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Why Closing the Digital Divide Is a Team Effort

What we learned from our pilot campaign in Arizona to help families enroll in the Affordable Connectivity Program.

By **Ilana Lowery** | February 8, 2023

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Lia Larson is a mom in Phoenix who began homeschooling her children after they had a hard time readjusting to the classroom when schools reopened. Until recently, Lia's ability to teach was limited by her home's slow internet connection (a phone hotspot) and a single tablet split among her four kids. But now, thanks to a campaign led by Common Sense Media, Lia has fast, reliable, and affordable home internet and each of her kids has their own tablet.

Our campaign helped Lia, and thousands like her, by promoting the new Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), a \$30/month federal benefit that helps vulnerable households buy high-speed internet service and devices. Our awareness and enrollment campaign featured an innovative combination of targeted advertising, individualized assistance, and in-person events, all with the goal of increasing ACP enrollment in the Phoenix area.

And the campaign was a success.

Before we began, in August 2022, ACP enrollment in Phoenix was down to 2,900 households per month. At the peak of our campaign, that number had climbed to 8,500—the highest since the ACP began in March 2022. Each enrollment represents a household, like Lia's, that is now able to get faster, more affordable internet service and devices, which are critical in today's modern digital life.

Now that our campaign's first phase has ended, we are expanding our outreach in Phoenix and in other communities. It's not easy to help eligible households enroll in any new program, but here are a few things we have learned so far about how to enroll people in the ACP:

- First, **navigators are essential**. Enrollment can be challenging, especially for the ACP's target audience, who often lack computer skills and may struggle with the complicated online enrollment process. They need 1:1 expert support, but it's no small feat to find the capacity for such labor-intensive work. We recommend partnering with libraries, 311 hotlines, or, in our case, universities. We worked with Arizona State University as it transformed the university's internal 150-person tech support center into an external-facing ACP navigator hotline. We ran ads with the hotline number so residents could get live, expert support for every stage of the enrollment process.
- Second, **collaborate with state and local governments**. In our first campaign, for

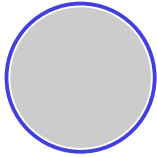
example, we worked with the city of Phoenix. We included ACP information in residents' water bills, placed ads on transit shelters in targeted areas of the city, and coordinated with subject-matter experts in the state library system. The mayor also released a PSA. We further recommend collaborating with state benefit programs, like Medicaid, SNAP, and WIC, whose participants are eligible for the ACP. Encourage program administrators to share information about the ACP wherever possible, such as at benefit offices and through texting and mailers. After all, the ACP will allow their participants to consistently use online services, which can be helpful to program administrators.

- Third, **use ACP outreach to share digital literacy and inclusion materials**, like our digital citizenship resources or a state's digital literacy training for workforce, education, and telehealth. During our campaign, we offered information on how families can use the internet safely, ensuring that people have a healthier and more useful experience as they get online with the ACP.
- Fourth, **use comprehensive advertising**. Marketing wisdom indicates that it takes an average of seven impressions before a person acts on an ad's message. We ran digital, TV, radio, and outdoor advertising connected to bilingual 800 numbers at the university call center.
- Fifth, **use every source of data available**. We assigned a specific hotline number to each mode and language of advertising, allowing us to track the number of calls generated by each type of ad. We also monitored web traffic, both source and destination; tested different versions of ad language and website design; evaluated hotline metrics, such as hold time and call duration; and used the Universal Service Administration Company's (USAC) ACP data to measure our impact on enrollment.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, our campaign succeeded thanks to partnerships. We worked with the Digital Equity Institute and ASU, Chicanos Por La Causa, Arizona Students Recycling Used Technology (AZStRUT), the California Emerging Technology Fund, our media partner, SAESHE, and our philanthropic supporters to maximize our impact.

Our Phoenix pilot campaign for ACP awareness and enrollment was one of the nation's first and largest independent campaigns for the ACP. We are building on lessons learned to expand our work in Arizona, launch a new school-based campaign in Atlanta, and explore opportunities to work in other states and cities. If you'd like to discuss this campaign—what we've learned and how we can boost enrollment in your community—please don't hesitate to reach out!

Drew Garner, state broadband policy adviser, contributed to this article.



Ilana Lowery is the director of Common Sense Media's Arizona office. Her work centers around expanding broadband access in underserved communities and

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