

New Mexico commits another \$340K to bring computers, digital skills to underserved communities

State-supported initiative has distributed 170 laptops since January, with additional giveaways and training ahead

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A mother in Grants pursuing a nursing career, two sisters from To'hajiilee with an interest in computer science, a Mesilla woman learning how to sell her wares on Etsy.

Jill Beets has lived in Albuquerque most of her life, but the digital literacy program she oversees has introduced her to people and communities across New Mexico she might otherwise never have encountered.

Beets is vice president of marketing and communications for Albuquerque-based Adelante Development Center, whose DiverselT program received \$340,750 in state funding Tuesday to expand computer access and digital literacy training across New Mexico.

While laptop and desktop computers have long been ubiquitous in schools, workplaces, public libraries and in many homes, Beets said DiverselT is filling a significant gap in computer ownership and digital literacy throughout New Mexico.

"It's surprising the number of people that have only used a smartphone, but have never used a computer," Beets said.

DiverselT has distributed more than 5,000 computers since its founding nine years ago, giving away between 600 and 700 machines in recent years, primarily to people with disabilities.

The state provided an initial grant of \$300,000 to DiverselT's TechUp! New Mexico program, which gave away new computers to 170 New Mexico families from January through June of this year. The grant also enabled DiverselT to travel to 33 communities, where staff offered 1,600 training sessions.

The most recent, larger round of funding will allow DiverselT to sustain and expand TechUp! through June 30, providing free laptops to low-income and underserved residents of all ages in rural, urban and tribal communities.

"We are pleased to continue our partnership with DiverselT in this important mission to get computers into the hands of families that need them," said Jeff Lopez, director of the New Mexico Office of Broadband Access and Expansion, which provided the funding. "We want to do more than deploy broadband in the state. Getting computers to those in need and teaching them to use and understand digital operations are critical in these changing times."

DiverselT partners with local nonprofits, schools and libraries to identify residents who need computers but can't afford them. Recipients receive a free laptop equipped with Microsoft Office and agree to participate in digital skills training to learn how to get the most of their computers — and to do so safely, especially in a new age of artificial intelligence.

"One of the things we like to give to everybody, for example, is how to tell what's real on the internet," Beets said.

She explained that the mother in Grants who enrolled in TechUp! was cleaning hotel rooms to make ends meet for four children before she pursued her dream to become a nurse.

"When I talked to her like a month later, when I was doing the report and wanted to do some follow-up questions with her, she had finished her GED and was enrolled in school," Beets said. "I was like, 'That's fantastic. It's making a difference for people.'"

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