



News Release

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Austin Wins Award from Next Century Cities for New Effort to Increase Mobility Equity with Better Access to Online Tools

Austin is one of three cities nationwide to receive the Benton Next Generation Engagement Award

Next Century Cities recently announced that Austin was one of three winning cities for the inaugural Charles Benton Next Generation Engagement Awards, given to municipal governments that are harnessing high-speed internet to enhance civic engagement and democratic participation.

The Benton Award was given to Austin for the city's plan to develop *Smart Work, Learn, Play*, an effort to engage public housing residents near two public transportation hubs to increase citizen access to and use of online public services. Joining Louisville, Kentucky, and Raleigh, North Carolina, Austin will now receive \$30,000 and hands-on technical assistance for the next year to help drive the *Smart Work, Learn, Play* project forward.

“Through this award, the Housing Authority of the City of Austin (HACA) can help ensure mobility equity for residents in public housing in Austin — especially residents who can least afford it or easily navigate it,” said Austin Mayor Steve Adler. “We welcome the opportunity to receive meaningful input on future transportation planning efforts and to begin to overcome the digital barriers that keep HACA residents from confidently and safely using a variety of transportation options.” The City of Austin [Digital Inclusion Strategic Plan](#) initiates and supports community digital inclusion programs and services in partnership with other agencies, nonprofits and the private sector.

In an effort that combines an interesting mix of education, connectivity, and social services, *Smart Work, Learn, Play* will involve recruiting “mobility ambassadors” from public housing communities. These ambassadors will receive training on digital tools for workforce, education, and quality of life applications that they will then pass on to their peers. To enable the ambassadors to directly address mobility equity, trainings will focus on topics like local ride scheduling tools and applications, open data, deliberative democracy and advocacy tools, and media justice.

“Not every employer, school, job training facility, or child care provider is near a bus route. This limits options for HACA families striving for self-sufficiency,” said HACA Executive Vice President Sylvia Blanco. “Our goal is to help working families use smart phones and computers to leverage the smart

transportation options most Austinites easily access so they can get to their jobs and schools comfortably, safely and cost effectively.”

The Benton Award was given by Next Century Cities, a nonprofit membership organization of more than 145 mayors and city leaders nationwide committed to ensuring access to fast, affordable, and reliable internet access for their citizens. As a founding member, Austin has been a member of Next Century Cities since its inception in 2014.

In addition to providing expert technical assistance as the program gets under way, Next Century Cities will also elevate Austin’s creative use of next-generation broadband to bolster civic engagement and will promote replication of the *Smart Work, Learn, Play* project nationwide.

“We know that broadband connectivity can bring economic and educational development to a region, but next-generation broadband is also a valuable tool for empowering citizens to be actively engaged in their communities,” said Deb Socia, Executive Director of Next Century Cities. “The *Smart Work, Learn, Play* initiative in Austin, and the other two winners of the Benton Awards show a range of exciting approaches and all three cities share a strong commitment to better engaging their citizens using high-speed broadband connectivity.”

More information about both the winning projects and the award program can be found on the Next Century Cities website at <http://nextcenturycities.org/next-generation-engagement-awards/>.

About Smart Work, Learn, Play

Smart Work, Learn Play uses Internet and technology training to help residents of the Housing Authority of the City of Austin learn how to use and advocate for safe, affordable, comfortable public and active transportation. The program is funded by the Next Century Cities inaugural Charles Benton Next Generation Engagement Award. The City of Austin and various educational and social service institutions and local nonprofits advocating to resolve transportation barriers to self-sufficiency will provide additional support. HACA’s non-profit Austin Pathways’ is home of the *Unlocking the Connection* program seeks to connect all public housing residents to the Internet.

About HACA: The Housing Authority of the City of Austin is a public agency whose mission is to cultivate sustainable affordable housing communities and partnerships that inspire self reliance, growth and optimism. For more information, visit www.hacanet.org, or find us on Twitter [@hacanet](https://twitter.com/hacanet).

About the City of Austin: The City of Austin [Digital Inclusion Strategic Plan](#) initiates and supports community digital inclusion programs and services in partnership with other agencies, nonprofits and the private sector. The City also supports public access facilities supporting training, computers and frontline staff to assist residents with overcoming technological challenges. The City also provides funding to Austin-area non-profit organizations through its Grant for Technology Opportunities Program (GTOPs). For more information about the City of Austin’s Digital Inclusion Program, visit www.austintexas.gov/digitalinclusion or contact digital.inclusion@austintexas.gov.

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