



**Media Contact:**

Diane Holland, (202) 907-1566

Diane.Holland@fcc.gov

**For Immediate Release**

**COMMISSIONER STARKS ANNOUNCES  
2020 DIGITAL OPPORTUNITY EQUITY RECOGNITION PROGRAM HONOREES**

WASHINGTON, September 14, 2020—Today, Commissioner Starks announces the honorees of the inaugural Digital Opportunity Equity Recognition (DOER) Program, which was created to acknowledge the tireless efforts of Americans working to close the digital divide in communities without access to affordable, reliable broadband. The program honorees will be recognized at a virtual reception in October. Commissioner Starks issued the following statement about this year’s DOER honorees:

“It is clear that our long-standing digital divide has morphed into a monstrous new COVID-19 divide. From the start of the COVID-19 pandemic through now, I have heard stories about the innovative and rapid ways individuals, non-profit organizations, and companies are responding to the connectivity needs of people across this country who are seeking access to medical professionals via telehealth services, education, and safe ways to communicate with family and friends. In response to these efforts, I put out an open call to hear about heroic DOERs who have stepped up in their communities to ensure that no one gets left behind because they lack broadband connectivity. The DOER Program received an overwhelming response to that call with more than 60 submitted applications, each one impressive and laudable, and demonstrating a true commitment to serving communities through acts of substance and consequence, big and small, generosity and selflessness both during the pandemic and prior to the recent events that have changed our nation.

Because of all of the strong nominations I received, alongside my advisory board, narrowing down the honorees was very challenging. I believe every applicant is worthy of recognition but there were several that rose to the top because of the scope of their accomplishments and the impact they made. From rural areas to urban corridors, students to seniors, to say this year’s DOER honorees are a stellar group is an understatement. The scope of their accomplishments includes:

- Nationwide efforts that cover all 50 states;
- Specific and focused work in cities like Detroit, San Diego, Boston, Los Angeles, and New York City and across rural communities like Audubon, Iowa; Palmer, Alaska; and Northern Minnesota;
- Hundreds of community hotspots;
- Connections for over 600,000 students to devices and broadband during the pandemic;

- Connections to 16,000 public housing units;
- Thousands of miles of rural connectivity;
- Support for thousands of school districts, 160 library branches and community locations such as hospitals;
- Legal and governmental outreach and support to over 400 tribal communities;
- Thousands of jobs attained which have supported both families and the economy;

I am immensely proud of the work Americans are doing across this country to connect those who are being left behind. Below are the awardees, as recognized in three categories: Individual(s), Organization, and Corporation. Congratulations to all, and please keep up the hard work.”

### **Individual and Small Group DOERs**

***Monica Babine, Mike Gaffney, Cindy Aden, and Russ Elliott*** led multiple companies and nonprofits to bridge the digital divide by providing free broadband access to all Washingtonians using 260 community drive-in Wi-Fi hotspots and 600 overall hotspots during the course of a state-wide project in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The work of Monica Babine and Mike Gaffney of Washington State University Extension, Cindy Aden of the Washington State Library, and Russ Elliott of the Washington State Broadband Office led families to have the high-speed internet connections necessary for distance learning, remote work, telemedicine, and day-to-day essential services.

***Joshua Edmonds*** is the first Director of Digital Inclusion in Detroit, Michigan. He has leveraged public-private partnerships and raised over 20 million dollars of private capital to support digital inclusion program for students, coordinated various agencies to deploy Wi-Fi in parking lots, and distributed devices for disconnected residents to participate in court proceedings. Joshua has been a notably strong advocate for digital inclusion on the local, state, and federal level and his current work in Detroit and prior work in Cleveland has transformed lives.

***Dr. Nishal Mohan*** has been a champion of digital equity for the digitally underserved while at the National Science Foundation, US Ignite, and through his nonprofit—mohuman. He founded mohuman in 2018 to help underserved individuals and families access digital services that improve their lives. Among other notable accomplishments, he created the San Diego Digital Equity Coalition to aid coordination among digital equity organizations, government, members of the community, and other initiatives across San Diego.

***Leslie Morissette*** is the founder and CEO of Grahamtastic Connection, which was named in honor of her son, Graham, after he passed away from leukemia. Grahamtastic Connection has provided free devices (including iPads, laptops, and robots) and free Internet connections to over 2000 school children with cancer and other serious illnesses so they can stay connected to their friends, school, and medical providers while undergoing treatment.

**Matthew Rantanen, Geoffrey Blackwell, and Irene Flannery** are relentless advocates for tribal communities. They have worked directly with 420 tribal communities during the COVID-19 crisis to create both short-term and long-term connectivity solutions. Matthew Rantanen is Director of Technology for Southern California Tribal Chairman's Association, Geoffrey Blackwell is Chief Strategy Officer and General Counsel for AMERIND Risk, and Irene Flannery is Director of AMERIND Critical Infrastructure. Additionally, the group provided support and facilitated outreach for tribal communities applying for the 2.5 GHz Rural Tribal Priority Window.

**Dr. Kiesha Taylor, National Education Administrator for T-Mobile For Education,** oversees T-Mobile's EmpowerED program, which provides free and reduced broadband service, as well as affordable Wi-Fi hotspots and tablets, to low-income children across the country. T-Mobile's EmpowerED 2.0 effort provides eligible schools and school districts with up to \$200/per student for the purchase of mobile internet devices and offers mobile data plans ranging in price from \$0 per month to \$20 per month based on data allowances and mobile speeds. Dr. Taylor was instrumental in connecting with more than 1,000 schools and school districts nationwide to provide over 600,000 low-income students (and counting) with internet connectivity and devices that will allow them to stay connected and continue their education online.

### **Organization DOERs**

**America's Libraries-** Libraries across the nation have consistently bridged the digital divide by providing essential access to the internet, devices, digital literacy training, rich content, and services to the disconnected. In response to COVID-19, 93% of public libraries surveyed by the Public Library Association said they provide (or plan to provide) free Wi-Fi access on their grounds even when their buildings are closed to the public; 44% of public libraries moved routers outdoors to improve public access; and 23% of libraries surveyed also provide Wi-Fi hotspots for patrons to check out and use at home. Additionally, at the time America's libraries were nominated, the Public Library Association was in the process of providing 80 library systems with devices for over 160 branch and community locations.

**human-I-T** has provided school districts, universities, and nonprofit organizations with the ability to connect low-income people with computers, internet connections, and digital literacy training. They accept donations and repurpose unwanted tech, thereby reducing the ever-growing stream of e-waste. Through this successful service, human I-T provides laptop and broadband access to underserved communities.

***ShelterTech*** brings digital connectivity and improves access to social services for over 9,000 individuals experiencing homelessness in San Francisco. ShelterTech works in partnership with the City of San Francisco and local ISP, Monkeybrains, to provide free, turn-key Wi-Fi solutions to shelters and transitional housing facilities in the city. During the COVID-19 pandemic, ShelterTech rapidly adjusted their database of over 1400 human services to include relevant resources that would assist the unhoused in staying safe during the pandemic.

***Tech Goes Home*** works to achieve digital equity by providing the critical trio of digital skills, internet, and a device so individuals can continue their education, apply for jobs and unemployment benefits, order essentials such as food and medicine, and access telehealth. Over the last five years, Tech Goes Home has distributed 14,500 new computers in communities across Greater Boston. In 2019, 80% of adult Tech Goes Home graduates were more likely to use the internet for job resources and/or educational purposes, 520 unemployed graduates found jobs, and 1,366 adult graduates secured better jobs due to Tech Goes Home.

***Warner Public Schools-*** In partnership with Cross Telephone, Warner Public Schools launched the Connect the Children program to connect all students without an internet connection during the COVID-19 pandemic. With the goal of keeping students connected at low to virtually no cost to their families, they connected over 400 students to the internet for the remainder of the 2019-20 school year – over 200 of which had no connectivity prior to the pandemic.

### **Corporate DOERs**

***Consolidated Telecommunications Co. (CTC)*** partnered with the Brainerd School District in Minnesota to coordinate in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Within two days, using data provided by the school district on all students that did not have access to a reliable connection, CTC plotted hundreds of students into its GIS mapping system and partnered with the District to contact all families within their service area. The information led to them connecting 100 students within a week without regard to their families' credit rating, history with CTC, or ability to pay. By the end of April, CTC connected over 300 additional homes.

***Hill Country Telephone Cooperative, Inc (HCTC)*** identified students and teachers in need of Internet service within 15 counties across Texas and provided service free of charge to those in need for the remainder of the school year (March - June 2020). At the time their application was submitted, HCTC had invested over a hundred thousand dollars in communities by rolling out broadband only service and providing copper customers with the maximum level of broadband available without any upcharge.

***Horry Telephone Cooperative (HTC)*** had connected 675 residences at the time they submitted their DOER application, completing installations within seven business days after confirming that 843 primary residences within their service area had no access to internet. HTC also installed seven Wi-Fi hotspots throughout Horry and Georgetown counties in South Carolina to help keep the community connected.

***Matanuska Telephone Association, Inc. (MTA)*** provided free upgrades to nearly 3,000 area students and educators as they transitioned to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. To ensure that borough officials in the Mat-Su Valley could keep systems and operations running smoothly, MTA upgraded services, as requested, at no additional cost to borough offices to accommodate remote work. Additionally, MTA partnered with the City of Wasilla, Palmer, Houston, and the Mat-Su Borough to install drive-in Wi-Fi hotspots to provide a way to get online for those without internet at home.

***Midco*** worked with the State of North Dakota and local school districts to provide free Internet service for families who were without service; this was done in response to the COVID-19 school closures. Their quick decision to provide this service, coupled with their rapid installation response made distance learning possible. They also created a new Internet service option for their customers, allowing for a \$14.95 per month high speed broadband connection, without requiring families to navigate lengthy forms and red tape.

***NISHNANET*** is a local family owned ISP started in 2018 that delivers broadband to approximately 500 square miles of Cass and Audubon, Iowa, servicing hundreds of families, farms and small businesses. NISHNANET's service is affordable and priced below typical urban median broadband prices. The need for their service arose when regional providers pulled the plug on customers outside of their ILEC service areas after completing their local fiber buildouts. They've assisted the Atlantic Community School District with building a private CBRS LTE network to provide connectivity for low income/non-broadband connected homes and to support the district's "Return to Learn" plan for students who are unable to attend traditional classes.

***NTUA Wireless, LLC*** implemented service enhancements to assist the Navajo Nation's response to COVID-19. They offered discounted broadband for K-12 and college students and teachers, deployed 30 high-speed Wi-Fi devices across the Navajo Nation, and worked with wireless companies to secure a Special Temporary Authorization for the purpose of utilizing unused 8700 MH spectrum to double network capacity on the Navajo Nation.

***Paul Bunyan Communications*** and its cooperative members have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic including the transition to working from home, increased telehealth services, and distance learning. Paul Bunyan Communications worked directly with the school districts it serves to quickly develop creative solutions to ensure broadband access for students by installing multiple Wi-Fi hot spots so students and their families in unserved areas around the cooperative would not be left behind. The cooperative has now built one of the largest all-fiber optic rural broadband networks in the United States that is delivering broadband speeds, both upload and download, up to 1 gigabit per second to over 23,000 rural locations in northern Minnesota.

***Starry, Inc.*** is an innovative wideband hybrid wireless ISP that has concentrated on closing the digital divide in densely populated urban communities by launching Starry Connect in 2018. For \$15 month, residents living in their Connect communities across Boston, New York City, Denver, and Los Angeles, receive 30 Mbps with no data caps or long-term contracts. At the time their application was submitted, more than 16,000 units of public and affordable housing participated in the Starry Connect program.

***Tri-Co Connections*** created the Senior2Senior Program which connects older residents to younger tech mentors. The company coordinates with four senior centers and local high schools to offer seniors a free eight-week course taught by their tech mentors where they focus on telemedicine, online government resources, banking, employment, shopping, cybersecurity, and connecting with family through Skype and other video conferencing platforms.

***Triad Wireless*** company launched its Education Everywhere program in 2011 to support families in need of low-cost Internet across communities in Arizona. The \$10 per month program provides filtered Internet access to school district-approved websites and applications for their students. Demand for their service forced Triad Wireless to find additional buildings to install wireless radio towers that could deliver their affordable services. At the time their application was submitted, Triad Wireless had signed up an additional 250 families to address internet connectivity needs during the pandemic.

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**Office of Commissioner Geoffrey Starks: (202) 418-2500**  
**ASL Videophone: (844) 432-2275**  
**TTY: (888) 835-5322**  
**Twitter: @GeoffreyStarks**  
**[www.fcc.gov/about/leadership/geoffrey-starks](http://www.fcc.gov/about/leadership/geoffrey-starks)**

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