

Report for Broadband Expansion and Accessibility of Mississippi Office

In June of 2023, MediaJustice staff traveled to Utica, Mississippi to gain a better understanding of why the digital divide remains so persistent in Black communities in the rural South. This trip was motivated by a [2021 report](#) from the [Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies](#) that showed rural communities with large Black populations in the U.S. South remain the most disconnected communities in the United States:

The barriers to broadband faced by African Americans in the Black Rural South are significant and deserve attention. Across the United States, approximately 18 percent of all Americans report lacking home access to the internet. Outside the South, 22 percent of rural residents lack home internet access. [...] In contrast, 38 percent of African Americans in the Black Rural South lack broadband access.

We also are aware that states, including Mississippi, are in the process of community engagement as they draft plans for BEAD and DEA programs for submission to the NTIA and for public review. Knowing the timeline for drafting plans and the requirements for robust engagement at the community level may be a challenge for many states, we also hope our work can be helpful to understanding how community members in Utica identify **Assets** and **Barriers** to digital equity and broadband access, as well as the kinds of **Solutions** they would like to see implemented with the federal infrastructure funds.

This report is not a replacement for the much needed and welcomed community outreach by the BEAM office to Utica, but instead an offer of invitation to begin that outreach, which to this point has been missing and is sorely needed.

During the week of June 11, we spoke to most everyone we found around town. We sat down for extended interviews with six Utica community members. This report was created based on those conversations and pulling directly from the transcripts of the longform interviews.

What We Learned

Assets

Community members noted that while it is true that there are multiple internet options available (for some), but they were quick to point out that these options were a combination of unaffordable, unreliable and unavailable for most folks in and around Utica. Interviewees also noted a few institutions where folks can go in town to get access to a computer and Wi-Fi, such as [Hinds Community College](#) and the [Evelyn Taylor Majure Library](#).

By far, the asset that was most present in interviews was the community itself, the people who live in and around Utica. This was especially present in stories community members shared about living through the pandemic in an unserved community. While no one could think of any kind of formal digital equity programming, everyone had a story about those in the community who helped an elder learn how to use Facebook or who jumped in to support a pastor learning to livestream services with a cell phone during COVID.

When it comes to digital equity and internet assets, Utica would be considered a poor community. While the richness of the people and the place means that folks were able to find ways through together, interviewees all expressed that simply "making do" was not sufficient and that with robust, reliable and affordable internet access, the shrinking Utica community would thrive and grow.

Barriers

When asked about barriers to internet access, community members first pointed to existing internet service provider options. C Spire recently ran a fiber line down the mainstreet of Utica, but it's only available to businesses and at a cost that is higher than the mortgage or lease payments for even most commercial buildings on Main Street. Wireline internet is offered to some by AT&T, but the DSL internet is slow, unaffordable to many and often proves unreliable. HughesNET offers satellite service, but it too is slow, unreliable and cost prohibitive for most community members. While mobile cell and internet service is a more affordable option for many in the community, it too is slow and unreliable in rural Utica.

Another barrier that interviewees mentioned was a doubt that the state of Mississippi had any intention in investing in a rural Black community like Utica. They all identified a state power system that was more interested in maintaining the status quo than improving and empowering its own communities,

I think it's clear to me that the powers that are in this state have made it a collective decision that they would rather be in power than to have a state that is competing at its highest level. That to me is the framing of the way that access is thought about. It's like, we're fine with being last on all the worst statistics in the country as long as the power doesn't shift, as long as power remains where the power has always been.

Whether the BEAM office agrees with this assessment, the reality is that communities lacking trust in the State of Mississippi will remain one of the barriers to closing the digital divide unless and until the state proves otherwise.

Another unfortunate truth that shows up as a barrier for closing the digital divide in Utica is the very maps the Federal Communications Commission created to help identify areas which are served, underserved and unserved. These maps ultimately determine where federal funds can be spent on internet build out. The FCC Fabric Maps show the entire community of Utica as fully served and thus ineligible for federal funds, unless the State of Mississippi engages with the community to correct those maps for the state's BEAD planning. With the exception of the police station and the community bank on mainstreet, not one location in and around the community of Utica is served meeting the federal standards under the BEAD program. If the FCC, NTIA or the State of Mississippi all refuse to correct this error, Utica will remain an unserved community, disconnected while sitting less than an hour away from the state capital in Jackson.

Solutions

The community members we interviewed and spoke to were excited and intrigued when they were asked what kinds of solutions they would like to see. They also, for the most part, were somewhat uncertain because the lack of engagement from the state makes it unclear to them what the potential options are. This was reflected in the number of community member responses that identified the same first step of the solution: the state showing up in the community to engage in conversations that make them feel like they have a stake in closing the digital divide.

While community members had some difficulty in identifying what or who they would like to see build out the infrastructure, several were quick to point out who shouldn't. Some were worried that the large incumbent in the state, AT&T, had failed for decades to connect the community despite the community demanding it. There were also some who, still remembering Ma Bell's monopoly, expressed concerns about having only one national provider which has proven itself to not be accountable to community concerns or desires. They pointed out, when AT&T previously received subsidies to connect rural communities like Utica, the large provider instead expanded its mobile network.

The kinds of solutions that did come to mind for those we interviewed and the other community members we spoke to were ones that were locally accountable to community needs. Some were quick to say, "ME!" As in, *give us the resources and let us build the internet out ourselves*. Others were cautious about how state laws and red tape could make it difficult for the community to build out their own internet network, but pointed instead to an electric coop not far from Utica as a potential solution that could actually meet the community's needs. Still others, frustrated with the lack of any current affordable or reliable options, just hope that anyone will come in and offer fast reliable service at a price community members can afford.

Who We Spoke With



Carlton Turner

Carlton Turner was raised in Utica and is "Mississippi through and through." He describes himself as a builder, not just a builder of objects and organizations, but also a builder of community, culture, process and people. With his wife, Brandi, they started [The Mississippi Center for Cultural Production \(Sipp Culture\)](#) in Utica in order to strengthen and grow a community full of possibilities, limited only by a lack of access to resources and opportunities.

"[Utica] has tons of potential to develop and strengthen its self-determination muscle. There's so much history and grounding just in the soil about what's already possible, because so much has already been achieved. So there's innovation and genius, and remembering... the accomplishments that have already come through."



Jean Greene

Ms. Jean has been, like all librarians, so many things to the Utica community. In retirement, she volunteers as a Co-Director at the [Utica Institute Museum](#) preserving and continuing the legacy that William Holtzclaw, founder of the Utica Institute, and many since from Utica have contributed to Hinds County, the state of Mississippi and the United States.

"When we first got Wi-Fi on the campus it really benefited the community more than it did the campus. There would be people lined up in cars across from my library at night getting the Wi-Fi, because they couldn't get it out where they lived a mile away. So I see Utica's campus as being central to access to information and to identity for folks from this area."



Veronica Lee

Ms. Veronica is a business owner who was born and raised in Utica. After moving to Jackson and starting a family, she decided to open a restaurant in her hometown. Veronica describes Utica as a family-oriented small town with a lot of possibilities. A place where it's easy to start a business, but just as easy to shut one down.

"With faster internet I probably could have some of the college students come and see and eat. So by having faster, reliable internet, I'd probably get more business. They probably would want to eat sitting here doing assignments or doing research. So yeah that'd probably increase the revenue here."



Allison 'Chucky' Allen

Allison has lived in Utica all her life. She's a multimedia creator whose projects include photography, videography, ceramics, filmmaking, storytelling and more. Allison works at Sipp Culture and is writing her first book as well as working on two films she plans on shooting in Mississippi. She's a dreamer whose vision is only limited by the lack of robust access to the digital tools many of us take for granted.

"So since I've been working on my book, I lost literally 15 chapters in the middle of the book and I had to start the entire book over because... it actually happened because of my Wi-Fi. I was like, that really, that really broke... hurt. Because I was (whispered) almost done..."



Calvin B. Williams

Calvin Williams is a lifelong resident of Utica. He is often referred to as the "Voice of Utica". He serves on the town's Board of Aldermen and the Friends of Utica, Inc. Board. He believes that in order for rural communities to meet their greatest potential, they have to have a fair opportunity to access the same resources and infrastructure, which include broadband internet access, as other communities.

"I see myself as an advocate for my community—not just a voice, but a voice that comes with actions and initiates change. Most people feel that they don't have a voice. I will be that person. I'll be that person who invokes change. I'll speak up for the person who feels like they're voiceless."



Doris McClure

Ms. Doris was born just down the road from Utica in Carpenter, MS. She's lived and raised her children in Utica since 1996 and after 23 years working at Hinds Community College, retired at the end of June, 2023. Ms. Doris has been advocating for providers in the area to connect her and her neighbors for decades. Although her efforts have helped to get others in the community connected, she remains unserved.

"I kept calling, me and the other ladies I worked with, we'd call AT&T and talk to them about bringing communication through our town. Probably 10, 15 years or something. It's been a long time. If we had another pandemic like now, we would be in the same predicament we were living in 2020."

What They Said

Assets

Everyone we interviewed expressed frustration with the existing internet options in Utica. While there are a few 'choices' for providers, none of the available options for those who could get service met their needs. Most options were unaffordable and for those who could afford existing options noted issues with both speed and reliability.

Interviewees on affordability of existing ISPs

Ehhh... It's [AT&T] all right. I pay whatever I need to keep access. I would, but you know, I'm not everybody. It would not [be affordable]. Even if there was something running by, they couldn't get it. Most people use their phones and their cellular [data].

- Jean Greene

I use AT&T for internet. That's the only actual internet service that is down here. We can't have anything else. I got DSL. Nope [it's not affordable], (laughter).

- Veronica Lee

There's only one option in our town and that's the AT&T, 18 megabit download. I do have it [at home]. It's horrible. I guess [it's affordable], but if you're saying, if you're asking in terms of what we're paying for what we're getting, it is extremely overpriced. If you're asking if the price is affordable for the type of access that it provides in terms of being connected, I guess... sssomewhat. So our internet at home is five megabits, which is criminal.

- Carlton Turner

With the business we got now [at Sipp Culture], I guess we can use the Wi-Fi 45 percent of the time? It's not worth it. It's not worth what he's paying for it.

- Allison Allen

I called and got an estimate from C Spire as to what it would cost up there and they were like, for one gigabyte download speeds it would cost us somewhere north of \$600 a month, for the mainstreet [Sipp Culture building], because it's a 'commercial property'. So I was like, "Oh, okay... That's... good to know." I mean it's probably going to be more than the mortgage on that building. It's crazy.

- Carlton Turner

Well, I think that the satellite [HughesNet] is not really affordable for the majority of the people that live out here. It is not affordable for retired people. It is not affordable for probably 90 percent of the people that live out here because, you know, you need a good income to be able to pay \$120, \$140 a month for that kind of extra service.

- Doris McClure

Interviewees on Speed and Reliability of Existing ISPs

You know, uploads we... I try to do them the following day, because I know everybody's not really using the [AT&T] Wi-Fi strongly with Zoom calls or whatever. But after getting them off the SD card, getting them loaded, it'll take... If I do it on a Monday, it'll take approximately two hours. Two to three hours. I'll use yesterday for example. I only loaded 78 [photos] and it'd say about two and a half hours. So I started – what time did y'all leave yesterday? It was on the morning side – well, from the time y'all left to 4:30PM, I was still loading pictures.

- Allison Allen

If the weather is bad – and even if the weather is not bad – it might not even pick up in your house. And it just... you get one bar and you're lucky if you get two bars. So the [wireless internet] service that there is out here, it's not even strong enough.

- Doris McClure

The internet at [Sipp Culture] is supposed to be 18[MB], but I can never get it to clock in anything over 12. So it's.. is it enough to stream something on Hulu or Disney+? Yeah. Cool. But it pretty much stops there, you know. It's not robust enough to be considered quality access in this day and time with the level of access that is available in the world. And everywhere is a household. There's very few one-person houses in Mississippi and in our region. People, we're generational groups, you know? So as people with grandmamas in the house and such and such, and kids and you know. During the pandemic, having two children at home that were both expected to be online all day and I'm trying to work online. And how's that working? Excuse me, it's not.

- Carlton Turner

[HughesNET] runs slow if it's... if you have like more than one thing. I'd say if all our phones are hooked up to it, so say you want TV or me, I use my laptop all the time, you won't get a connection at all because it's too many devices on it. I think the max we can do is three without it running like... duh-duh-dut... like, super slow. It really don't have to rain for it to not work. So you'll just be there, like the wind will blow and your connection will go out. So I was like, "Maybe I have to put it in the bed with me or something." I thought about that other day when I was trying to work from home. I was like maybe if I need to put [the satellite dish] in my bed, maybe it'll work! Because I'm like, it's right here at the window but... still slooow.

- Allison Allen

"HughesNet is trash because you are paying out of the blue for a service that you still can't stream with. For instance, say earlier today when we had an overcast, the user wouldn't be able to use the service that they are paying an outrageous price for."

- Calvin B. Williams

[Wireless internet] does [have limitations] because, you know, if you're in trees, if you're in a building with a lot of metal in it, if you are where I am in a holler – you know what I mean when I say a holler – my cell service, when I get turned into my driveway my phone says bye. My iPad, it's kind of like when I was trying to get Wi-Fi on campus. If I can give my iPad at quite the right level... then I can get cell service. So it's not going to be good for anybody this out in the country and in a wooded area.

- Jean Greene

No [wireless internet isn't a replacement for wireline service]. And people say because of where we stay in Utica, it's nothing but trees. So I don't know that's 100% true, that the trees are blocking the internet service, right? I don't see how that's possible. With the power lines... I guess. I don't know. It works the majority of time. I wouldn't... it's a bigger percentage than the satellite dish.

- Allison Allen

[Is mobile internet] pretty reliable? Yes, if you have AT&T. If you have a Verizon or T-Mobile, they don't get anything out here. But AT&T got the bulkshare of all the subsidies. I think they got a five-year, they were getting five years subsidized support. Somewhere around 50 million dollars a year to expand rural access to broadband and all they did with it was go out and build more towers. Expanded their mobile access, but it didn't actually really expand the internet access.

- Carlton Turner

For students, it's a disservice. You, as I say, you would have to go and try to get internet somewhere else. Even if you're at home and you do have some Wi-Fi or Mi-Fi and you try to Zoom from... The infrastructure is not strong enough to pick up. You were just in and out.

- Doris McClure

Hmm... can't get nothing done, number 1 [problem with unreliable service]. And I have a couple friends that stay, like closer towards Vicksburg. And then I have two friends that stay in Vicksburg. So I'll go to them, to their house and use Wi-Fi or whatever I have to do. Because theirs, I guess them being in the city and not around trees, theirs is faster. And it's only two, maybe two or three of us in the household at that time. So that's frustrating. Everytime that you have to travel to use it when you have a satellite [HughesNet] right outside your house. It's actually right outside my bedroom window.

- Allison Allen

Well the impact it has on the family is... I go to my grandchildren. Their parents are paying for an internet service that now probably costs about \$140 a month and it does not, and I repeat, does not last a month. So, if they're doing a lot of research and have to be online to do classes, You don't have the service. If the lights or you have a problem with any kind of weather... then you still don't have service that you need. And... and it's expensive. So there are only a very few people out here that probably have internet service, because what you're getting is satellite.

- Doris McClure

I do [have internet at my business]. No [it's not good], not at all. It's not even reliable. And with all this rural area down here, it's not reliable. Anytime it rains, it don't even have to rain! Like Saturday, we had a bad wind coming through and knocked everything out, the lights, the internet and everything. For hours.

- Veronica Lee

Often at home and even here at the office we have to switch over to our mobile phone. In fact, we purchased a mobile Wi-Fi base for our farm to have access at the community center and it actually has much faster internet than the landline that we have. I think it's generally accessible, but the quality of it is, you know... sometimes it dips all the way out. So it'll be like, you just sitting and you're like, "Why can't I get into my email?" And it's like, "Oh, connecting... trying to connect... trying to connect." It feels like old dial-up in those responses. You know? And then trying to do a Zoom call or some type of online video meeting... I'm sure that people think that we're, that we're in like Alaska somewhere or like, you know... the middle of Canada because it's like our stuff is constantly going out and like cutting off, and closing out and we have to wait till it boots. And it happens so much we're just oblivious to it now. It's like, "Oh it's just, oh just went out. It'll be back." You know, you can't get upset about it, because you'll spend your whole day mad. But it's also like, you know, you realize... man they could do so much better than what they're doing and for what we're paying, there's gotta be a better solution.

- Carlton Turner

Interviewees could not identify any formal digital equity programming. There were examples like a librarian at the community college offering informal classes or church practitioners assisting a pastor learning to livestream during the pandemic. Interviewees mentioned the Evelyn Taylor Majure Library and the community college as the two places community members can go to use the internet. We were unable to get permission to speak on the record with the town's library director while we visited, but others we spoke to indicated they may start to offer some summer programming.

Interviewees on Digital Equity Programming

I think Carlton and Sipp [Culture] is going to do something like that when they open up that mainstreet office, but I don't know of anybody else that's doing that in this area. Teaching basic device skills used to be something that was taught in our BOT program – Business and Occupational Technology program – but they closed that and that was the basic keyboarding skills.

- Jean Greene

Nothing to my knowledge. No, I don't know, but that would be something that I'd be interested in doing though. I want to honestly build a little program, because... I, this is what I had told my photography team. I told them like, if we ever be blessed with one [grant], I wanted to open up a little session where we teach kids photography. Teach them like other than just being on YouTube and all that stuff. Like give them some hands-on to do. It was one of my things to do that, saying I would add digital. You could add digital access to that too.

- Allison Allen

Interviewees on Where Community Members Can Access Public Wi-Fi

When I think of access to information as a librarian – I'm always thinking access – When we first got Wi-Fi on the campus it really benefited the community more than it did the campus, because there would be people lined up in cars across from my library at night getting the Wi-Fi because they couldn't get it out where they lived a mile away from the building, from the campus. So I see Utica's campus, this area, as being central to access the information for folks and to identify for folks from this area.

- Jean Greene

The library. Utica Library. I would say because it's small and you probably, it's – there's still the COVID thing going around – people don't want to be that close to people, up under people. But it is kind of small. So you maybe have to rotate days with someone or at night. Right now they have a summer program for the kids going on. So, you would probably have to schedule a time to come in and use it.

- Allison Allen

Library pretty much. I think people who have a relationship to the college probably go to the college. You know, we had hoped that this space [Sipp Culture Office] would be that space for people. You know, set up some tables out here and hey, "Go to Sipp Culture and get online." But we can't. We don't, I mean, our internet can't do it.

- Carlton Turner

I think the library helps people with digital skills. They're doing more things with the community. I think that the community college can play a part in it. I remember a couple years back where they sent the bus out to pick up the seniors from different senior centers and got them together prior to COVID with Ms. Greene, now retired library, down at the community college to train about technology and how to use technology. But how many people will feel comfortable continuing to practice the skills that they learn when some do not have access to technology when they go home? We can't go home with those individuals.

- Calvin B. Williams

While interviewees found it difficult to think of robust digital equity and broadband assets in the community of Utica, everyone was quick to point out that the greatest asset and the key to any community development in Utica is the community itself, the people and their relationships with one another.

Utica is a unique town. Good people. A good place to live. It's a good community and we have this rich college here. What I'd like the people to know is that we're just looking out to bring more jobs in the community. In order to have some of those things, we need some of the other things that the metropolitan cities are getting. We need access. We need infrastructure, better than what it is. We need to be able to reach out and communicate with people.

- Doris McClure

I think it's the families at first and then – the born families and the found families and the creative families. Because when I came, when people found out that I had no family – I had a son but I had no family – these folks just started adopting me and, "This is, baby, your Titi Jean," and, you know, including me. Making me feel as if I was a part. I didn't feel as if I was an outsider. Because in some places, you'll always be an outsider.

- Jean Greene

I would say how we look out for one another. Like if one don't have, we reach out and we come together. When some family is struggling or a death in the family or something like that, we don't even have to know the person. But when it's posted on social media, it's like, that's how we connect. We connect by love, giving.

- Allison Allen

Well I love that it's my hometown. I grew up in it. I love that the crime rate is not high at all. You can basically walk the streets peacefully. Don't have to worry about nobody picking you up, robbing you or things like that. It's like I said, it's a family oriented community. So it's pretty much laid back for people to live in, especially older people.

- Veronica Lee

The hospitality. Generosity. I guess the love. Like I really don't even know everybody in Utica, but I'm like... we just do. It's just a thing that we do. Yeah, we are a hospitality type town. Even though we small and we should know everybody, because you're not that big. But still, anybody that comes, we are just willing to help. And that's with anybody.

- Allison Allen

I mean just look around. It's, it's gorgeous. It's peaceful. It's serene. It's where my people are. It has... tons of potential to develop and strengthen its self-determination muscle. It's so much history and grounding just in the soil about what's already possible, because so much has already been achieved. So there's innovation and genius, and remembering... the accomplishments that have already come through.

- Carlton Turner

A prime example of the way the community shows up for one another in regards to internet access is how community members did everything they could to make sure folks had access to their worship and church services during the pandemic.

Like my mom, she used to [write sermon notes] for her and her older sisters. She's the oldest one out of all nine of them. So [her sister] didn't have Wi-Fi and she only [had] a house phone. So that was a big no if it was on Zoom for her. So my mom, she'll uh... when she listens to [church service], she'll write everything down. The scripture, she'll say like who got up and did this and she'll take it to her [sister] and she'll just read it.

- Allison Allen

But even as the community reorganized itself to continue to be a community and to take care of one another during the pandemic, the lack of internet access continued to pose challenges and frustrations even for those who had limited access.

Well, I think churches primarily rely on mobile access. Like even our Pastor – and I do go to a church that's in the woods and there's no internet there – but the pastor, you know, he livestreams on Facebook through his phone. So I think, you know, Black folks gonna make it do what it do, whatever they got, you know. So it's... and you get exhausted by having to... always have to... over intellectualize your situation.. to make it just barely work for you. When there's, when there's so many other ways, right?

- Carlton Turner

I have been Zooming with our church ever since the pandemic hit. So that is how we stay together, communicating. There was a time that my husband and I, we had to go to the church so the people could actually see inside the church and try to stay together that way. And that became our... the main communication during the pandemic, even though we weren't back in church. I host it for the church. It goes okay, but the same thing. You may be in the middle of a Zoom and you got one bar, you got two bars... the Zoom goes out. You gotta get back in. The Zoom goes in and out.

- Doris McClure

Barriers

It may feel as though the assets section of this report already covered many barriers in discussing the limitations of internet offerings and the unreliable, slow and unaffordable nature of those offerings for those who do have access to them. For many residents of the Utica community, AT&T and other providers have refused for years to provide even their unaffordable, unreliable and slow options.

Several of us tried to get AT&T to get us on Wi-Fi and they wouldn't. So we wrote up a petition and all of these folks signed it and [folks] in the community signed it and we got that to them. And I was calling all the time and I was just really, you know, because I wanted my access. And finally, this guy comes down to my apartment and says, "Are you Jean Greene?" I said, "Yes, sir. I am." "Well, you're the reason I'm down here, dammit and we're gonna make sure you got your DSL." But it ran past one of the women who signed up for it up on Traxler Road. Right before you get to the creek. Right before you get down here. Miss [Doris] McClure and I have worked really hard to try to get that. They went past. Would not put it at her house. She's never gotten it, but we got it down here.

- Jean Greene

Okay. So for years I've been trying to – probably 10, 15 years or something – just reach out to some of the communication services, trying to see if we can get more Wi-Fi internet services out here. Now I have grandchildren that live in the area and go to school. And so a few years back, I was, we were trying to get internet in our community. Well it may be in the town, but it's not in the rural area. So if you're just out a mile or two out from the city... then you don't have communication. [D]uring that time we kept calling. Me and the other ladies I worked with, we'd call AT&T and talk to them about bringing communication through our town, some fiber into our rural area and somehow or another, it just never reached me. It just... they're saying we're out. If I go out there today and put in my address, it would still tell me I don't have [service]. So you can't get the communications you need out here in this rural area. So it's been a long time. It's been a long time. And even since the pandemic hit, if you still go out there and put in the address, like... I live not even a mile from the college.

- Doris McClure

We had everyone on, we had AT&T at first. But when we tried to switch over to the 'Boost' internet network – however they wanted to put it – they said you couldn't reach where we were on our street. And I was wondering [about] that, because my cousin lives beside us and then my mom live right around the corner... and both of them had AT&T. And I'm like... how the house in the middle can't get it if you between two people with AT&T internet service? But that's what we do.

- Allison Allen

Well, on the first Tuesday of this month, AT&T was right here. I said, "Sir, why are we right here and we don't even have fiber?" He responded, "Well, you're going to have to pay for it." But if you are providing a service to our community with probably copper lines, why not just go through and redo your infrastructure and provide fiber for everyone? It's about a dollar, but if the state has already invested resources for you to upgrade your system and you put them into your

cellular towers, that's not the people's fault. That's management. That's leadership. They prioritize the wrong things and don't put people first. They put their benefits and their pockets before the people who actually keep them in business. They're able to monopolize and capitalize only because there's really no competition.

- Calvin B. Williams

So we've been asking to see if or when C-Spire was going to come down here [to the Community College] and so far we're getting no answers.

- Jean Greene

I don't even know if this story's worth telling, but after I left my job, I couldn't afford [satellite internet] anymore. I just kind of went back to not having anything. But then, I went across the street to my neighbor's home and I went inside for some reason. I don't even know why I went over there. It must have been like to return a cookie tin or something. I looked and I was looking out and I said, "What is that, um, box you have on your TV?" They said, "Oh, that's internet. We get internet." I said, "You get internet from who?" And [they were] like, "We get internet through AT&T." I'm like, "How are you getting internet through AT&T?" She's like, "Oh yeah. They, you know, they came out and run the line and everything so," she said, "you see the line?"

So I begin to trace the line. Right? Guess where the line goes? Back to my property! So there's a box on my property on my land where they had literally attached a cable, ran it across the road – where cars are running over it and everything – and down a hill to my neighbor's house. So, I call AT&T. I said, "Hey. Yeah, I'd like to order internet. Such and such and such.." [They reply,] "Oh, it's not available in your area." I said, "Bullshit!" I said, "It's got to be available in my area. Cause it's, it's coming from my land. Like it's on my land." He was like, "Oh no. It's not available in that area, but we will let you know when it's available." I said, "uh... I need to speak to a manager." And I began to put it on videophone and I traced it from my home all the way across the road to my neighbor's house and I said, "This is the internet you're saying is not available to my community. So you're saying it's available across the road from me, but not at my house. But the place where it's coming from is at my house? That makes zero sense. Like how can you, you know..."

Within two days, they came out and we got internet. But, you know, had I not just randomly gone across the street... [laughing] ...to talk to my neighbor... I woulda had no idea that internet was in town, you know? Now, my neighbor's white. You know, not to their own fault, nothing to do with them. But I wonder... how that plays... you know, in terms of, of access? You know? How did they even know it was available? How... how is it that our address is redlined to where it's not available to us, but it's available right across the street, but it's also coming literally on the land that I had purchased with my wife.

So..um.. it's just a really, you know... those kind of things are like, "Oh. Okay. So this is a, these are bigger issues than what we understand."

- Carlton Turner

The kinds of barriers associated with poor existing choices and the redlining of some community members are the exact kinds of barriers the Infrastructure Investments and Jobs Act hoped to overcome with programs like BEAD, DEA and the FCC's Digital Discrimination rulemaking. Unfortunately, the barriers identified by community members in Utica were primarily barriers to their community benefiting from these federal programs.

Specifically, the two largest barriers identified by those we spoke to in Utica were, one, a lack of trust that the State of Mississippi would invest in a rural Black community and two, an FCC Fabric Map that shows a community that's completely served and ineligible for federal funding that in reality is a mix of underserved and unserved.

Interviewees on Lack of Trust in the State

There's no intention for the State of Mississippi to do any more than what they have done, right? It won't... it sounds like ours will never be served, unless there becomes some, unless some innovation happens in technology that changes the game. It is because that's, you know, it's part of the design. There was a time in which I think people were, people benefited, I think the country benefited from having a strong society. And so education was promoted as a hallmark of our ability to participate at the highest level of society. But that's not the, it's like, that's not the business model anymore. You know the business model is like you're more valuable incarcerated.

- Carlton Turner

I would say because of leadership. Most individuals in leadership fail to represent people and the underserved communities. Public service means serving others, not self-serving. A lot of times people are self-serving. They are self-centered. That's why I have no confidence in the leadership to implement broadband in rural areas.

- Calvin B. Williams

Have you read the article by Ralph Eubanks, "[The Land the Internet Era Forgot](#)"? Mississippi is the land the internet forgot. Ralph Eubanks is a writer in residence at Ole Miss right now and he is from a little bitty town, I think Collins. And it's, it's crazy about how Mississippi prides itself, it would seem it prides itself on its ignorance. Because it does not, I know they're saying they want to do this now... They've been talking [about closing the digital divide] for years and I'll believe it when I see it. I hope it happens, but unless... unh uh... I just hope it does. Cause there are too many people that could benefit from it and who need it. You need that access.

- Jean Greene

I think it's clear to me that the powers that are in this state have made it a collective decision that they would rather be in power than to have a state that is competing at its highest level. So that to me is like, the framing of the way that access is thought about. It's like we're fine with being last on all the worst statistics in the country, as long as the power doesn't shift, as long as power remains where the power has always been. So that's, that's kind of like a... that's my base response. But I think the responsibility is to provide the highest quality of life for its citizens.

- Carlton Turner

There's too many reasons for [the lack of closing the digital divide in Black rural communities]. The one thing I'll say is – and I will go back to Holtzclaw – when [William] Holtzclaw came to Mississippi, he went up to the Mississippi Delta, up to Tunica, and he talked to white planters up there about having the school for Black folks and they said,

"They don't need to know how to read and write to pick cotton."

"These folks don't need to get on the internet to do the job. That'll just distract them from their job."

"Why they need this kind of access?"

"These kids don't need that information anyways. They ain't going to college."

So there is... it may not be stated, okay? So, Getting them thinking about affording access. Come on. It's just... it's disheartening. I think that it's, it's keeping your population ignorant, keeps them malleable and, and you can use them in whatever way you want. How are you going to find out information on how to vote? How are you going to find out information on your health? How are you going to find anything? And If I can keep all of these people confused and stupid, nobody's the challenger. However, conspiracy-ish that may sound...

- Jean Greene

Interviewees on FCC Fabric Maps

They're completely wrong! [The FCC Maps] are completely wrong. It's like, you know, for us, there's no... there's AT&T and it's HughesNET. Now it's C Spire in the game and C Spire did run fiber optics. So there is a high level of internet that is available, but only if you live on the highway. You live any – even like one road away from the highway – you can't get it. And so, you know, it just creates these pockets of like access and and...

So three things:

- 1. The first is, because we have 18 megabits, it puts us below the national threshold, right? Which is 25[MB], but above the bare minimum that makes you qualified. So because we get above 10[MB], it makes us ineligible for most of those federal programs. Even though we don't match 25, which is the standard. Right? Which is supposed to be the baseline. We can't get there, because AT&T has said that they're done expanding their network, okay? So that's one.*
- 2. Because C Spire has pulled this line from Jackson all the way down to Port Gibson and to Crystal Springs and to Vicksburg... technically, they can say that high speed internet is in our community. Technically. On that end, even if I, we could never get that here, because it stops at the mainstreet. Technically, Utica is served with high speed broadband. Technically. Now that's something that just happened within the last two years.*
- 3. There is supposedly a really high speed internet access that just goes to the school that is not available to the community, but technically, they can use that to say that these communities are served.*

- Carlton Turner

And that's a lie. Those FCC maps are a lie. So what do you mean? That's not coverage! That means you're covered because you get money from it from individuals in those areas. You've got that covered. But that's not coverage as far as internet access. It's not reliable, and they're lying, and that's just, point blank, like it is. It's a lie. So what are the things that we need to be doing as a community to make sure that our voices are heard for the people in our community? We can meet with the representative, Sally Doty. I think she's a representative of the state of Mississippi. If they come out, we can talk to people about internet access because it's needed. You can't get around it! It's a daily need; it's not a want now.

- Calvin B. Williams

Solutions

Community members were uncertain when asked who should build out the internet in Utica, provided the state first addresses the FCC maps and proves the community of Utica wrong on its apparent negligence in addressing the digital divide for Mississippi's rural Black communities. Some folks just wanted any option, as long as it was affordable, fast and reliable. Some named C Spire, a Mississippi-based company currently offering fiber internet on one road that is unaffordable to most and unavailable for residential customers. Others were clear that whoever it was building out infrastructure with federal dollars allocated by the state should be locally accountable. One interviewee simply said, "ME!"

Interviewees on Who Should Build Out Internet Infrastructure in Utica

I got some issues with AT&T, cause I remember when they broke up that monopoly back in the 80s and then letting it build back up again... that really pisses me off. But no, I would, I would want the best, the most economical. Let's take it, but we're getting back to that whole monopoly of AT&T. We wouldn't have C-Spire and all these others if they had broken that up back in the 80. We'd still be using Ma Bell. Am I lying? Am I lying? I don't know and this is because I don't have this knowledge. I know that we didn't get a lot of innovation going in this area until they broke that up. And that's when all these others popped up and we started getting some innovation. By having them build back up, we're squashing innovation again.

- Jean Greene

You know, whether it's AT&T. Whether it improves... C Spire or any of the other communication... You know, the town probably cannot do it, but we want the service. You know, if they're giving federal dollars to AT&T and C Spire and the other people, we want the service too. You don't want it to just stop in Raymond or to stop in the town of Utica. We want it out here. You know, because for what I see, the fiber that came on down only helped those that already had it.

- Doris McClure

ME. It's actually my photography hashtag, #ChuckyDidIt

- Allison Allen

Cooperative. You'd need to have strong people and strong leadership in the cooperative. That would be the ideal thing—to put power and control back in the hands of the people. That would be the ideal thing. C Spire is a Mississippi-based company that started here. So why not give a homegrown, home-based company the opportunity to do it if they offer better service than the others?

- Calvin B. Williams

While community members struggled to identify who might build out the internet in Utica, they had no problem imagining how much the community would change if it had fast, affordable and reliable internet access.

You know, we have to... I'm thinking we have to re-look at what being employed looks like, what working looks like. And if we had this, maybe we could have folks working remotely that would be able to then have an income that they could help build up that economic base. That's a possibility. So I could see that happening. I do see that it would help with our schooling, and our training.

- Jean Greene

I just feel like it'll be so... it'll be different because we'd have more. We could do more. I wouldn't say use it for the better, the greater good, but it could be. [F]or like me and my sister, I would say it will help. She's working on her second part of her phlebotomy degree because she just graduated this past Saturday. So she needs the computer to do homework or research papers and stuff like that. I need it for my book and sometimes if I'm like, if I take a sick day here, I know I got high speed internet, I can still connect and work from home. But I really just don't do that too much because of the type of internet we have, but it would make things much easier for me. So It's just to say, if I could, because my grandma is a, she's an amputee. Both of her legs gone. So sometimes, maybe sometimes she needs that one person to be at home. And so say if I need one of them days, it wouldn't bother [...] my work because I'm there and I have a high speed internet to do what needs to be done from here and won't have to worry about, "Oh, did it submit?" or "How long is it going to take to submit if it's due today or tomorrow?" It would cut down on a lot of stressing. Because, I do that a lot.

- Allison Allen

With faster internet, again, we do have a college down there. With faster internet I probably could, you know, have some of the college students come and see and eat. Let them know. "Hey, we got free Wi-Fi that's, you know, reliable. You can come use the Wi-Fi." Because, again, down at the college, it's not reliable or really good at all neither down there. So by having faster, reliable internet, you know, I probably get more business because, if I was [one of] the college students, of course they probably would want to eat sitting here doing assignments or doing research. So yeah that'll probably increase the revenue here.

- Veronica Lee

I think we would have... probably more businesses in the community. I think we definitely would have more people working from the community. I think that, you know, we [would] just have a lot more activity generated, because people don't feel like they have to leave to get something or at least to get that essential thing that is very key to all of our like, relationships to community right now.

- Carlton Turner

One of the things you said is skills and knowing how to utilize it. [Community members would] be able to tune in to [town] board meetings. We could livestream board meetings so we could get more engagement.

They can always access church services. You have elders in their home, but if they were trained with their technology, they wouldn't miss church service. They're not missing meetings. They can Zoom in. They have grandchildren at the school but don't have a car. Well, send me the Zoom link. I can go to my email and open the Zoom link [clap!]. We can have a Parent-Teacher conference that way. It makes it easier. They can save money by not trying to pay somebody to get them from point A to point B just for a meeting. So it will give them a better opportunity to be involved and engaged in community activities and processes.

- Calvin B. Williams

What They Want BEAM to Know

Knowing the community of Utica was eager to connect with the BEAM office, but still waiting for engagement in the community of Utica, we asked interviewees if there was anything they specifically wanted to tell the State, the BEAM office or folks in Jackson generally. Here's what they shared.

The state needs to make sure that they train. Train their population. And that benefits the state. They need to understand that having a trained, literate population benefits them and ups their ante. I don't think they're knowledgeable of that at this point in their development, because they see information as something to be squashed anyway and that the access isn't for everybody. So the state's going to have to do some... some soul searching.

- Jean Greene

Yeah. [Federal internet funds] should come at least in the rural areas first. It's like I said in the big cities, like in Jackson where I stay, they have, we have no problem with the internet like Utica. But down here, we do. Like my kids – I got four kids and my husband and myself – we, I mean right about four TVs, devices, games... all that. Try putting that on this type of internet. So yeah. I think they should [invest federal funds in Utica].

- Veronica Lee

I'd want them to... Oh, it's so good. What would I want them to know? There's so many things. There's several things I want them to know. That would not be just one thing. People need affordable access and affordable is relative to the community, right?

People need to be taught. So there needs to be some opportunities for teaching. And opportunities for somebody that can teach them, but also somebody that can be a resource for them, for later. And, I would want the state to know that it's not one and done. That as technology changes, as access changes, they need to keep up with that. Because sometimes we think as institutions and as agencies, it's one and done. We put that road down. We fixed the road, but we got a pothole, sorry, and fix that. So I would want them to know that this should be part of an ongoing upgrade. You always have to upgrade your technology. Always.

- Jean Greene

I'd say to try harder actually. For the number one thing, to try harder. So it's like we getting half of what we should. I feel like more effort, more concern and more people actually speaking up about it, so we can be heard. [Don't] be small minded.

- Allison Allen

My vision for that would be that if this work is so important and you feel like people that need access have it, then the challenge from me would be: So set up all of your infrastructure to administer this project in communities that don't have internet. Set up the infrastructure to administer the project in communities that don't have internet. And if you can successfully do that from those communities, then you will have solved the challenges that those communities face, in regards to, to access. But if you're doing it from your perch in which you already have the access, then you're, the challenge to you is nothing. You know what I'm saying? You can just go through the motions. But if you really wanna, to meet the challenge, set up your infrastructure in places that don't have that access and try to make the project work.

- Carlton Turner

Oh, the most important thing [for BEAM] to know is that the amounts that they're looking at would be a lot. And tell them I would invite them. They can come spend some time here in Utica, operate their office out here, and see how quick the speed is. So that would be perfect for them to do. I want them to know that the coverage information that they have is inaccurate, that they need to do community assessments, and that if they're getting paid to do a job, they need to come out to this community. The community should not be calling them. They need to go to each community. Why would they be awarding this money if everybody had it? So you identify each town, and there you have a list, a book, with every town listed inside of it. Go to each one of those communities to see. Give yourself a timeline to go through each one of them.

- Calvin B. Williams

Yeah! That if the baseline is 25[MBs], then the baseline is 25 and anybody under 25 should be getting the 25. Period. If the baseline is 25... if it's not, then say what the baseline is... but if you're saying that the acceptable baseline for minimum is 25, then every community should be at 25. Period. That should, no one should be allowed to sell internet access that's below that standard.

- Carlton Turner

I don't care if one person said they don't have it. Well that means that's sufficient enough for me to say that you need to replace all that, all the infrastructure here. Because it doesn't matter, if it was just that one person. [If] that one person don't have access, it's the next person [too]. So equality, equity is what we're getting to. Meet people where they are. Bring the speed. I don't care, I could be the short person [and] you can be the tall person, but I need the same amount of speed. I need something that's going to be accommodating to me. So that's just how it is.

- Calvin B. Williams

We also would like to share a back and forth between one of the interviewees, Carlton Turner, and the MediaJustice staff doing the interviews:

Oh, wow. Jackson or DC... Let's see... Well, I want folks in Jackson to know that we're not far. you know, I think people assume when you say Utica are like, "Oh my goodness! That's just like, that's like Alaska."

[Interviewer] Yeah. The rental folks made us get the truck.

[Carlton] Right!

[Interviewer] You're going out to the country...

[Carlton]

It's so silly. You haven't been on a dirt road yet, right? Except going on to the farm, right? So it's like this, this mental... and that's people in Jackson. It's people in Jackson giving you that advice. Because they'd never come out here, right? To them this is, this is uh... This might as well be anywhere in the world, you know? So there's this disconnect that allows them to not see this as part of their community. [That goes both ways and I think that's what I would say, is that we are one. We're in the same county. You know, we're all a part of Hinds County. We all benefit or have a deficit because of what happens in Jackson. And I think the same is [true] in reverse. They benefit or have deficits by what happens and in our community [in Utica]. You know, so I think that that's what I would say to the folks in Jackson. I think Jackson struggles as much with low internet access as we do out here. You know?

As this report will also be submitted to the NTIA for their consideration as they evaluate the state's community engagement, we wanted to finally share some words one of our interviewees had for folks in Washington, DC.

I would say that, you know, [Congressman] Bennie Thompson is from here. He's from Bolton, but he went to school right down here. You know, Rod Page, who's the Secretary of Education, came from that school. We can go down a list of major players that have come through Utica, you know? Utica's not some crazy outlying town. It has been the center of so many achievements for the state of Mississippi that have had national impact. And so, even the Jubilee Singers. They were traveling and representing not just this community. What they were representing, Black folks in the South... and they had two million listeners on a Sunday! You know, in random 1930s. Like that's, that's big.

We had the first paved road in the state of Mississippi. It was Main Street. The first radio station in the state of Mississippi was on Main Street, you know? So Utica is not.. the average small town. It actually has a deep significance to the history of this state. And, you know, we're not asking for a pat on the back. We just want people to just remember that great contributions can come from anywhere and that it really is about the foundation and the conditions that are being created on the ground. And Utica has a history of creating optimal conditions to create amazing people.

- Carlton Turner