Closing the Affordability Gap for First Nations Connectivity

First Nations Technology Council

June 2026

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Executive Summary

Across British Columbia, most communities have some form of internet infrastructure in place. In 2026, 97% of homes and 80% of rural homes now have access to high-speed internet. In First Nations communities, access has reached 88% compared to just 66% in 2017.[1] Yet for many First Nations households, being "served" does not mean being connected. While network buildouts have significantly reduced coverage gaps, high monthly service costs continue to keep families offline or limit how they are able to use the internet at home.

Affordability has become one of the most pressing barriers to digital equity. Internet affordability challenges are shaped by both price and availability. While fibre plans may be priced consistently where they are offered, basic high-speed service can cost more in rural areas, and many rural, remote, and First Nations communities continue to face limited provider choice. For individuals and families living on fixed or limited incomes, internet bills can take up a disproportionate share of monthly household expenses.

The impacts of unaffordable home internet are far-reaching. Reliable connectivity supports students completing schoolwork, adults pursuing education and training, patients accessing virtual health care, entrepreneurs running businesses, and community members participating in governance and consultation processes. It also supports language revitalization, cultural programming, emergency communications, and connection to family and community. Without affordable service at home, these opportunities are unevenly distributed.

Affordable, dependable internet is also fundamental to First Nations exercising their inherent and legislated rights. When internet access limits participation, First Nations' rights, including those recognized by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) Act, are undermined. When the internet is unaffordable, community members may be excluded from decisions that affect their lands, waters, and futures, making digital affordability a core Nation-building issue.

This report examines the affordability gap facing First Nations in British Columbia and assesses existing subsidy programs, emerging models, and community- driven approaches aimed at lowering costs. It is the third publication in the Indigenous Digital Enablement Series (IDES), an initiative led by the First Nations Technology Council to strengthen digital knowledge, capacity, and decision-making tools for First Nations.

Closing the infrastructure gap alone is insufficient. Achieving digital connectivity and equity requires coordinated action among First Nations, governments, and industry to address affordability, simplify access to subsidies, build local capacity, and embed long-term sustainability into connectivity strategies.

[1] Ministry of Citizens Services, "Connectivity Coverage in B.C.", accessed February 24, 2026, www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/connectivity-in-bc/20358.

Understanding the Digital Landscape

Connectivity in British Columbia is largely shaped by geography. Both across Canada and within BC, vast terrain and relatively small, spread-out populations makes building and maintaining internet infrastructure across vast mountain ranges, granite corridors, expansive rivers and harsh northern landscapes especially costly. Today, significant progress has been made in expanding internet infrastructure across British Columbia, with only 3% of households without access to high-speed internet in the province.

However, connectivity does not necessarily mean affordability, and many First Nations households continue to face inequities and challenges accessing and affording reliable internet service.

Access to reliable and affordable internet is closely tied to where people live, with rural and remote communities facing distinct challenges[2] including limited competition among major internet service providers. In BC, 66% of Indigenous people live outside of the mainland and southwest region, compared to only 37% of non-Indigenous people[3], meaning Indigenous people are more likely to live in areas where internet service is harder and more costly to provide.

This research is guided by the First Nation Technology Council's mandate to support digital enablement and build digital skills. It is intended to support First Nations leadership, administrators, staff, partners, funders and others seeking to understand affordability barriers and advance practical solutions for First Nations connectivity. Access to affordable internet is a key part of this work and an important enabler for self-determination of First Nations. Reliable connectivity helps people stay connected to family and culture, access education and health services, find jobs, and participate in community and economic life. Without it, many everyday tasks become harder or impossible.

[2] First Nations Technology Council (2024). BC First Nations Community Internet Connectivity / Digital Equity (IDES 1) www.technologycouncil.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/FNTC-IDES1.pdf
[3] Williams, Ruth (2021). Current Status of Broadband Connectivity in First Nations Communities in B.C. Prepared for National Indigenous Economic Development Board, Pathways to Technology/ All Nations Trust Company

To understand the current digital affordability landscape, this research focused on three main questions:

1. What are the existing subsidized connectivity solutions? How effective are they in addressing affordability challenges for First Nations households, and what are the gaps in their accessibility and implementation?

2. What impact does the lack of affordable connectivity solutions have on First Nations communities, particularly in remote areas?

3. What community-driven solutions can effectively address the affordability gap in digital access for First Nations communities?

This report is grounded in comprehensive desktop research and a series of interviews with First Nations experts, community members, government representatives, internet service providers, and other connectivity sector experts (see Appendix A for more details). A list of key terms is provided in Appendix C for clarity on technical concepts and terms used throughout this report.

This series explores topics related to connectivity and digital inclusion to equip First Nations with the knowledge and tools to advocate and make decisions that best suit their unique needs and contexts. It is important to examine affordable connectivity for all First Nations households and the current barriers as the Government of BC moves towards their commitment of ensuring 100% of households in the province have access to high-speed internet by 2027.

The Affordability Gap: Connectivity ≠ Affordability

Even when internet infrastructure is available, monthly costs can still be a barrier. In B.C., the average internet bill is about $106 per month, with rural households paying slightly more than urban households. At the basic high-speed standard of 50/10 Mbps[4], rural households pay about $22 more per month than urban households.[5, 6] Higher-speed fibre plans may cost the same in rural and urban areas, but they are still expensive: 1.5 Gbps and 2.5 Gbps fibre plans average about $145 per month, well above the provincial average.[7] This means affordability is not only about where a household lives, but also whether the services available are priced within reach. For low-income households, internet costs can take up 8—10% of monthly income, higher than the 4—6% affordability benchmark used by the Public Interest Advocacy Centre[8] and shared with the House of Commons in 2021.[9]

In BC, the average internet bill is about

$106/mo

Rural households pay about

$22/mo more

for basic high-speed service than urban households

Higher-speed fibre plans average about

$145/mo

*where available, fibre plans cost the same regardless of a household's location.

[4] In 2016, the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) set Internet speeds of at least 50/10Mbps as the target across Canada for service providers.

[5] Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, Communications Market Reports — Open Data, (Government of Canada, 2026), "Data — Monthly prices at year-end," https://crtc.gc.ca/eng/publications/reports/PolicyMonitoring/cmrd.htm

[6] Note: Rural and remote pricing is used as a proxy because many First Nations communities face similar geography, infrastructure, and provider-choice barriers. First Nations-specific affordability data remains limited.

[7] CRTC, Communications Market Reports — Open Data, "Data — Monthly Prices at Year-End."

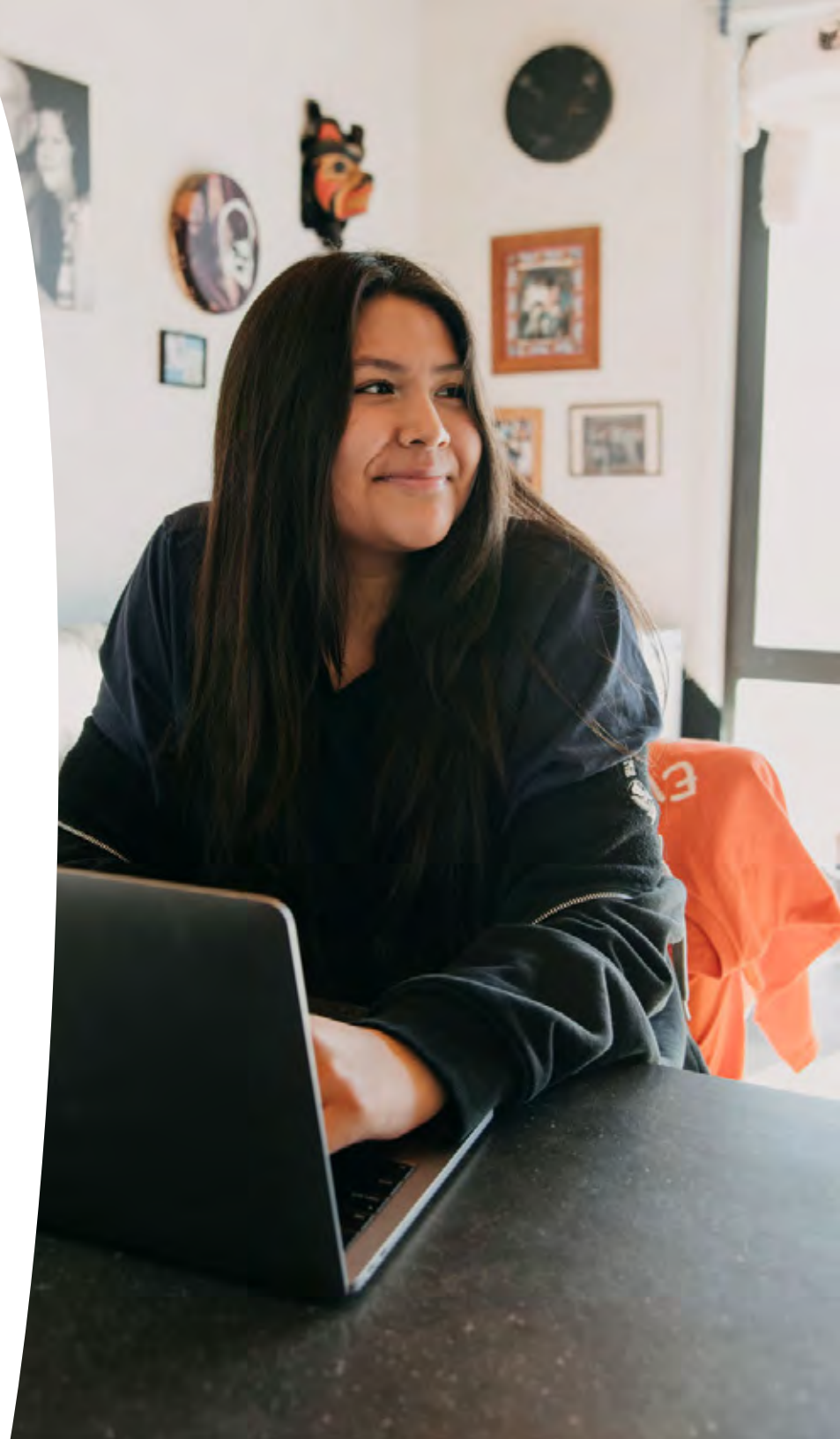
[8] Public Interest Advocacy Centre, No Consumer Left Behind: A National Broadband Accessibility and Affordability Strategy for All Canadians (2015), www.piac.ca/wp-content/ uploads/2015/03/PIAC-No-Consumer-Left-Behind-Final-Report-English.pdf. p. iv.

[9] House of Commons Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology (2021). Affordability and Accessibility of Telecommunications Services in Canada: Encouraging Competition to (Finally) Bridge the Digital Divide. 43rd Parliament, 2nd Session. www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/432/INDU/Reports/RP11439444/indurp07/indurp07-e.pdf. p. 15.

These costs force difficult choices. Some households reduce their internet speed, split service with family members, or disconnect entirely to manage other essential expenses. These decisions affect daily life, including how people learn, work, communicate, and take part in community activities.

A range of subsidized internet services provided by the Government of Canada and Internet Service Providers (ISPs) exist to help address the affordability gap (see Appendix B), but these programs are not always easy to access or well-known by communities. Program rules, complex application processes, limited eligibility requirements, and inconsistent delivery still exclude households from benefiting from low-price options and, ultimately, the host of privileges that the internet has to offer.

> ***"The size of the community [and location are] a big factor in affordability. [For] communities that are remote, there's not a lot of homes, or if there are homes, there's not a lot of jobs. And so getting connectivity in there, from an affordability perspective, is tough."***
>
> ~ First Nations information and communications technology expert



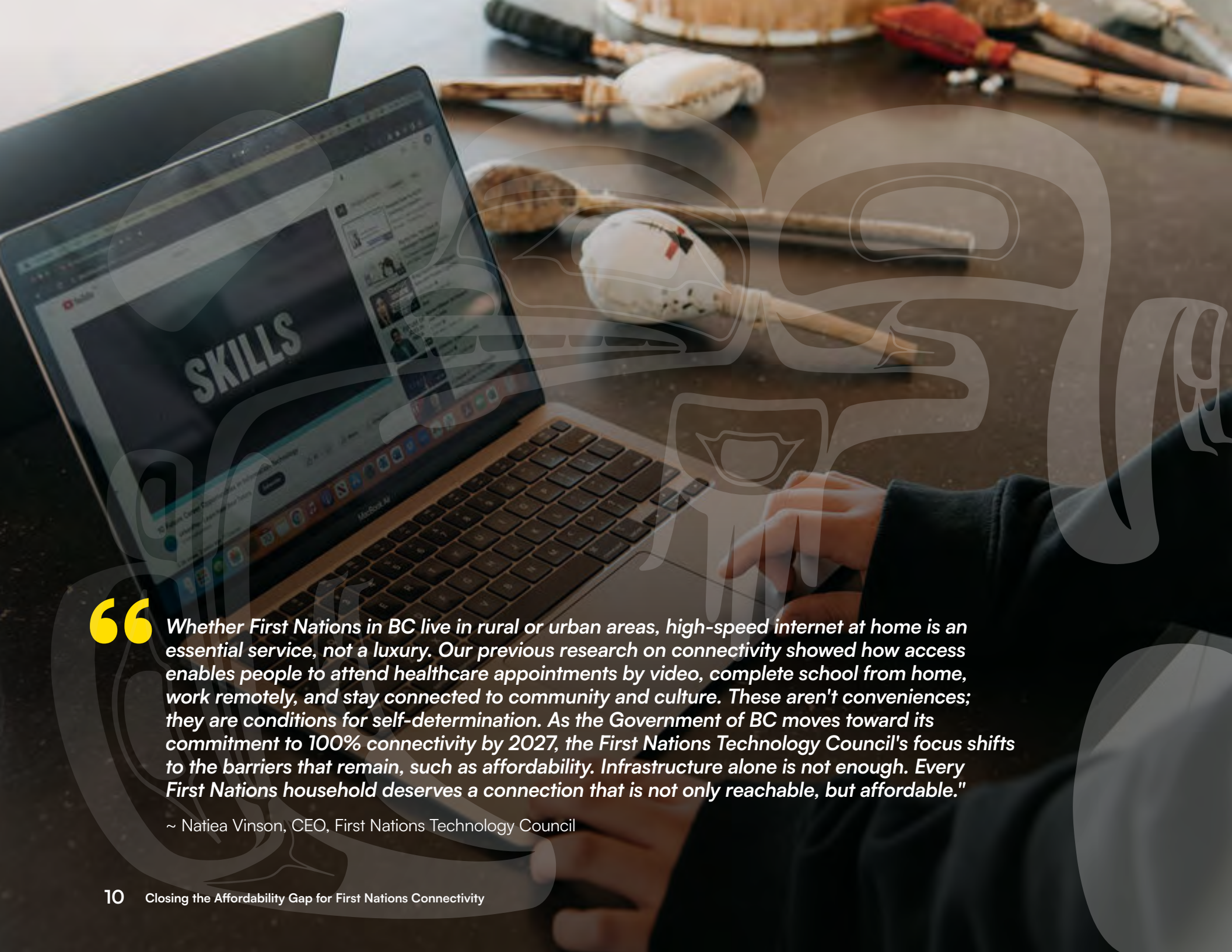
The Real-World Impacts of Disconnection and Unaffordability

Having affordable and reliable internet at home affects many aspects of daily life. Like housing, transportation, and access to health care, internet access shapes wellbeing, opportunity, and participation in communities and society as a whole. For First Nations, where historic underinvestment already limits access to services, unaffordable or unreliable internet only further magnifies existing inequities.

Even in communities where the infrastructure is in place, affordability, reliability, and awareness of internet options continue to be major barriers. Disconnection is not just about a lack of service; it is about missed opportunities, added stress, and inequitable participation in a society that largely assumes all people are online.

Lack of affordability continues to worsen the digital divide and digital exclusion of First Nations in areas such as:

- Economic Opportunities
- Education System
- Labour Market
- Social Connection and Civic Discourse
- Community Safety and Emergency Response
- The Exercise of Self-Determination
- Nation-Building
- Cultural and Language Revitalization



> ***Whether First Nations in BC live in rural or urban areas, high-speed internet at home is an essential service, not a luxury. Our previous research on connectivity showed how access enables people to attend healthcare appointments by video, complete school from home, work remotely, and stay connected to community and culture. These aren't conveniences; they are conditions for self-determination. As the Government of BC moves toward its commitment to 100% connectivity by 2027, the First Nations Technology Council's focus shifts to the barriers that remain, such as affordability. Infrastructure alone is not enough. Every First Nations household deserves a connection that is not only reachable, but affordable."***
>
> ~ Natiea Vinson, CEO, First Nations Technology Council

Economic Participation and Opportunity

Affordable internet allows people to work from home, run businesses, and support the local economy. The Information and Communications Technology Council (ICTC) estimates that achieving 100% broadband connectivity across BC could increase employment levels by about 2.9% overall.[9] For First Nations in BC, this would mean approximately 1,250 additional jobs created when full connectivity is reached.[10]

Importantly, progress to date has already contributed an estimated 460 new jobs in First Nations communities as connectivity improves.[11] This is because for many First Nations, connectivity makes it possible to work from anywhere, reducing the need to leave their home community to find employment elsewhere and instead allowing them to support stronger connections to community and culture.

Entrepreneurs rely on connectivity to market and sell products online, manage bookings, process payments, and communicate with customers. When internet service is affordable, businesses can operate in communities while reaching broader markets, helping keep income within the Nation and supporting local economic resilience.

An example of this is the role reliable internet plays in supporting First Nations tourism businesses and local industries. Without dependable connectivity, communities face barriers to promoting tourism opportunities, managing bookings, and supporting local operators.

In this way, affordable internet functions as a foundation for many Nations' economic self-sufficiency. When access is limited, economic opportunities are constrained, but when access is equitable, connectivity supports local entrepreneurship, remote work, and stronger community economies.

> ***"People come to your town, they expect to have connectivity."***
>
> ~ Government telecommunications director

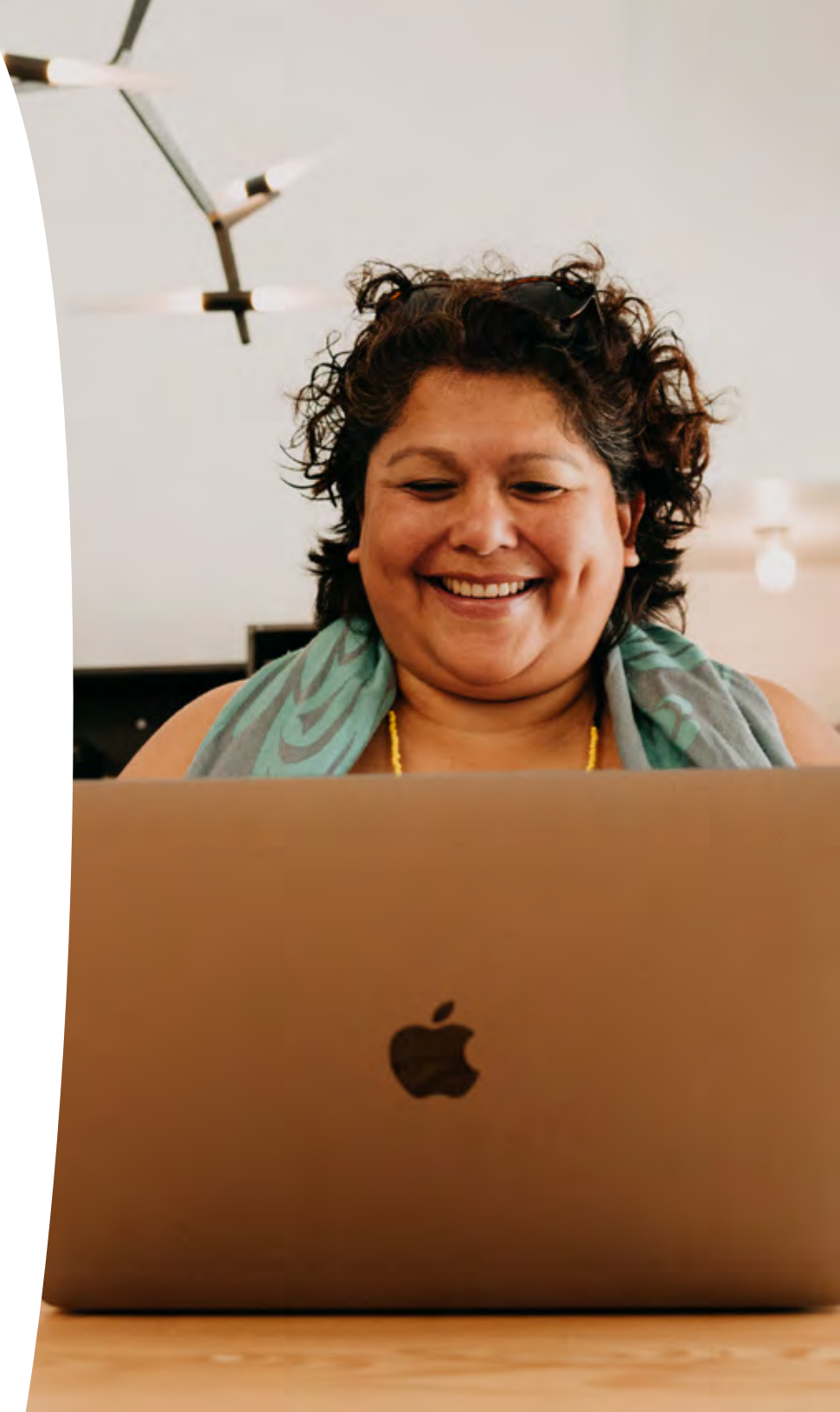
[9] First Nations Technology Council, *Connectivity*, 21.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.

Education and Lifelong Learning

Online and virtual education options have only continued to expand in British Columbia, Canada, and around the world since the COVID-19 pandemic. However, these opportunities rely entirely on students having access to affordable and reliable internet service: from homework assignments and research to virtual classrooms and adult learning programs, connectivity shapes who can participate and who is left out.

For students without reliable home internet, their participation in educational experiences and opportunities can depend on shared community spaces such as band offices, libraries, or computer labs. These spaces can provide supportive alternatives, but they are typically limited to business hours, creating barriers for students who need to study in the evenings or on weekends and for adults balancing work, caregiving, and education.

Adult learners are particularly affected by the affordability gap in internet access. Many training programs and certifications are now offered online, but without affordable home internet, participation becomes difficult or impossible. As a result, connectivity functions as a gatekeeper to educational opportunity for anyone seeking to upgrade skills or retrain for new careers, reinforcing cycles of economic disparity and underemployment. When internet access is inequitable, educational outcomes become uneven as well, shaping long-term economic and social trajectories.



Social Connection, Participation and Youth Inclusion

Affordable internet supports everyday social connections for individuals, families, and communities. For Elders, people with disabilities, and those with limited mobility, reliable connectivity helps reduce isolation by making it easier to stay in touch with family, receive community updates, FaceTime their loved ones, and join virtual community gatherings. When internet service is unaffordable, households may have to prioritize basic needs such as food, utilities, and transportation over home internet. Even modest monthly costs can be a barrier for people on fixed or limited incomes, resulting in uneven access within communities and increased isolation for those who are already vulnerable.

Youth are also deeply affected by the digital exclusion created by the affordability gap. Online spaces are increasingly playing a role in social life, identity-building, and peer connection. When young people cannot reliably access these online spaces, they can feel excluded or disconnected from their peers, both within and outside their communities, which can negatively affect confidence and mental well-being.

> ***"Our elders are ... in a situation where they're having to choose and well, I guess it's not even a choice [...] All of their money is going to their basic needs. And so internet connectivity is kind of like a want as opposed to a need."***
>
> ~ First Nations education manager

Community Health, Safety and Emergency Response

Reliable internet access is increasingly important for physical, mental, and emotional health. Virtual medical appointments, mental health counselling, and wellness supports are crucial to community wellbeing, particularly in rural or remote communities where in-person services are limited or require long-distance travel.

Connectivity is also critical for safety and emergency response. At both the household and First Nation levels, internet connectivity is essential for sharing important safety updates such as evacuation alerts or orders, emergency plans, emergency operations resources, and more. These communications often rely on social media or other internet-based services to ensure community members are informed and supported in times of crisis. When households lack reliable access, communication gaps increase safety risks and stress for families, leaders, and emergency responders.

Consultation and First Nations' Free, Prior and Informed Consent

As federal and provincial government mandates push forward with major projects on Indigenous territories, the ability of First Nations to exercise free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) depends on having the time, information, and meaningful opportunities to participate in critical consultation processes, and this consent increasingly depends on reliable and affordable internet access. The Crown governments, as well as project proponents, now rely heavily on digital tools to share information, host meetings, and gather feedback related to major projects affecting First Nations lands, waters, and rights.

For Nations to exercise free, prior, and informed consent, community members must be able to access project information, participate in discussions, ask questions, and share their perspectives. This requires more than infrastructure; it requires affordable, dependable connectivity in homes and community spaces. When internet access is unreliable or unaffordable, participation is uneven, and some voices may be excluded from significant consent or decision-making processes.

Nation-Building

Reliable and affordable internet access plays a critical role in community development, decision-making, and governance. For many First Nations, good governance and community development are grounded in participation, ensuring citizens and members are informed, actively engaged, and able to share their input through elections, referenda, and other decision-making processes.

Equitable access to internet connectivity helps ensure all members can participate in shaping community priorities. As communications and engagements increasingly take place online, tools such as email, social media, virtual meeting platforms, and digital voting systems have become essential for reaching First Nations citizens and members, including those living away from their home communities. These tools help ensure timely information sharing and broader participation in decision-making processes, and rely on reliable internet connectivity for households.

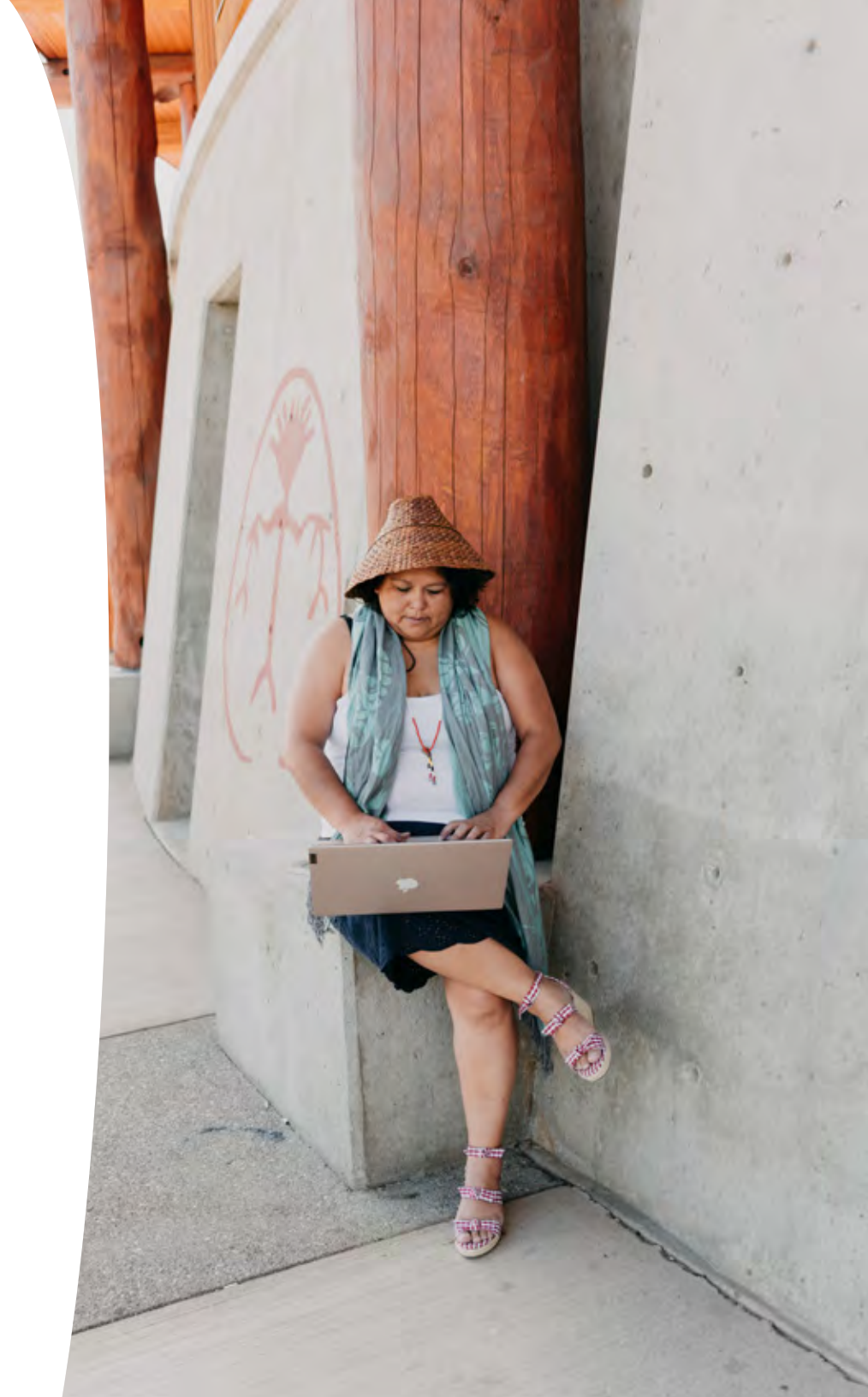
Connectivity also supports regional collaboration and participation in broader Indigenous networks and movements. When communities are digitally isolated, opportunities for shared learning, coordination, and collective advocacy are more limited. In the absence of reliable internet, information sharing often relies on in-person approaches such as door-to-door notices or printed newsletters. While these methods remain important, they require significant time and capacity and do not always reach everyone. These gaps highlight how an affordable and reliable internet supports strong governance, meaningful participation, and self-determination grounded in the voices of the whole community.

> ***"It is a bit challenging when our community is going through our electoral process, and low turnout has been a challenge for big things like land designation. We haven't got the numbers that we're looking for."***
>
> ~ First Nations education manager

Culture and Language

Access to internet connectivity also plays an important role in supporting cultural continuity, particularly through language sharing and learning. Affordable and reliable internet enables virtual cultural programming and online gatherings that connect community members across distances and generations. These tools are especially important for citizens who live away from their home communities but want to stay connected to language, culture, and teachings.

Digital platforms support the recording, sharing, and preservation of language and cultural knowledge in ways that can be guided by community protocols and priorities. When internet access is limited by cost or reliability, participation in these programs is reduced, and opportunities to strengthen language and culture are missed. Conversely, when connectivity is accessible and affordable, communities can expand language revitalization efforts, support intergenerational learning and create culturally safe digital spaces. This demonstrates that internet access is not just a technical service, but a key support for cultural and language preservation across generations.



Existing and Emerging Solutions: What's Working for First Nations

First Nations today are leading their own solutions to address local connectivity needs. These approaches recognize the importance of community control and local expertise in creating internet services that are sustainable and affordable over the long term.

Existing Telecommunications Programs

Large telecommunications providers, including Rogers and TELUS, offer discounted internet programs intended to make service more affordable for low-income households and individuals (see Appendix B for more information about the programs and eligibility). In particular, TELUS's Indigenous Internet for Good pilot offers useful lessons on how to reduce access barriers for Indigenous Nations and communities. By working directly with Indigenous governments, the program enables Nations to identify eligible households within their own communities, reducing reliance on standard eligibility criteria that may not reflect local needs. Programs like these can reduce monthly costs and help households stay connected to school, work, health care, family, and community.

However, awareness and access to these programs is low a mong community members and First Nations staff who are often responsible for facilitating community members in accessing the subsidies. Eligibility can often be tied to income thresholds or participation in government assistance programs, which can exclude households who are struggling but do not meet specific criteria. Application processes can also be complex, and information about available programs does not always reach First Nations communities, particularly in rural and remote areas.

For households that are not eligible for, or not enrolled in, these programs, another way to reduce costs may be through bundling, where internet services are offered alongside mobile or television services. While this approach may lower overall costs for some households, it does not always align with community needs, particularly when additional services are neither affordable nor useful.

Government Funding

Government funding has played an important role in expanding connectivity across BC, particularly in communities that were previously unserved or underserved. Programs such as Connecting Communities BC have supported the construction of broadband infrastructure, helping bring internet access closer to many First Nations communities.

At the same time, these programs generally focus on building infrastructure rather than reducing monthly service costs. As a result, some communities now have networks in place but still face high prices that make it difficult for households to connect.

The federal Connecting Families initiative (see Appendix B) offers discounted internet packages for eligible low-income households. While these programs have supported some families, their reach is limited; awareness remains low in many communities, and some ISPs may not participate in every region. In remote areas, households may not benefit simply because there are no participating providers.

The CRTC Broadband Fund[12], which provides financial support specifically for infrastructure projects, recently conducted a review to better support Indigenous applicants, communities, and Indigenous-led projects, signaling a significant long-term investment in connectivity and accessibility. The changes seek to reduce financial barriers for Indigenous applicants and funding recipients. Many projects are still underway, and communities are waiting to see how these investments translate into affordable, reliable service.

[12] Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission. Broadband Fund Review: Closing the digital divide in Canada. crtc.gc.ca/eng/internet/poli.htm

Community-Driven and First Nation-Led Approaches

Connected Coast

Connected Coast is a project managed by a partnership of CityWest and the Strathcona Regional District, in collaboration with local First Nations, ISPs, regional districts and governments.[13] Rather than delivering internet service directly to homes, the project focuses on bringing high-capacity fibre connectivity to communities, with retail ISPs then responsible for connecting individual households and businesses.

Connected Coast addresses affordability by providing the underlying infrastructure, making it easier and less costly for service providers to operate in coastal and remote areas; however, its role in addressing affordability of services is somewhat limited.

CityWest uses a consistent pricing approach across communities — charging the same rates regardless of whether a community is urban or rural — a model that is intended to prevent higher costs in remote areas. CityWest operates on the wholesale side, meaning other internet service providers can also connect to the network through a set pricing model. However, with monthly packages ranging from $88-138[14] Connected Coast still remains relatively expensive for many.

> ***[Connected Coast] takes on operational risk. If a Nation has existing infrastructure [they can] retain ownership and [Connected Coast] operates it on their behalf."***
>
> ~ Telecommunications and infrastructure expert

[13] Connected Coast. About the Project — Connected Coast. connectedcoast.ca/about
[14] CityWest. www.citywest.ca/north/shop/internet/personal/fibre-internet.

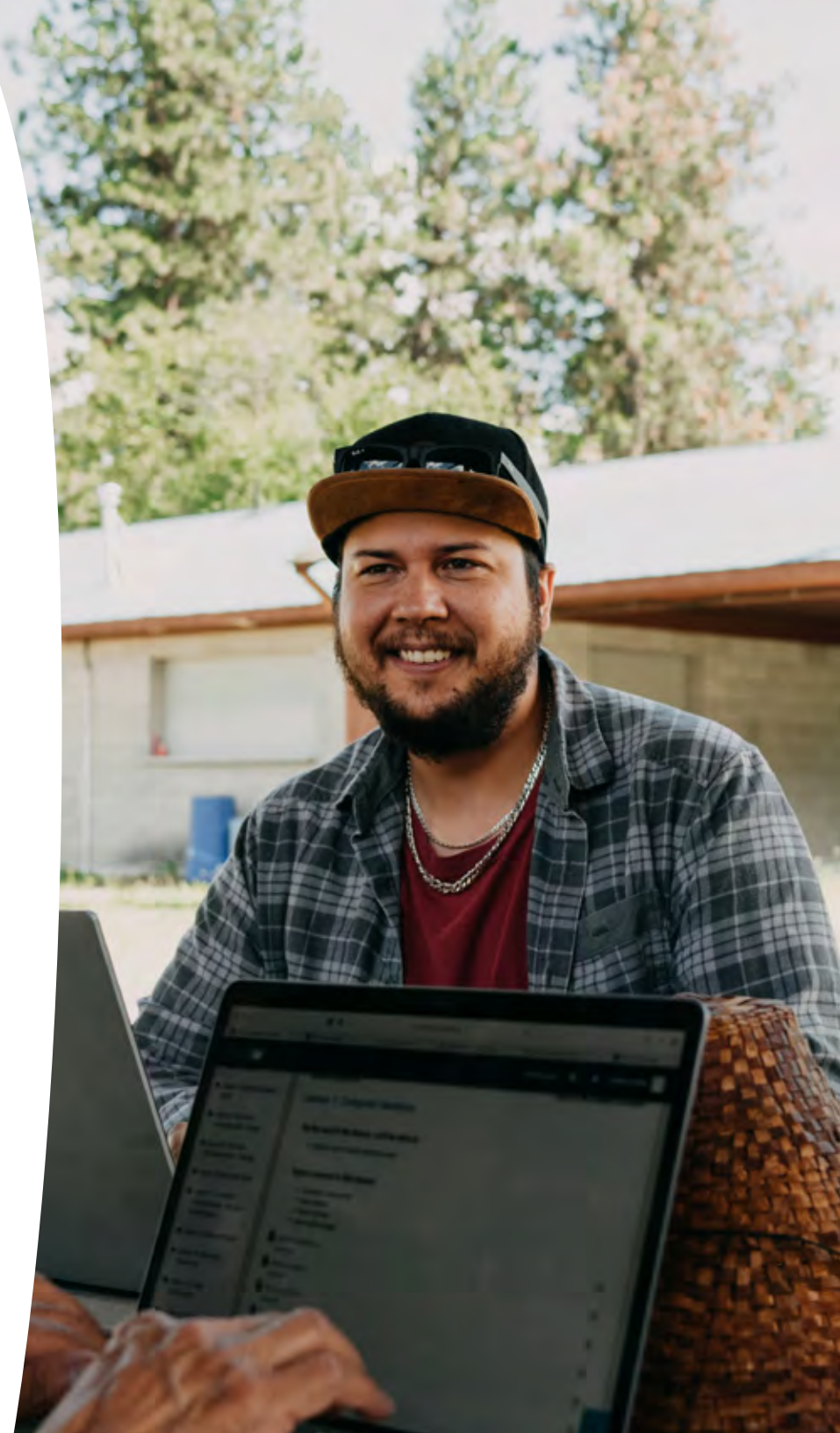
Community-based Internet Service Providers (ISPs)

Over the last decade, some small community-based internet service providers have emerged as First Nations sought to improve local connectivity and respond to gaps left by larger providers. These efforts reflect strong community leadership and a desire for greater local control over essential services. However, while these models are often grounded in community priorities, many have faced significant challenges moving from initial build-out to long-term operation.

Community-led ISPs are not often pursued by small communities or First Nations because they face multiple challenges including:

> ***"Really high capital requirements, the skills and the ongoing operating costs, the need to refresh the technology on a regular basis at very high levels, not to mention the geographic challenges."***
>
> ~ Government telecommunications director

Smaller internet service providers and community-owned networks often rely on start-up funding, but ongoing operations and maintenance costs can be extremely difficult to carry without stable, long-term funding. Internet infrastructure also needs regular upgrades, usually every few years, which adds to ongoing costs and makes First Nation-led ISP development burdensome and extremely expensive.



Pathways to Technology

Pathways to Technology, an Indigenous-managed project in BC that is currently in the process of sunsetting, works to bring affordable and reliable high-speed internet connectivity to First Nations in BC. The project achieved 92 transport builds[15] averaging $452,000 each and 88 last-mile builds[16] averaging $141,000 each.

Pathways to Technology worked alongside First Nations to support planning, coordination, and implementation in ways that reflected local priorities, governance structures, and capacity. This model provided connectivity investments that were community-supported, and aligned with long-term goals.

However, community run internet service models can face other challenges that make them increasingly difficult to maintain. We heard from interviewees about how community politics, difficulties with billing and payment collection, and the inability to enforce service disconnections when payments are not made, all contribute to the long-term viability of First Nation-led ISPs. Even in "white-label" models[17], where a larger provider supports operations, the service is often still perceived as being run by the Nation, making it difficult to manage non-payment in a way that larger providers can.

Ktunaxa Nation ultimately shifted its approach to community connectivity, recognizing that the greatest challenges were not technical but structural. The realities of delivering essential services within close-knit communities required a model that balanced financial sustainability with community relationships, leading the Nation to prioritize direct support to households.

[15] Transport builds (also called middle-mile builds) are the major network connections that bring high-capacity internet into a region or community. This includes fibre lines, submarine cables, or other infrastructure that connect communities to the broader internet backbone.

[16] Last-mile builds are the portion of internet network infrastructure that connects the main transport network directly to individual homes, buildings, or community facilities. This is often one of the most expensive parts of delivering internet in rural and remote communities.

[17] White-label models are arrangements where a larger ISP provides underlying network service, but a smaller organization, sometimes a First Nation, offers it to customers under their own name. The larger provider handles the technical operations, while the local provider manages customer relationships.

Case Study

Subsidized Internet Access in Ktunaxa Nation

The Ktunaxa Nation is made up of four communities in the East Kootenay region. In the early 2000s, the Nation recognized that poor connectivity between communities was limiting communication, service delivery, and economic opportunities, leading Ktunaxa to begin forming partnerships and exploring ways to improve internet access.

These early partnerships faced challenges and, by the mid-2000s, had largely fallen apart. In response, Ktunaxa took on the infrastructure across the region and in 2012, launched FlexiNet, a 100% Nation-owned internet service provider. While this marked an important step toward increasing connectivity, maintaining reliable service proved difficult. Weather regularly affected satellite connections, infrastructure maintenance was costly, and wholesale internet prices remained high.

Large providers such as TELUS and Shaw have been unable to expand service to Ktunaxa communities unless costs stayed below certain thresholds, limiting competition and options. Even when federal grants helped bring fibre to some areas, FlexiNet often paid thousands of dollars per month for bandwidth that individual urban customers could access for a fraction of the cost.

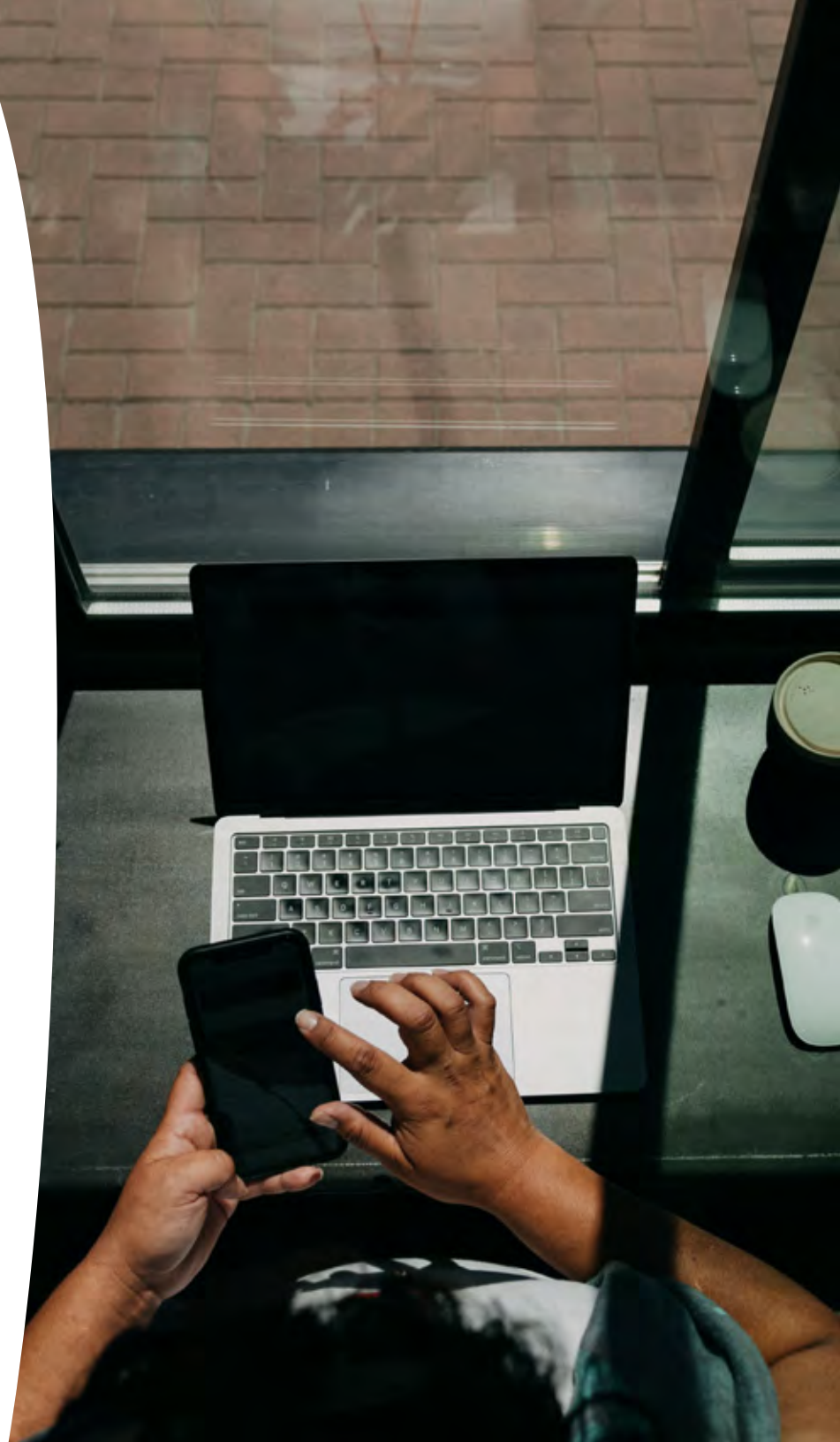
Affordability remained the central challenge. While many community members expected free or low-cost internet from a Nation-owned provider, high wholesale costs made this unrealistic. FlexiNet typically has to charge around $100 per household just to break even.

In 2020, Ktunaxa undertook a full assessment of its connectivity model. Through partnerships and a revenue-sharing agreement tied to local industry, the Nation was able to subsidize internet service for members. Between 2022 and 2023, they rolled out free internet service on reserve. In 2023 and 2024, any Ktunaxa member can access free FlexiNet service, and in instances where FlexiNet service cannot be provided, members receive a $55 subsidy to help pay for another service. Ktunaxa currently provides 135 households with this subsidy.

Ktunaxa's experience shows both the promise and the limits of community-owned connectivity. While Nation leadership, persistence, and partnerships made progress possible, long-term affordability remains constrained by wholesale pricing, infrastructure costs, and limited competition which are challenges that individual communities cannot solve alone.

Low Earth Orbit Satellites

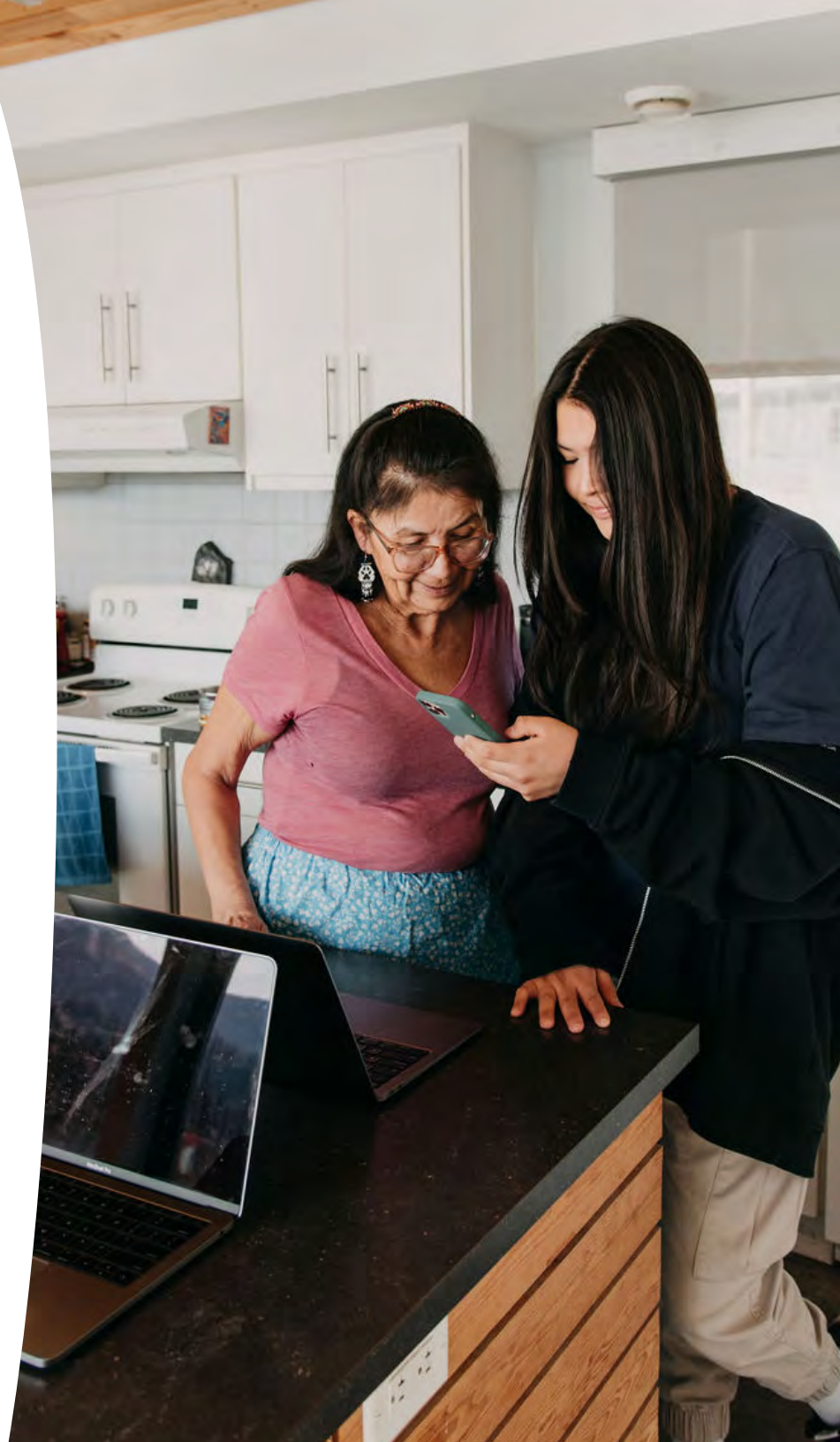
Low Earth Orbit (LEO) satellite internet is widely seen as a potential solution for ultra-remote communities where no other connectivity options are currently available. At the same time, there is concern over use of LEOs relying on services like Starlink, specifically about digital sovereignty and long-term autonomy since the company is not Canadian-owned. In contrast, Canadian-owned and regulated connectivity solutions are seen as offering stronger alignment with First Nations control and governance. While LEO services are sometimes described as an accessible option for those living in remote areas, interviewees questioned whether the cost reflects the quality and reliability of the service provided. For households with limited options, LEO may be "better than nothing," but it is not viewed as an ideal or long-term solution.



Beyond Affordability: Capacity and Information Gaps

Access to affordable connectivity also depends on having the staff, skills, and information needed to navigate complex applications, digital systems, and administrative requirements. First Nations staff and community members bring strong knowledge and problem-solving skills to this work, but are often expected to manage these processes without dedicated training or support. So, while the previously-mentioned subsidized internet packages do exist for First Nations and Indigenous clients specifically, awareness of and access to these programs remain uneven.

The lack of clear, accessible information about available affordability supports, including federal subsidy programs and low-cost internet plans remains a significant barrier. First Nations communities and staff may not be aware of what programs exist, how eligibility is determined, or how to apply. Information is often spread across multiple providers and government departments, making it difficult to navigate. As a result, programs designed to improve affordability are underused. Closing these information gaps in ways that recognize the strengths already present in communities is essential to ensuring connectivity programs deliver real benefits for First Nations.



Opportunities and Pathways Forward

Improving affordability and access to internet services requires collaborative action and commitment. The following opportunities outline practical steps that First Nations, Crown governments, and private-sector telecommunications providers can take, individually and together, to support better outcomes for First Nations.

These opportunities focus on both short-term actions to address immediate affordability and access challenges, and longer-term strategies to support the creation of sustainable digital equity in British Columbia. They are intended to highlight suggestions for collective action by First Nations, Crown governments, and private sector partners to improve affordability, access, and long-term digital equity, reflecting examples of what has worked in practice and where collaboration can help align efforts toward sustainable solutions based on the research and interviews completed for this report.

Opportunities for First Nations to advance community-led affordability solutions	
Short-term actions: Affordability and access	**Long-term strategies: Sustained digital equity**
• Invest in, or seek funding for, basic community IT training to support staff and community members in navigating internet services and devices • Explore partnerships with large ISPs to better understand available affordability options • Develop communications strategies to boost awareness within communities about existing low-cost internet plans and how to apply	• Support IT-related training pathways and job opportunities for community members • Identify and, when appropriate, engage in partnership models that emphasize local employment and skills development while leaving administrative and regulatory responsibilities to larger providers (i.e., “white-label” or managed service partnerships with large ISPs) • If considering community-led ISP models, prioritize long-term operational sustainability, governance capacity, and maintenance planning beyond initial infrastructure builds

Opportunities for federal government departments and regulators to support and strengthen existing affordable connectivity solutions and improve access for First Nations	
Short-term actions: Affordability and access	**Long-term strategies: Sustained digital equity**
• Share information directly with First Nations about federal funding or program streams for IT training and capacity building • Work collaboratively with First Nations to co-develop affordability eligibility for federal subsidies that reflect community priorities and realities (i.e., TELUS Indigenous Pilot Nation-led eligibility identification) • Research/explore existing approaches taken to simplify subsidy application and verification processes (i.e., standardized proof of assistance document co-developed by Rogers and ISC) • Support coordination efforts between federal departments, ISPs, and First Nation Social Development Workers to reduce administrative burdens on First Nations	• Develop long-term strategy to connect First Nations with information about funding or program streams for IT training and digital capacity building • Revise and simplify administrative requirements for subsidy application and verification processes • Engage First Nations to build long-term sustainability, capacity, and affordability considerations into connectivity funding program and policy design

Opportunities for telecommunications providers, private sector and industry to engage in collaborative partnerships and facilitate affordable outcomes	
Short-term actions: Affordability and access	**Long-term strategies: Sustained digital equity**
• Work collaboratively with First Nations to co-develop affordability eligibility for subsidies that reflect community priorities and realities (i.e., TELUS Indigenous Pilot Nation-led eligibility identification) • Develop clear, culturally appropriate communications strategies to improve First Nations' awareness of low-cost internet and mobile plans	• Align corporate affordability programs with the real needs of First Nations, building on existing examples from Rogers and TELUS • Invest in building relationships with First Nations Band Social Development Workers to develop communication pathways • Partner with trusted community-based organizations (i.e., First Nations Technology Council, regional AFN offices) to share information, support outreach, and support application processes • Embed reconciliation commitments into digital affordability initiatives, moving beyond access to support long-term equity and self-determination

Building a Connected Future

As BC continues to close remaining infrastructure gaps, the path forward is clear: true digital equity for First Nations requires more than fibre in the ground. It requires affordable, reliable, and sustainable internet access that allows every household, every citizen, and every Nation to participate fully in community life and in the digital world.

High monthly costs, inconsistent access to subsidy programs, limited provider choice, and ongoing operational and maintenance challenges continue to keep families offline. These barriers restrict access to education, health care, safety information, cultural revitalization, employment, and economic opportunity. They also limit full participation in governance, consultation, and the exercise of Indigenous rights, including free, prior, and informed consent.

Yet across BC, First Nations are actively building the foundation for a more connected future. Community-driven approaches, local leadership, and Nation-led partnerships are shaping innovative solutions that reflect the strengths, capacity, and vision of First Nations. Emerging models, alongside federal subsidies, ISP programs, and regional collaborations, show that progress is possible when affordability, sustainability, and self-determination are centered.

Moving forward, closing the affordability gap will require coordinated and long-term action. Clear and accessible information streamlined and flexible subsidy programs, sustained funding for operations and maintenance, and policies grounded in the rights and priorities of First Nations are all essential. Equally important are partnerships that respect Indigenous governance systems and uphold commitments made through the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act and BC's *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*.

Building a connected future means ensuring every First Nations household can access and afford high-quality internet today and for generations to come. It means supporting community well-being, protecting rights, and supporting self-determination in an increasingly digital world. With shared commitment and collaboration, closing the affordability gap is not only possible; it is within reach.

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Appendix A: Methodology for Gathering Community Voices and Shared Knowledge

This report is informed by a mix of desktop research, a literature review, and direct conversations with First Nation community experts and organizational representatives working in the connectivity space. These conversations helped to build a clear and balanced understanding of affordable connectivity solutions for First Nations communities.

The desktop research and literature review included a range of sources, such as government policies and programs, telecommunications industry reports, academic research, previous reports by the Technology Council, and work led by other First Nations organizations. This diversity of sources helped to ensure that different perspectives were reflected and that Indigenous-led knowledge was included alongside government and industry information.

Eight interviews were conducted with First Nations community leaders, Indigenous connectivity organizations, program experts from the BC Ministry of Citizens' Services, and representatives from telecommunications companies. First Nations community representatives were offered honouraria in recognition of their time and expertise.

With consent, interviews were recorded to ensure accuracy, and the findings were analyzed to identify shared themes, common challenges, and promising practices, rather than focusing on individual responses.

This research was guided by OCAP® principles, which emphasize First Nations ownership, control, access, and possession of information. These principles helped shape how information was gathered, used, and represented throughout the project.

There were some limitations to this approach. The timeline and availability for interviews were limited, particularly for First Nations community representatives who often have many competing priorities. As a result, the community-level perspectives that were captured in this research were not as broad as initially planned. Despite these limitations, the research reflects a range of voices and provides meaningful insight into current experiences and opportunities related to digital connectivity.

Appendix B: Examples of Existing Subsidy Programs

Federal Connecting Families Initiative (CFI)	TELUS Internet for Good	TELUS Indigenous Internet for Good Pilot	Rogers Connected for Success
Program funder or sponsor			
Led by Innovation, Science and Economic Development (ISED) Canada ISPs across Canada voluntarily participate to cover the costs of the discounted plans	TELUS	TELUS	Rogers
Webpage			
Connecting Families Initiative	Internet for Good	no webpage	Connected for Success
Objective			
Provide discounted home Internet to low-income families and eligible seniors	Provide low-cost connectivity to low-income families, seniors, people with disabilities, and youth aging out of care	Provides low-cost connectivity to Indigenous households falling into eligible groups (eligibility is determined by Nation)	Provide affordable high-speed home Internet, mobile plans and bundles to customers already receiving income assistance support

Federal Connecting Families Initiative (CFI)	TELUS Internet for Good	TELUS Indigenous Internet for Good Pilot	Rogers Connected for Success
Eligibility			
• **Families** receiving the maximum amount of the Canada Child Benefit (CCB) • **Seniors** who receive at least 80% of the maximum amount of Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS)	Eligibility varies by stream: • **Families** receiving maximum Canada Child Benefit (CCB) and can provide a recent CCB statement showing family net income ≤$37,487 • **Youth aging out of care** between age 19-26 (in BC) and eligible for Strengthening Abilities and Journeys of Empowerment (SAJE) program • **Seniors** who receive the GIS benefit in at least $6,500 per year and can provide Old Age Security statement • **Individuals with disabilities** who receive the PWD, AISH, or CPPD benefit	**Nation identifies households that fall into eligible groups** **Note:** community must be PureFibre enabled	**1) Receiving Band-administered assistance, funded by government allocations** including: • BC Persons with Disability Program • BC Employment and Assistance Program • Resettlement Assistance Program • BC Subsidized Housing • Guaranteed Income Supplement; or **2) Reside in housing supported by a non-profit or co-op organization**; or **3) Those who qualify for the federal Connecting Families Initiative**

Federal Connecting Families Initiative (CFI)	TELUS Internet for Good	TELUS Indigenous Internet for Good Pilot	Rogers Connected for Success
Process for accessing the program			
Eligible recipients will be mailed a letter from the Government of Canada with an access code and instructions on how to enroll in the CFI	Apply by mail or online	Pilot program currently operating in select First Nation communities; First Nation Social Development Workers contact TELUS Indigenous Connectivity team members directly	Verify eligibility using Band Proof of Social Assistance document, and apply online at www.rogers.com/connected-for-success

Federal Connecting Families Initiative (CFI)	TELUS Internet for Good	TELUS Indigenous Internet for Good Pilot	Rogers Connected for Success
Packages and costs			
Option 1: $10 per month (plus tax) • Up to 10 Mbps download speed • 1 Mbps upload speed • 100 GB of data Option 2: $20 per month (plus tax) • Up to 50 Mbps download speed • 10 Mbps upload speed • 200 GB of data	Internet for Good offers low-cost internet plans (between $10-35). See TELUS pages for current plan prices Connecting Families - Internet for Good | TELUS Internet 25: $10 per month (plus tax) • 25/25 Mbps • 300 GB of data/month Internet 50: $20 per month (plus tax) Up to 50/50 Mbps • Unlimited data Internet 150: $35 per month (plus tax) • 150/150 Mbps • Unlimited data	Indigenous Internet for Good offers low-cost internet plans (between $10-35). See TELUS pages for current plan prices Connecting Families - Internet for Good | TELUS Internet 25: $10 per month (plus tax) • 25/25 Mbps • 300 GB of data/month Internet 50: $20 per month (plus tax) • Up to 50/50 Mbps • Unlimited data Internet 150: $35 per month (plus tax) • 150/150 Mbps • Unlimited data	Rogers Xfinity Internet 25: $10 per month (plus tax) • Up to 25 Mbps download speed • 5 Mbps upload speed • Unlimited usage Rogers Xfinity Internet 50: $15 per month (plus tax) • Up to 50 Mbps download speed • 10 Mbps upload speed • Unlimited usage Rogers Xfinity Internet 150: $35 per month (plus tax) • Up to 150 Mbps download speed • 15 Mbps upload speed • Unlimited usage 5G Mobile 10 GB: $25 per month (plus tax) • 10 GB of data available, speeds up to 250 Mbps • Data at reduced speeds after 10GB used 5G Mobile 15 GB: $35 per month (plus tax) • 15 GB of data available, speeds up to 250 Mbps • Data at reduced speeds after 10GB used

Federal Connecting Families Initiative (CFI)	TELUS Internet for Good	TELUS Indigenous Internet for Good Pilot	Rogers Connected for Success
Equipment and/or installation fees			
Canadians eligible for the CFI can get a discounted refurbished digital device through the Computers for Schools Plus (CFS+) program, depending on region, while supplies last	TELUS provides refurbished devices (free or discounted) through Mobility for Good; installation/equipment fees for Internet for Good are subject to offer specifics and region	TELUS provides refurbished devices (free or discounted) through Mobility for Good; installation/equipment fees for Internet for Good are subject to offer specifics and region	WiFi modem rental included No activation or installation fees
How to apply / documentation			
	Applicant completes application form by mail or online, providing proof of eligibility (tax forms/ ministry letter) Proof of eligibility documentation required varies based on stream. TELUS will review and respond to all applications within 1 week If approved, customer will be sent a code and instructions on how to sign up for the plan	First Nation staff identifies households that fall into eligible groups TELUS provides codes to First Nation staff, who then distribute to households	Rogers requires online or mail application with proof of eligibility (government ID, income-support documents) First Nation staff completes and provides applicants with the Band Proof of Social Assistance document to demonstrate eligibility Applicants can then apply online at www.rogers.com/connected-for-success Band Social Development Workers can contact cfs.general@rci.rogers.com for additional support with the process

Federal Connecting Families Initiative (CFI)	TELUS Internet for Good	TELUS Indigenous Internet for Good Pilot	Rogers Connected for Success
Geographic availability			
Nationwide, where participating ISPs operate **Note:** Not every ISP offers identical speed/data in every area	Only available in British Columbia, Alberta and some areas of Quebec. Program availability varies by province/territory and by program stream; TELUS publishes province-specific eligibility information and partner lists	Currently a pilot project phase with select communities	Rogers' program is offered in provinces served by Rogers and may have province-specific offerings (Ignite in many provinces; 5G Home in others). Check Rogers' provincial pages
Limitations			
Once you sign up for the CFI, you must stay with the Internet Service Provider (ISP) you choose. You may only switch providers if you move to a location where your current ISP does not provide service The 19 ISPs participating in the CFI collectively serve nearly 85% of the Internet market in Canada. However, this service may not yet be available in all regions	Prices available for 24-month term only. Must reapply at the end of each 24-month term	Currently a pilot project phase with select communities, but interested communities are encouraged to contact TELUS directly First Nation community must be PureFibre enabled Prices available for 24-month term only. Must reapply at the end of each 24-month term. Elders/ Seniors are not required to reapply	Rogers requires proof of eligibility; provincial variations exist Eligibility documents must be submitted once every two years to confirm ongoing eligibility

Appendix C: Key Terms and Acronyms

Bundling
Bundling refers to when internet service providers (ISPs) offer multiple services together (i.e., internet, phone, TV, or mobile) at a combined price. Bundled plans can sometimes reduce monthly costs, but discounts vary and may not always be available in rural or remote areas.

CITZ (Ministry of Citizens' Services)
CITZ is the provincial Ministry of Citizens' Services. Among many responsibilities, it oversees provincial connectivity programs, digital infrastructure, and initiatives aimed at improving internet access across B.C., including in First Nations communities.

CRTC Broadband Fund
The CRTC Broadband Fund is a federal funding program administered by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC). It provides financial support for infrastructure projects that improve high-quality internet and mobile services in underserved communities; however it does not involve financial support or subsidies to lower the cost of internet services and packages.

ISPs (Internet Service Providers)
ISPs are companies or community-owned organizations that deliver internet services to households, businesses, and community buildings. Examples include large national companies (i.e., TELUS, Rogers, Bell Canada), regional providers (i.e., CityWest, Northwestel), and First Nation-owned networks.

Fibre
Fibre refers to fibre optic cable, which uses thin strands of glass to transmit data at very high speeds over long distances. Fibre is considered the standard for reliable, high-capacity internet and is often the preferred option for long-term connectivity in rural and remote regions.

Last-mile builds

Last-mile builds are the portion of internet network infrastructure that connects the main transport network directly to individual homes, buildings, or community facilities. This is often one of the most expensive parts of delivering internet in rural and remote communities.

LEO (Low Earth Orbit Satellite)

LEO refers to satellites operating in low Earth orbit; much closer to the ground than traditional satellites. LEO systems (i.e., Starlink) offer improved speeds and lower latency compared to older satellite technologies, though costs and equipment needs still often vary by region.

Transport builds

Transport builds (also called middle-mile builds) are the major network connections that bring high-capacity internet into a region or community. This includes fibre lines, submarine cables, or other infrastructure that connect communities to the broader internet backbone.

White-label model

White-label models are arrangements where a larger ISP provides underlying network service, but a smaller organization, sometimes a First Nation, offers it to customers under their own name. The larger provider handles the technical operations, while the local provider manages customer relationships. While this can increase local control, it can also create challenges if customers assume the First Nation is solely responsible for service or billing issues.

First Nations
Technology Council