

FORUM PLANS TO BRIDGE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

21 June 2018



New technologies can enhance lives and strengthen remote communities but poor infrastructure and services continue to create a digital divide, according to a recent forum on remote Indigenous communications.

The Indigenous Focus Day at the Broadband for the Bush Forum in Darwin provided a platform for more than 70 First Nations producers, decision makers and consumers to share experiences and ideas about the potential of digital connectivity and to discuss strategies to improve digital inclusion.

Daniel Featherstone, Indigenous Remote Communications Association General Manager, said the focus day highlighted the positive benefits and opportunities of improved digital access and proposed solutions to closing the digital divide.

“Mobile and WiFi use is increasing in remote communities, often exceeding data allowances, but the lack of affordable access to digital infrastructure and online services in the bush continues to be a roadblock to development,” Mr Featherstone said.

“Community-led innovative and creative projects and ideas were showcased at the forum. We saw how community-based content creation projects are strengthening language, culture and providing training and work opportunities.”

“Programs that provide digital mentors and targeted resources to improve skills and awareness are having positive outcomes.

“We heard how providing improved internet can lead to better opportunities for enterprise development and access to more affordable products and services.

“What is evident is the need for better mobile coverage and internet access in remote regions.

“Last year’s forum called for Indigenous digital inclusion to become a Closing the Gap measure. IRCA & Broadband for the Bush Alliance, along with 17 signatory organisations, wrote to all COAG members calling for this and outlining a 6-part digital inclusion program.

“While we are waiting to see the outcomes of the Closing the Gap Refresh, participants this year renewed the call for an Indigenous digital inclusion strategy. This is critical to help improve health, education and employment outcomes in remote Australia.

“Policy makers need to achieve a connected and inclusive digital future for remote regions, especially as key government services move to online delivery.

“This includes improving issues of affordability, digital literacy and cyber-safety, as well as overcoming the infrastructure deficit.”

The six-point Digital Inclusion Program includes:

- Remote data collection to measure access, availability, affordability and digital literacy
- Improve availability with prioritised roll-out of broadband and mobile coverage to communities with limited access
- Public Internet access through community-wide WiFi and community access computers
- Unmetered access to all key online services and affordable pre-paid mobile options
- Cultural and language appropriate digital skills program in remote communities, locally tailored to needs
- Digital mentors program to provide local jobs and a peer-supported learning model.

For further information and to arrange interviews please contact:

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