



***DIGITAL  
CONNECT™***

an initiative of Gila River Telecommunications Inc.

# 2023 Annual Report



## How has working with DCI helped you?

*"It's helped a lot! ... I've been able to get a lot done for our (district) committee because of learning to use my laptop. It's given me confidence to work on what I've learned and to continue learning more. I think you guys are doing a wonderful job. I just wish more people would come."*

– Lilly Lynch, District 7

*"Everyone is very friendly. I needed to learn some things and I've been taught in a simple way. I'm learning and [DCI] are working together to help me learn something. I really like my time with Amanda. She teaches me things I need to learn, and she has become a friend to me, too. Everyone at DCI is well suited for what they do. I can't find a fault in any of them!"*

– Patricia Smith, District 6

## By the Numbers:

**85**

One-on-one sessions with clients at our Tech Skills Workshops

**150%**

Increase in client engagement in Fall 2023 (compared to Spring 2023)

**39**

Clients in our Workplace Upskill Classes

**85**

Urban Elder participants over seven sessions, partnership with Warriors Code & GRIC Urban Members Association

**380**

Community Members at district meetings where DCI presented (in all seven districts)

# What is Digital Inclusion?

“Digital Inclusion refers to the activities necessary to ensure that all individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, have access to and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).”

– NATIONAL DIGITAL INCLUSION ALLIANCE (NDIA)

Typically, digital inclusion is thought of in the context of two related concepts: the digital divide and digital equity.

*The digital divide is the issue. Digital equity is the goal.  
Digital inclusion is the work.*



The digital divide describes the differences between those with access to everything necessary for full participation in the online world and those without such access.

Digital inclusion is the collection of activities that bring us closer to digital equity.

Digital equity is the desired end-goal in which everyone has the ability to fully engage in our online society and economy, according to their unique needs and interests.





The DCI Team (left to right): Tyler Smith, Digital Navigator; Mikhail Sundust, Executive Director; Amanda MacDonald, Program Manager; Carmen Baldwin-Ortega, Community Liaison

## Dear Community Member,

I am so grateful for the opportunity to serve the Gila River Indian Community. Digital Connect® (aka the Digital Connect Initiative, DCI) has come a long way in the past year and we now offer many useful services. In 2023,

- ❁ DCI partnered with the Tribal Broadband Bootcamp to enhance indigenous-led broadband capacity building;
- ❁ We hosted in-person classes with Gila River Indian Community (GRIC) departments, teaching employees how to use new digital tools in the Microsoft 365 suite;
- ❁ We assisted with the Ira H. Hayes Memorial Library's 2023 Summer Reading Program;
- ❁ We provided online safety awareness training for youth at the Boy & Girls Club – Sacaton Branch and elders residing in The Caring House; and
- ❁ We continued to work with our elders based in the Phoenix metropolitan area, in partnership with Warriors Code and the Urban Members Association.

In 2024, we are launching several new projects that will have a positive impact of our community. For example, we are working with GRIC and our parent company, Gila River Telecommunications, Inc. (GRTI) to make free Wi-Fi service available for the public in each district service center. We have partnered with the Community to conduct a Digital Inclusion Study.

We are kicking off an apprenticeship program in collaboration with Native Technology Solutions (NTS) and we are excited to launch a new service called Digital Connect Pro Skills to help enhance digital skills in the workplace. Finally, we are exploring ways to expand our Digital Navigator services and seeking new partnerships for STEM opportunities within the community.

I hope this report not only informs you of our success, but also helps to paint a vision of Gila River as a connected and digitally integrated community. We present a definition for “digital equity” on page 3 of this report, but to me, digital equity also means that we – as a community and as individuals – own our future and have the ability to exercise self-determination and self-sufficiency in all digital domains. In short, digital equity is a crucial component of our sovereignty as a tribal nation and as indigenous people.

I am proud of the accomplishments highlighted in this report and grateful to work with a team that is committed to bridging the digital divide. None of our progress would be possible without the efforts of the DCI staff and the support of our colleagues in the GRTI family of companies, including GRTI, NTS, Alluvion Communications, and the Gila River Broadcasting Corporation.

On behalf of the DCI team, I want to say thank you for your support and partnership. We exist to serve you, the members and residents of the Gila River Indian Community. With your help, we can bridge the digital divide and make digital equity a reality for our people.

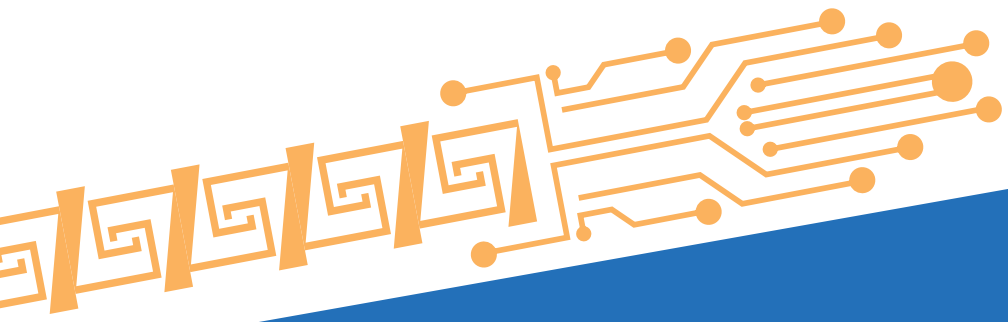
Sincerely,



Mikhail Sundust

Executive Director, Digital Connect<sup>+</sup>





## Digital Navigator Services

Our digital navigator services are the cornerstone of our digital inclusion work. Thanks to a generous grant from the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA), DCI was able to hire a full-time Digital Navigator, Tyler Smith.



“Hello, my name is Tyler (he/him). I grew up in the village of Ge’e Ki (Sacaton) and

I have worked for the Gila River Indian Community for over 10 years. In my free time, I enjoy running and skateboarding.

As a Digital Navigator, I view my role as an opportunity to give back to the community that helped shape me into the person I am today.”

*“I was able to get the feel of being on a computer again. I made time today to work on what I struggle with as an adult. I’m very blessed to get the hands-on [assistance] today. Thank you, Tyler.”*

*– Digital Navigator Client*

# What is a Digital Navigator?

“Digital navigators are trusted guides who assist community members in internet adoption and the use of computing devices. Digital navigation services include ongoing assistance with affordable internet access, device acquisition, technical skills, and application support.”

— NATIONAL DIGITAL INCLUSION ALLIANCE (NDIA)



## What can a digital navigator do for you?

Our digital navigator will meet you at your local district service center in a 1:1 setting. Tyler helps clients with things like, learning about apps and software, email management, how to use “the cloud,” and much more.

**47**

**New Digital Navigator  
clients in 2023**

Join our community of learners by signing up for a Digital Navigator session today at:  
**[bit.ly/DN-new-client](https://bit.ly/DN-new-client)**





# Working with the community

## Elders I.T.

Digital Connect has partnered with Warriors Code and the GRIC Urban Members Association in Phoenix to provide technology education for elders once a month. Our Elders I.T. classes often center on a fun or useful topic related to technology. Examples of classes from last year include: introduction to computer hardware, the Affordable Connectivity Program, and holiday-themed games about online safety and cyber security.

*"The Digital Connect Initiative (DCI) plays a pivotal role in enriching the Urban members of the Gila River Indian Community by integrating elder engagement, technology education, and community support. Through targeted programs that promote digital literacy among elders and enhance technology awareness, DCI fosters a sense of inclusion and well-being. By valuing the wisdom of our elders, the richness of our culture, and the potential of our youth, DCI not only bridges the digital divide but also strengthens the cultural fabric of our community, ensuring that every member feels valued and connected."*

– Dr. Anthony Newkirk, Warriors Code



# Senior Planet

In 2023, Digital Connect became the first Native American organization to offer Senior Planet curriculum.



Senior Planet is a product of Older Adults Technology Services (OATS), a division of AARP®. As a licensed Senior Planet program, DCI now has access to dozens of lectures, workshops, and courses that are specifically designed to engage elderly audiences.

*"Digital Connect Initiative collaborated with the Ira H. Hayes Memorial Library for the 2023 Summer Reading Program. DCI staff interacted with the children on STEM projects and helped us connect with other GRIC departments, who spoke to the children about their work.*

*DCI brings to GRIC a lot of knowledge on how digital technology works and the training they have has helped people to not be afraid of new technology. I, myself, have had some question and called on them to help me. I have also referred my patrons to them. DCI is needed in the Gila River Indian Community."*

– V. Rose Smith-Chavez, Ira H. Hayes Memorial Library

# Grant Awards & Additional Projects

## Grants

The Digital Connect Initiative helped the Gila River Indian Community win two federal grants in the past two years.

In 2022, GRIC was awarded the Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program (offered through the National Telecommunications and Information Administration). This grant funded residential internet service in the Community and is now funding the apprenticeship and study projects described below.

In June 2023, GRIC was awarded the Treasury Capital Projects Fund (via the U.S. Department of the Treasury). This grant is being used to fund the Public Wi-Fi Project (more information below).

In addition, DCI applied for and was awarded the National Digital Navigator Corps grant (offered by the National Digital Inclusion Alliance, in partnership with Google.org).

## Fiber Optic Construction Apprenticeship Program

DCI has coordinated with GRTI and Native Technology Solutions (NTS) on an apprenticeship program. The Fiber Optic Construction Apprenticeship Program provides an opportunity for four individuals to start a career in the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) field. As part of the program, NTS will hire four new technicians to learn the fiber optic construction trade. The program also provides funding for educational expenses. Apprentices will be required to take classes to receive a certification in the field.



# Digital Inclusion Study

In 2024, we will kick off the GRIC Digital Inclusion Study. We hope to learn about the opportunities, obstacles, and goals GRIC members have when it comes to engaging with the digital environment. The final product of the study will be a Digital Equity Plan, which will utilize public input from Community members to cast a vision for our future and provide steps to help achieve community goals.

## Public Wi-Fi Project

In collaboration with GRTI, NTS, and the Gila River Indian Community tribal government, Digital Connect is working on a project to bring free public Wi-Fi access in all seven GRIC service centers. In our effort to close the digital divide, we believe our community deserves access to fast, free, reliable and secure broadband service in public spaces like the service centers.



*"The Office of the Community Manager received training from DCI on some Microsoft applications. Learning about Microsoft Teams has helped our department improve our communication in addition to project management.*

*The primary benefit that DCI brings to the Gila River Indian Community is the understanding of our culture and its relation to technology. The trainers relate to community members and patiently navigate them through software applications. The work of DCI enhances the lives of community members. I appreciate all that they have done for our department and the community."*

– Michael Preston, Assistant Community Manager, Gila River Indian Community



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[DIGITALCONNECT.ORG](https://digitalconnect.org) | [@DIGITALCONNECTINITIATIVE](https://twitter.com/digitalconnectinitiative)

## Mission

To help people improve their quality of life using modern technology.

## Vision

We envision a flourishing, self-sufficient Indigenous community that is in command of technological advancements and uses current and emerging technologies to achieve wholistic prosperity that is consistent with our heritage of innovation and industriousness and in keeping with our culture and traditional values.

## Values

