



## OFA State and Tribal Technical Assistance and Resources *TANF and Technology: Preparing Workers for Long Term Success Webinar* Audience Q&A Follow-Up

The ability to access the internet and technological tools and then use those tools to access, create, share, and evaluate information is essential for employee success in most work environments. Almost all jobs integrate technology, whether it is for internal work processes such as submitting timesheets and completing online safety training or for actual job duties such as using specific computer software, counting inventory using a smartphone app, or operating machinery. Many jobs even require submission of an application online, which can be a barrier for jobseekers who lack access to the internet and digital tools. The prevalence of technology as a critical element of job attainment and success presents cross-cutting challenges to TANF participants who are more likely to lack basic technological skills, may have recently experienced job loss, and who lack the resources to own the appropriate technology required by most jobs, including laptops, tablets, and high-speed broadband.

On April 28, 2021, the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) hosted a webinar titled *TANF and Technology: Preparing Workers for Long Term Success* to discuss strategies TANF programs can implement to advance digital and technological literacy among the clients they serve. The webinar featured presentations by:

- Pamela Loprest, Ph.D., Senior Fellow, Urban Institute
- Scott Steiner, Engineering Branch Chief, Loan Origination and Approval Division, Rural Utilities Service, United States Department of Agriculture
- Charlene Miles, Education and Training Manager, Employment and Training Services Department, Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC)
- Samantha Hansen, Senior Manager, Employment & Training Services Department, Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC)
- Melissa Stallings, Chief Program Officer, Byte Back

Speakers explored how technology literacy increases equity in the workplace, the importance of access to digital tools, as well as shared examples of state TANF and tribal technology literacy programming. Following the moderated panel discussion, presenters engaged in a Q&A session with the audience. This document provides the answers to the submitted questions that were not answered live.

### QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS<sup>1</sup>

**Question:** Does Byte Back serve immigrant and refugee students? If so, could you share lessons learned while working with those populations?

**Ms. Stallings:** Our student population is incredibly diverse and spans all abilities, genders, and cultural identities. However, it is important to note that one of the enrollment requirements for our certification pathway is the provision of I-9 documentation. This is important because we are a workforce training

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<sup>1</sup> Some responses have been edited for brevity and clarity.



organization and our employer partnerships and funding sustainability rely on the fact that our students are ready and able to enter employment immediately upon completion of training without delay.

Language barriers can also be difficult when supporting our immigrant students with career opportunities, especially since the positions that they enter are largely customer service and depend on English fluency.

In the past, we have offered IT training in Spanish through a collaboration with a local organization. We also partner with English as a Second Language (ESL) organizations to provide support where needed. There is strength in numbers, and you do not have to be everything to everyone. There is always a community you can rely on. Partnering with local organizations to serve similar target populations eases your program's lift and allows you to celebrate successes together!

**Question:** What are some strategies for working with participants who lack basic technology skills?

**Ms. Miles and Ms. Hansen:** Some strategies include:

- Using icebreakers to gauge audience knowledge and comfort with subject matter.
- Walking participants step by step through how to use technology tools.
- Streamlining content to prevent Zoom fatigue.
- Conducting frequent check-ins with participants to ensure they are keeping up with the class.
- Encouraging participants to join follow up workshops to practice what they learned.
- Offering a basic technology skills workshop.

**Question:** How do you ensure program participants return loaner laptops?

**Ms. Stallings:** There is not an exact science to solving this; however, we make it very easy to return a laptop (pick-up, drop-off, and pre-paid mail). When a device is not returned, Byte Back marks the person ineligible for future services in our data management system.

Luckily, we have not had any issues receiving loaner laptops back within our Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) project. Folks are likely concerned that their benefits and/or services might be impacted. While DC SNAP does not cut off participant benefits for failure to return a laptop, participants who do not return equipment do become ineligible to continue receiving employment and training services.

**Question:** Does Byte Back offer digital literacy trainings for trainers?

Ms. Stallings: Byte Back offers digital literacy training to trainers for a fee. If interested, contact Melissa Stallings, Chief Program Officer, Byte Back at [Mstallings@ByteBack.org](mailto:Mstallings@ByteBack.org).

**Question:** What is the difference between broadband and "regular" internet?

**Mr. Steiner:** The main distinction between the two is the speed. The Rural Utilities Service (RUS) is tasked with helping to distribute contemporary internet speeds out to areas that lack it to help facilitate access to economic, educational, medical, and quality of life opportunities for those living in rural areas.



Broadband refers to high speed internet. There is no universal definition for the term and even within RUS there is some variation across programs and over time. As an example, both our [ReConnect](#) and [Community Connect](#) programs build their eligibility requirements around lack of internet service. Acceptable internet speeds fall between 10 Mbps download speeds and 1 Mbps upload speeds; below that we consider a house “unserved” for eligibility purposes.

RUS requires grantees provide at minimum 25 Mbps download speeds and 3 Mbps upload speeds to subscribers in areas we fund. Many of our projects offer higher speeds than required, but we are technology neutral and will finance any technology that can be demonstrated to exceed the 25/3 requirements. Common examples include Fiber optic networks, Hybrid Fiber Coaxial (cable modem), or fixed wireless systems.

As with Broadband, it is difficult to know what is meant by “regular” internet. Often what is referred to as “regular internet” is older DSL technology, or some lower speed fixed wireless technology.

**Question:** Will the ReConnect and Rural Broadband (and maybe other programs) receive pandemic funding? If so, will applications be accepted again?

**Mr. Steiner:** This past year, some of our programs received funding as part of the CARES Act. As a result, we reviewed applications and awarded qualifying projects. We also awarded winning projects with non-CARES Act funding. It is difficult to say whether RUS will receive additional pandemic-related funding. Nonetheless, RUS programs have in-house funding available and will continue to accept applications.

**Question:** How does Byte Back decide which populations need technology services or classes the most?

**Ms. Stallings:** The provision of laptops has not been based on which populations need it most, but rather what is available in our inventory and how soon classes of interest start.

Within the SNAP loaner project, laptops are available to all DC SNAP funded programs and their SNAP-eligible customers. Grantees submit a request on behalf of customers. SNAP DC verifies their eligibility and then Byte Back provides the device.

Eligibility for Byte Back classes is first determined by whether a person is unemployed or underemployed. We verify this through income documentation. Applicants also go through our admissions process to determine continued eligibility. Applicants submit a training application, complete an information session, take technical, basic literacy, and math assessments, participate in an interview, and submit enrollment documents.

**Question:** What software/program is needed to submit applications to Cook Inlet Tribal Council’s (CITC) program online?

**Ms. Miles and Ms. Hansen:** At this time, CITC does not use a software for applications but we have created a PDF version of our application and embedded a digital signature to our website. Once the form is completed, participants email the application to CITC’s eligibility distribution email. To view a PDF version of CITC’s application, click [here](#).