2023-2024 Report

Digital Equity Coalition for Santa Barbara County

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored digital access as a fundamental requirement for education, healthcare, employment, and civic participation, driving a nationwide movement to close the digital divide. California now has a once-in-a-generation opportunity to expand high-speed internet and digital access, thanks to federal funding from the Infrastructure and Jobs Act, allocated through the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) and distributed to states.

In California, the effort is coordinated by the California Department of Technology (CDT) and the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC). This funding supports the development of statewide goals, strategies, and action plans to bridge the digital divide. Central to this initiative is the Statewide Digital Equity Plan (SDEP), which outlines three high-level goals aimed at ensuring all Californians can fully participate and thrive in the digital age.

California Statewide Digital Equity Plan Goals

GOAL 1

All Californians have high-performance broadband available at home, schools, libraries, and businesses.

GOAL 2

All Californians can access training and support to enable digital inclusion.

GOAL 3

All Californians have access to affordable broadband and necessary devices.

California's Statewide Digital Equity Plan goals: https://broadbandforall.cdt.ca.gov

About the Digital Equity Coalition (DEC)

In Santa Barbara County, nearly 8% of residents lack internet access, while many others experience slow connectivity, lack home computers, or lack the skills to use them. As a result, many community members are unable to fully participate in education, apply for jobs, stay connected with loved ones, or access telehealth services. This digital divide disproportionately impacts People of Color, Indigenous communities, low-income households, people with disabilities, rural residents, and older adults—widening existing inequalities.

At the request of Santa Barbara County, the Santa Barbara Foundation (SBF) formally launched the Santa Barbara County Digital Equity Coalition (DEC) to align efforts, convene partners, and secure a fair share of state and federal funding for digital inclusion initiatives.

Mission & Objectives

The Digital Equity Coalition works to close the digital divide across all communities in Santa Barbara County by aligning resources, strategies, and partnerships. As part of a broader statewide and national effort, the DEC assesses and strengthens local digital inclusion initiatives while coordinating with regional and state-level digital equity programs.

The coalition focuses on six key priorities:

- Affordable Broadband Access
- Device Access
- Digital Literacy
- Technical Support
- Empowering Content
- Countywide Leadership

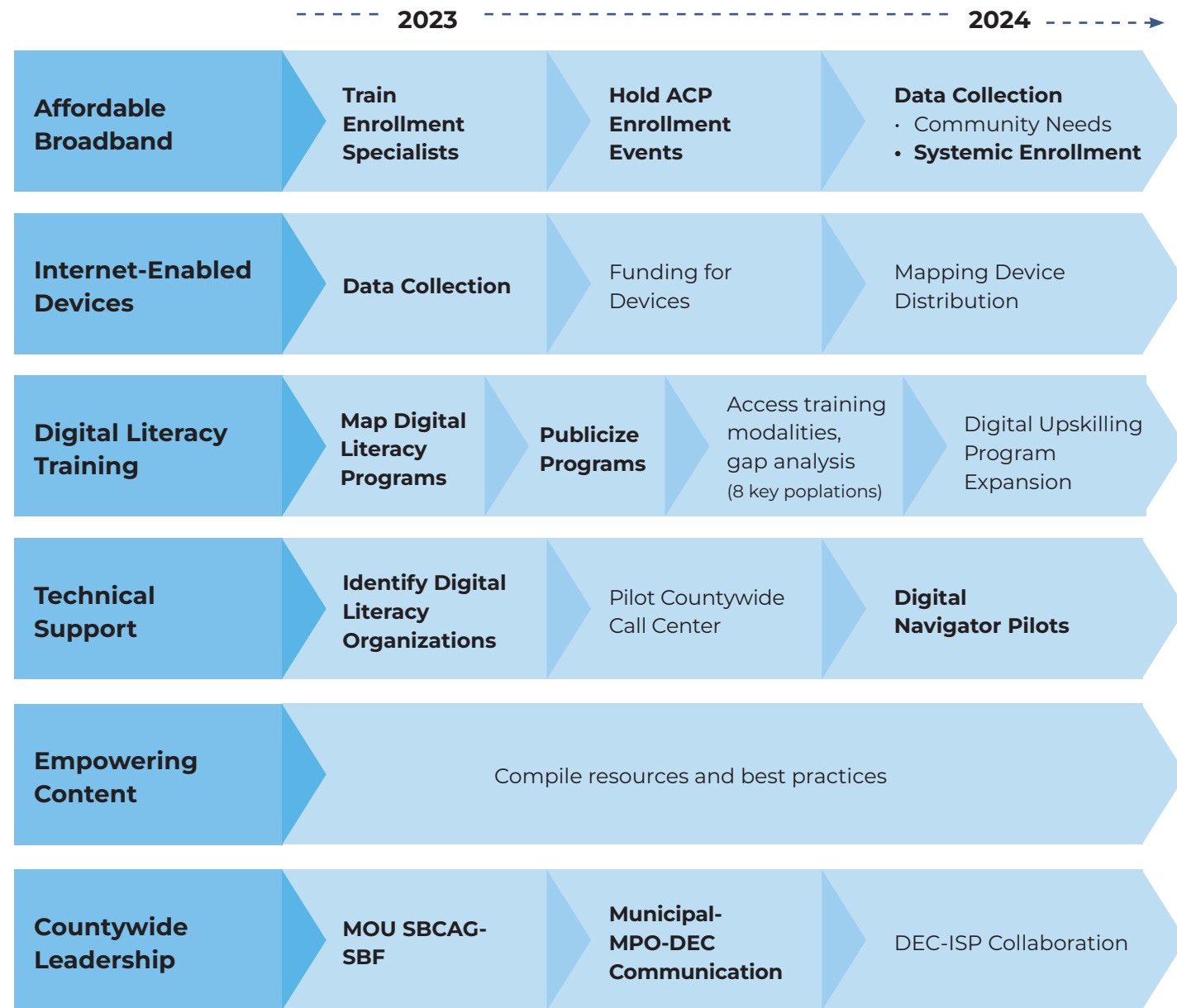## Collaborative Leadership & Partnerships

The Santa Barbara Foundation (SBF) serves as the primary convener of the DEC, working in partnership with the Broadband Consortium Pacific Coast (BCPC) and approximately 70 representatives from various sectors, including education, healthcare, public housing, governance, and community resilience organizations.

Additionally, the Santa Barbara Foundation and the Santa Barbara County Association of Governments (SBCAG) have executed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to define key priorities, track progress, and evaluate outcomes in pursuit of the Broadband for All initiative across Santa Barbara County.

Key Focus Areas & Outcomes

The chart below outlines the Digital Equity Coalition's (DEC) primary focus areas, shown on the left in dark blue, alongside progress across 2023, 2024, and beyond, displayed in lighter blue. Each focus area represents a core pillar of the DEC's mission, with key outcomes that have been achieved by partner organizations highlighted in bold.

Focus Area	2023		2024
Affordable Broadband	**Train Enrollment Specialists**	**Hold ACP Enrollment Events**	**Data Collection** · Community Needs · **Systemic Enrollment**
Internet-Enabled Devices	**Data Collection**	Funding for Devices	Mapping Device Distribution
Digital Literacy Training	**Map Digital Literacy Programs**	**Publicize Programs**	Access training modalities, gap analysis (8 key poplations) — Digital Upskilling Program Expansion
Technical Support	**Identify Digital Literacy Organizations**	Pilot Countywide Call Center	**Digital Navigator Pilots**
Empowering Content	Compile resources and best practices		
Countywide Leadership	**MOU SBCAG-SBF**	**Municipal-MPO-DEC Communication**	DEC-ISP Collaboration

This visual representation demonstrates how the DEC and its partners are driving digital inclusion efforts over time—tracking advancements in affordable broadband access, device distribution, digital literacy, technical support, empowering content, and countywide leadership. The chart also highlights milestone achievements, illustrating the collective impact of coordinated initiatives in bridging the digital divide across Santa Barbara County.

Coordination and Advocacy

In 2023, the Digital Equity Coalition (DEC) Steering Committee, comprised of 15 partner organizations, guided the Coalition's activities, set strategic objectives, and ensured alignment with its key priorities.

At monthly Partners' Table meetings, more than 70 partners collaborated to share best practices, address challenges, and strengthen digital inclusion efforts. These meetings featured updates on funding opportunities, digital equity programs, statewide initiatives, and roundtable discussions with partners.

The DEC and its partners also actively participated in state-led initiatives aimed at securing substantial federal funding, which will be available in 2025 to support efforts to close the digital divide. Additionally, throughout 2023, the DEC helped low-income residents enroll in the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), which provided internet service discounts. This effort led to a 31% enrollment rate in Santa Barbara County, delivering direct cost savings to residents and advancing the Coalition's mission of equitable digital access.

SDEP/ BEAD Conference

DEC Focus Areas: Affordable Broadband, Countywide Leadership

In June 2023, the Economic Development Collaborative, Santa Barbara Foundation, Ventura County Community Foundation, San Luis Obispo Digital Equity Roundtable, California Department of Technology, and the California Public Utilities Commission hosted an in-person workshop to gather input on the State Digital Equity Plan (SDEP) and the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Five-Year Action Plan. This workshop played a crucial role in collecting local feedback to help shape the Statewide Digital Equity Plan.

Held at the Santa Maria Veterans Memorial Community Center, the event brought together over 100 attendees from the tri-counties region (San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, and Ventura). Thanks to the coordination and leadership of the Digital Equity Coalition (DEC), Santa Barbara County achieved record participation at the workshop.

The event aimed to educate attendees on California's SDEP and BEAD plans while providing a platform for direct engagement with state officials. Participants contributed valuable insights that helped shape priorities for the $42.45 billion BEAD funding program, ensuring that federal funds would be directed toward addressing digital inequities in the tri-counties region.

Digital Equity Bill of Rights
LETTER OF SUPPORT

DEC Focus Areas: Affordable Broadband, Countywide Leadership

In September 2023, the Santa Barbara Foundation (SBF), on behalf of the Digital Equity Coalition (DEC), submitted a letter of support for the Digital Equity Bill of Rights (CA AB414 Reyes). The letter included the names and logos of 13 coalition partners.

The Digital Equity Bill of Rights is in alignment with California's Broadband for All initiative and the State Digital Equity Plan (SDEP). In October 2023, Governor Newsom signed the bill into law, making California the first state to officially recognize digital access as a civil right. This landmark legislation positions California as a national leader, advocating for digitally disadvantaged communities and unconnected households.

Draft State Digital Equity Plan
PUBLIC COMMENT

DEC Focus Areas: Affordable Broadband, Digital Literacy Training, Technical Support, Countywide Leadership

In December 2023, the Draft State Digital Equity Plan (SDEP) was released. Integrating local input from the BEAD conference and other listening sessions, this plan would provide access to the Digital Equity Capacity Grant funded by the bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) of 2021. The Santa Barbara Foundation (SBF) carefully reviewed the draft SDEP, shared the analysis with DEC partners, and submitted a public comment on behalf of the DEC.

State Digital Equity Plan Subgrant
PUBLIC COMMENT

DEC Focus Areas: Digital Literacy Training, Technical Support, Countywide Leadership

In September 2024, the California Department of Technology (CDT) announced that California's State Digital Equity Plan (SDEP) had received official approval from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA). This approval unlocked $70.2 million in federal funding to support the plan's implementation.

The funding will empower local organizations and communities to develop local digital equity plans, expand digital literacy training, and provide digital navigation services. To ensure transparency and inclusivity, stakeholders were invited to submit public comments on the SDEP subgrant program. This feedback process was designed to promote accountability and equitable fund distribution across California. The SDEP guidelines closely align with DEC's mission and objectives. In response, the Santa Barbara Foundation (SBF) submitted public comments on behalf of the DEC, offering recommendations for SDEP subgrants. These recommendations were also shared with DEC partners to support them in submitting their own public comments.

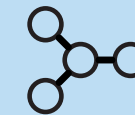# Best Practices & Program Updates

DEC Focus Areas: Countywide Leadership

Throughout 2023 and 2024, DEC partners collaborated to share progress, challenges, and best practices as digital inclusion practitioners.

Key takeaways from this collective effort included:

Building strategic partnerships
to close funding and capacity gaps

Integrating digital inclusion metrics
into client engagement strategies

Providing one-on-one technical support
to improve digital literacy

The Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) and Affordable Broadband

DEC Focus Areas: Affordable Broadband, Digital Literacy Training, Countywide Leadership

The Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) was a federal initiative that provided a monthly discount on internet service for eligible low-income households, aiming to improve access to wireless internet. In 2023, Santa Barbara County surpassed its goal of a 10% increase in ACP enrollments, achieving an 11.2% increase.

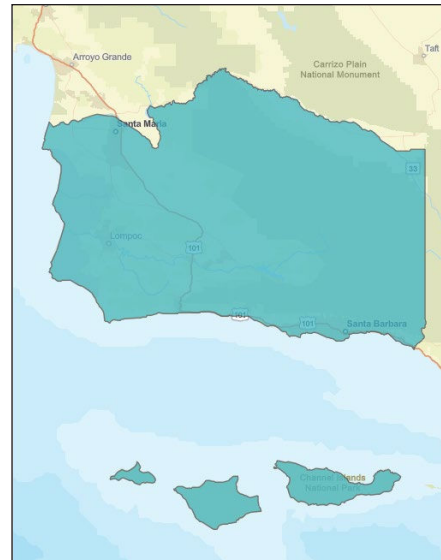Key partners working to expand connectivity in targeted areas included:

- American GI Forum
- Carpinteria Public Library
- CommUnify
- Isla Vista Community Services District
- Partners in Education
- Santa Barbara City College
- Santa Barbara Public Library
- Santa Maria Public Library
- Transition House

These partners facilitated enrollment and outreach events, developed partnerships and referrals, and provided one-on-one assistance to support ACP enrollment. ACP Enrollment Specialist Trainings were conducted with support from the Broadband Consortium Pacific Coast and completed by the American GI Forum, Family Service Agency, and Lompoc Adult School. Data collection was conducted by the Guadalupe Broadband Survey (FSA), CommUnify, and UCSB.

The ACP program stopped accepting new applications and enrollments on February 7, 2024, with April 2024 marking the last month for enrolled households to receive full benefits. The DEC was notified early about this change and shared a list of alternate reduced-rate internet options with its partners for Santa Barbara County residents.

As the ACP program sunsets, affordable broadband access remains a barrier in the county. In response, the DEC is adapting its strategy to continue supporting affordable broadband by:
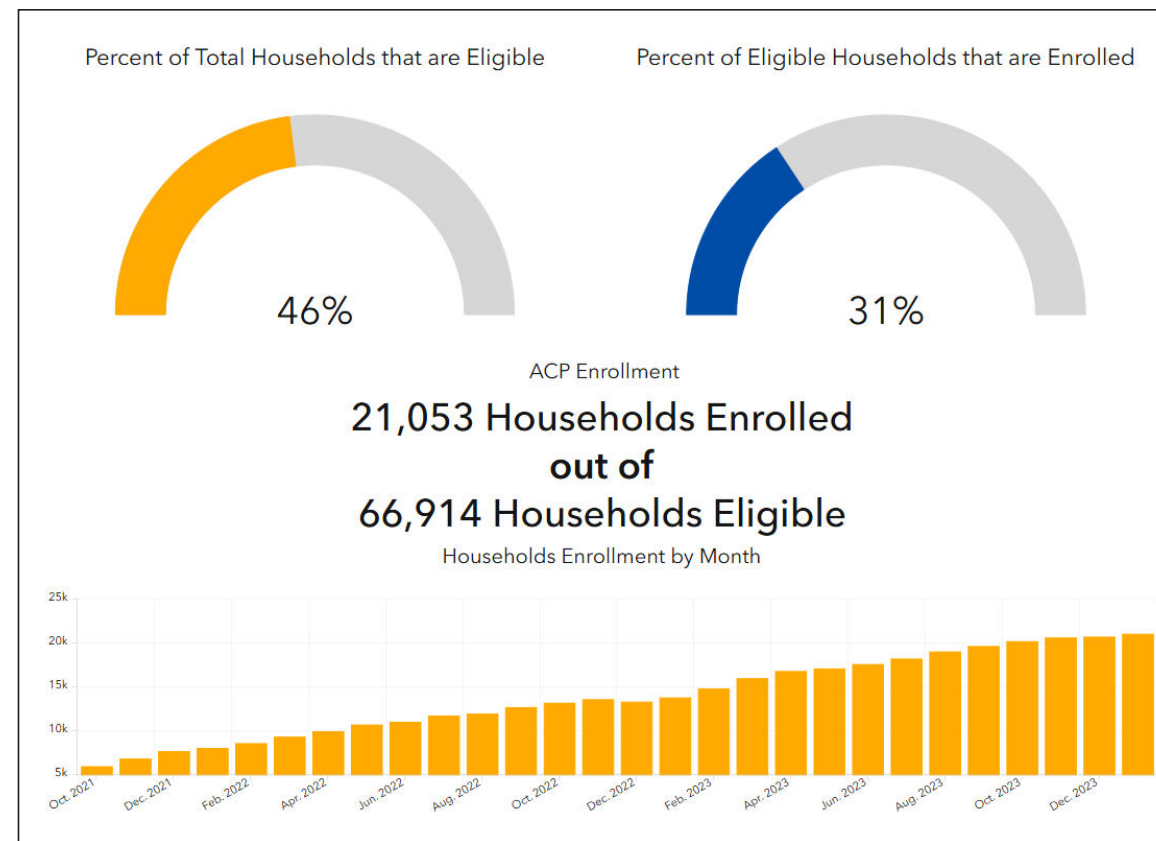
· Assessing and promoting low-cost internet options for key populations.

· Ensuring that internet access and digital literacy are integrated into success metrics across all partner efforts.

· Identifying one-on-one technical support for residents to assist with access challenges.

Percent of Total Households that are Eligible 46%

Percent of Eligible Households that are Enrolled 31%

ACP Enrollment
21,053 Households Enrolled
out of
66,914 Households Eligible

Households Enrollment by Month

Digital Literacy Training

DEC Focus Areas: Digital Literacy Training, Technical Support, Empowering Content

As part of the Statewide Digital Equity Plan (SDEP) development, the California Department of Technology created the Digital Equity Ecosystem Mapping Tool (DEEM). DEC partners contributed their program offerings through this tool, positioning Santa Barbara County as a top contributor to the DEEM data collection efforts. This data is publicly available on the SDEP website, allowing DEC partners to access and leverage it for their own initiatives.

Partners in Education	Online Safety Training for 371 device recipients
Santa Maria Public Library	Digital Literacy group classes & 1-on-1 support (in person & by phone)
Community Health Center of the Central Coast (CHCCC)	Plan-Do-Study-Act Digital Literacy trainings for staff Development of resources for staff and clients to access telehealth
Women's Economic Ventures (WEV)	Completed two cohorts (English and Spanish) of the EDC Curriculum Get Your Small Business Online (GYSBO) in partnership with the City of Goleta and 3CE

Access to Technology Grant Pilot Program

DEC Focus Areas: Affordable Broadband, Internet-Enabled Devices, Digital Literacy Training, Technical Support, Empowering Content, Countywide Leadership

In 2024, the Santa Barbara Foundation became the fiscal agent for a California Department of Aging Access to Technology (ATT) grant, a pilot project aimed at developing Digital Navigators—individuals who support the entire digital inclusion process—to assist aging adults and adults with disabilities in gaining access to connectivity and devices for internet use.

Five DEC partners participated in this program:

- American GI Forum
- CommUnify
- Community Partners in Caring
- Family Service Agency
- Independent Living Resource Center

These partners collectively completed 980 hours of digital navigator training through the Community Tech Network (CTN), served 654 community members, and distributed 573 devices.

What sets this program apart is its sustainability — the focus is not only on immediate impact but also on long-term community benefits. By training local staff and volunteers, we ensure that valuable knowledge and resources remain within the community, fostering lasting change.

This project serves as a model, positioning the DEC to scale similar digital equity efforts across different sub-populations and regions in the county. During the grant period, the DEC also redesigned its countywide website, sbcdec.org, to facilitate resource sharing among partners, promote training opportunities, and provide access to technology resources for local communities.

ATT Impact: Keeping our Older Adults Connected

Martha, a 65-year-old retiree, had never used a tablet before and was initially hesitant to try. However, she decided to attend one of our classes, where she learned the basics of tablet navigation — such as turning it on, connecting to Wi-Fi, and using essential apps.

As she progressed, Martha quickly gained confidence. She learned to send emails, browse the internet, and even video call her grandchildren. Martha went from feeling intimidated by technology to becoming an enthusiastic and capable user.

Looking Forward

Draft Santa Barbara County Digital Equity Plan

The Digital Equity Coalition (DEC) is ready to leverage data from our partnership table to identify areas of need and develop strategies for achieving our digital inclusion goals across Santa Barbara County. Through strong collaboration with our partners, we aim to align with key mission pillars—workforce development, healthcare, education, civic participation, and social justice. By utilizing strategic goals and objectives, we will define the priorities of the Digital Equity Plan and prepare ourselves to deepen countywide leadership in the prioritization of infrastructure plans.

Opportunities and Context of Digital Equity Efforts

The years 2024-2025 offer a rare opportunity to secure once-in-a-generation funding to close the digital divide, with significant support from federal and state agencies, as well as non-profit organizations. The DEC is strategically positioned to secure sustainable funding for its ongoing work in underserved communities. By leveraging our countywide leadership role, we will continue to promote broadband access, adoption, and training through existing programs.

Our outreach strategies are designed to be multilingual, culturally responsive, and adaptable to the evolving needs of the community. This comprehensive approach enables the DEC to effectively tackle digital disparities while refining our strategies as digital literacy and access continue to improve across Santa Barbara County.

Upcoming Opportunities in 2025

- Infrastructure and Jobs Act: Allocations to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) support infrastructure, access, affordability, and digital literacy.
- California Department of Technology (CDT) & California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC): Administer NTIA allocations and state funds through SB 156 and the California Broadband for All Initiative, resulting in the Statewide Digital Equity Plan (SDEP).
- California Emerging Technology Fund (CETF): Convening the statewide Digital Equity Coalition, promoting initiatives focused on improving access, affordability, and technical support.
- California Advanced Services Fund (CASF) Grants: Ongoing funding through SB 156, including Adoption Grants for broadband access, digital literacy, and call centers, as well as a Public Housing Grant for infrastructure projects, including those in farmworker housing and mobile home parks.
- Local Governments, Educational Institutions, and Nonprofits: These organizations are key champions of digital equity throughout the state and provide essential complementary funding to help achieve the Broadband for All goals outlined in the SDEP.

Digital Equity Coalition for Santa Barbara County

Steering Committee

American GI Forum Education Foundation (AGIF)

Broadband Consortium of the Pacific Coast

CommUnify

Community Health Centers of the Central Coast

County of Santa Barbara

Economic Development Collaborative

Family Services Agency of Santa Barbara County

Housing Authority of the County of Santa Barbara

Santa Barbara City College

Santa Barbara County Association of Governments

Santa Barbara County Department of Social Services

Santa Barbara County Education Office, Partners in Education

Santa Barbara Foundation

Santa Barbara Library

·Santa Barbara Public Library Foundation

Santa Maria Library

UC Santa Barbara

Partner Organizations

Allan Hancock College

American GI Forum Education Foundation (AGIF)

Boys & Girls Clubs of Mid Central Coast

Broadband Consortium, Pacific Coast

California Department of Rehabilitation

Carpinteria Children's Project

Carpinteria Community Library

Central Coast Alliance United for Sustainable Economy (CAUSE)

Central Coast CHW/P Capacity Building Collaborative

Channel Islands YMCA

City of Guadalupe

City of Lompoc

City of Santa Maria

CommUnify

Community Counseling and Education Center

Community Health Centers of the Central Coast

County of Santa Barbara

County of Santa Barbara Public Health

Cuyama Valley Family Resource Center

EconAlliance

Economic Development Collaborative

Family Service Agency of Santa Barbara County

Fighting Back Santa Maria Valley

First 5 Santa Barbara County

Food from the Heart

Fund for Santa Barbara

Future for Lompoc Youth

Guadalupe Dunes Center

Guadalupe Union School District

Housing Authority of the City of Santa Barbara

Housing Authority of the County of Santa Barbara

Independent Living Resource Center

Isla Vista Community Services District

LEAP: Learn · Engage · Advocate · Partner

Little House by the Park

Lompoc Adult School and Career Center

Lompoc Public Library

Lompoc Unified School District

Lompoc Valley Medical Center

Los Alamos Foundation

Mixteco Indigena Community Organizing Project (MICOP)

Momentum Work Inc

People Helping People

People's Self-Help Housing

Santa Barbara City College

Santa Barbara County Association of Governments

Santa Barbara County Department of Social Services

Santa Barbara County Education Office

Santa Barbara County Education Office, Partners in Education

Santa Barbara County Promotores Network

Santa Barbara County Workforce Development Board

Santa Barbara Foundation

Santa Barbara Neighborhood Clinics

Santa Barbara Public Library

Santa Barbara Public Library Foundation

Santa Maria-Bonita School District

Santa Maria Public Library

Santa Maria Valley Chamber of Commerce

Santa Maria Valley YMCA

Santa Ynez Tribal Health Clinic

Transition House

Transportation Planning (Caltrans District 5)

Tri Counties Regional Center

UC Santa Barbara

United Boys & Girls Clubs of Santa Barbara County

United Way of Northern Santa Barbara County

United Way of Santa Barbara County

Women's Economic Ventures (WEV)

Learn more about the Digital Equity Coalition!
Visit us at: **sbcdec.org**

Scan code with
your smartphone