

# The Pueblo Chieftain

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## NEWS

# Adelante Connect project to expand broadband access in Pueblo with \$3 million grant



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Over 30 census tracts within the city of Pueblo are considered underserved or unserved when it comes to broadband access.

Adelante Connect, a pilot project funded through a \$2.98 million grant from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), is looking to change that.

The grant was recently awarded to Colorado State University Pueblo, which will serve as a funding "conduit" for the communitywide project, said Fred Galves, project investigator and CSU Pueblo special assistant to the president.

"This is not just throwing money at the problem," Galves said. "It's a very well-thought-out, intelligent, efficient way of investing in the community — leveraging providers and other people so that it will come back and return to the benefit of everybody."

The federal Connecting Minority Communities Pilot Program grant is required to go to a Minority Serving Institution. CSU Pueblo has been a designated Hispanic Serving Institution since 2007.

Adelante Connect plans to subsidize internet services to 200 student households, hire seven community navigators, and provide laptops and digital literacy training during a two-year implementation period. El Centro del Quinto Sol, the Pueblo Latino Chamber of Commerce, Watertower Place and a fourth location that has yet to be announced will serve as "community anchor partners."

Lack of internet connectivity has significantly impacted neighborhoods in Pueblo's "Y-Zone," which encompasses historically disadvantaged communities in Bessemer, Downtown Pueblo,

the East Side and West Side.

A census tract on the lower East Side has 2,959 residents; about 45.5% of them don't have internet access, 35.7% live below the poverty line and 32.1% don't have a computer, smartphone or tablet. Another census tract in the heart of Bessemer is home to 1,595 residents; about 42.4% don't have internet, 36% live below the poverty rate and 34.1% don't have a computer, smartphone or tablet, according to the NTIA.

While academic achievement gaps between students in affluent communities and those in poorer communities already existed, they were exacerbated when the pandemic forced schools online, Galves said.

"If you're online in a very good space, then you can focus somewhat on the learning, but if you are in a bad space, then it almost makes learning impossible," he said.

Nineteen census tracts in the Y Zone will be targeted during Adelante Connect's first year. Seven of the 19 census tracts are in Bessemer, six are on the East Side, four are on the West Side and two are Downtown. About 28.6% of residents in these 19 census tracts do not have connection to the internet, and 20.3% do not own a device to access the internet.

Salvador Acuna is the CEO of Co Create LLC, a strategic development company based in Pueblo. He became interested in expanding Pueblo's broadband access after attending the Mountain Connect Broadband Conference in 2018. He soon developed a relationship with the state of Colorado's Broadband Office.

"It's not just that we know the need, the state of Colorado knows the need," Acuna said. "South central, southeastern Colorado is the most underserved area — hands down — in the state."

Acuna grew up on the East Side in one of the nineteen Y Zone census tracts. He graduated from Pueblo East High School in 1979. Galves graduated the same year but was a Pueblo South Colt. High school rivalries aside, Acuna was pleased to find out Galves would be returning to Pueblo from California in September 2021 to work at CSU Pueblo.

"(Acuna) thought I was coming back to be a professor at CSU Pueblo, but when I told him I was community engagement, he said, 'Hey there's this great opportunity, but we have to move quickly and I want to see if you can convince CSU Pueblo to do it. (CSU Pueblo) President (Timothy) Mottet was very open minded to the suggestion, he believed in me and believed in this grant."

Anywhere from 14 to 17 additional census tracts may be part the project in its second year. The remaining 17 census tracts include those in Belmont, Bessemer, the East Side, the Mesa Junction, Salt Creek and the South Side.

Data cross-referencing poverty rates, internet and device access from the NTIA and Indicators of Broadband Need identified 36 Pueblo census tracts that may qualify for assistance through the pilot program, but that number could change depending on findings from FCC maps in development, Acuna said.

Adelante Connect's official start date has not yet been announced but will likely happen at the end of this month.

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