develop basic trades skills. After starting training, they began meeting with the digital navigator to learn how to use online tools to meet their immediate needs. They were successful in finding affordable housing and a higher-paying job, with the goal of training to be foremen.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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From 421 participant survey responses, the average trainer approval rating was 9.36 out of 10, with a program satisfaction rating of 8.9 out of 10.

One person shared, “The AmeriCorps volunteer at the library is a lifesaver!... In nanoseconds, they spot the problem and gets me on my way.”

Increasing awareness of the navigator’s services was essential for the program’s success. In addition to word of mouth, various outreach methods were employed. By the close of August 2024, the program made significant strides, achieving:

- 631 community connections established
- 160 one-on-one tech help sessions provided
- 19 digital skills classes engaging a total of 351 participants
- 12 rural community visits were conducted to assist residents in enhancing their digital skills

Overall, the program reached 5,823 contacts through various community events, advertisements and infographics.

The Future

In an increasingly digital society and economy, infusing digital skills training and addressing access is vital to developing digitally resilient Idahoans and communities. UI Extension’s Digital Economy Program supports Idahoans by offering digital skills training, remote work retraining and guidance for small businesses to grow online. Learn more at <https://www.uidaho.edu/digital-economy>.

Cooperators and Co-Sponsors

AmeriCorps members were deployed through a partnership with the American Connection Corps, a program of Lead for America. Mountain Home Public Library provided office space and LEARN Idaho provided Senior Planet Curriculum training.