

Accessibility Sub-Committee Recommendations

Summary:

The Nevada County Youth Commission respectfully submits this recommendation to the Board of Supervisors urging action on two critical issues affecting the county's youth population: equitable internet access and affordable housing. These two issues are deeply interconnected. Both shape whether young people can succeed here and whether they will remain part of our community long term.

Introduction:

First, we recommend that the Board authorize an expansion of the county's mobile Wi-Fi hotspot lending program from its current level of approximately 200 devices to a minimum of 225 devices, with dedicated youth-specific allocations managed in partnership with schools, libraries, and youth-serving organizations. Second, we recommend that the Board condition approval of any renewed Housing Element on the inclusion of meaningful low-cost, youth-centric housing provisions — including attainable homeownership pathways, affordable rental units, and anti-displacement protections for young residents and families.

Background and Rationale:

A. Digital Equity and Youth Access to Wi-Fi

Broadband internet access has become essential to educational and economic participation. For K–12 students, reliable internet access is no longer optional — it is required for homework completion, accessing learning management systems, submitting college and financial aid applications, participating in remote or hybrid instruction, and connecting with mental health resources.

Nevada County's geography presents a persistent challenge. Large portions of the county, particularly in unincorporated rural areas, lack adequate fixed broadband infrastructure. Families who cannot afford home internet service, or who live where no service is available at all, depend on public programs like the county's hotspot lending library to stay connected. The current program, with approximately 200 devices, serves an important function but falls short of meeting demonstrated demand, particularly for youth and students.

Youth face specific barriers that a youth-designated hotspot allocation could address:

- Students frequently need internet access during hours when libraries are closed, including evenings and weekends during homework and exam periods.
- Families with multiple school-age children often share a single device, creating conflicts and limiting each child's effective access time.
- Young adults applying to college, vocational programs, or employment need consistent, reliable access to complete time-sensitive applications and required documentation.
- Youth enrolled in online courses, dual enrollment programs, or credit-recovery programs cannot participate without dependable home internet access.

The COVID-19 pandemic made these disparities impossible to ignore. While emergency federal funding temporarily expanded hotspot availability nationwide, many of those programs have wound down, leaving communities like Nevada County to address the gap with local resources. A permanent, youth-designated expansion of the hotspot program would provide durable support rather than temporary relief.

B. Affordable Housing and Youth Retention

Nevada County is experiencing a housing affordability crisis that disproportionately impacts its younger residents. Median home prices in the county have risen substantially over the past decade, far outpacing wage growth, particularly for entry-level and young workers. The result is a well-documented pattern of outmigration: young people who grew up here, attended local schools, and want to remain in their communities are simply unable to afford to do so.

This is not merely an economic problem — it is a community identity and sustainability problem. When young people leave, they take with them the energy, creativity, civic engagement, and economic contribution that communities depend on to thrive. They also leave behind aging populations with fewer working-age residents to support local services, care for elderly family members, and fill critical workforce gaps in healthcare, education, trades, and public safety.

California state law requires counties to adopt Housing Elements that plan for housing needs across all income levels. The Housing Element update process is one of the most significant opportunities a local government has to shape who can afford to live in the community. As Nevada County prepares for its seventh renewed Housing Element, it is crucial that it explicitly addresses the needs of lower-income and young residents.

Youth-specific housing needs include:

- Affordable rental units accessible to individuals and young couples earning entry-level or moderate incomes.
- Shared housing, accessory dwelling unit (ADU) programs, and cooperative living models that lower per-person costs.

- First-time homebuyer assistance programs and down payment support targeted at residents under 35.
 - Anti-displacement protections that prevent cost increases from pushing out young renters who have established themselves in the community.
 - Proximity to public transit, schools, and employment centers to reduce transportation burdens for young residents without vehicles.
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Proposal

A. Recommendation 1: Expand and Designate Youth-Specific Hotspots

- Direct county staff to increase the Wi-Fi hotspot lending program from approximately 200 devices to a minimum of 225 devices as an immediate first step, to meet the demonstrated need of ~10% of survey participants citing needs for a hotspot.
- Establish a dedicated youth allocation of at least 25–30 hotspots to be distributed through Nevada County’s school districts, public libraries, and youth-serving nonprofits, with priority given to students demonstrating financial need or lack of fixed home internet service.
- Create a streamlined, school-based referral process so that educators and counselors can directly connect students in need with available hotspot resources without bureaucratic delay.
- Partner with the Nevada County Superintendent of Schools and local libraries to co-administer the youth hotspot program and ensure equitable geographic distribution across the county.
- Establish usage tracking and annual reporting to allow the Board to assess demand, identify gaps, and make data-informed decisions about future program expansion.

B. Recommendation 2: Condition Housing Element Approval on Youth-Centric Provisions

- Adopt a policy that the seventh renewed Housing Element submitted for Board approval must include specific, quantifiable provisions for low-cost and moderate-income housing accessible to youth and young families.
- Require the Housing Element to include a dedicated chapter or section addressing youth housing needs, including goals, strategies, and implementation timelines.
- Direct the Planning Department to engage youth stakeholders in the Housing Element update process before final adoption.
- Prioritize zoning and policy tools that enable accessory dwelling units, missing middle housing (duplexes, triplexes, small apartment buildings), and mixed-use developments that increase the supply of affordable units.
- Explore participation in state and federal affordable housing funding programs, including those that target workforce and young adult housing.

- Include anti-displacement provisions such as just-cause eviction protections and rent stabilization analysis to protect renters who are already housed but at risk of being priced out.
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Implementation and Funding

A. Hotspot Program

Funding for the hotspot expansion may be pursued through allocation from the county's general fund, donations, or applying for the CASF Broadband Adoption Account Grant, recognizing that digital access is now a core component of educational equity and public service delivery. The grant is intended to fund broadband access and digital literacy programs for underserved communities, covering equipment, hotspots, staffing, and curriculum. Its deadlines are every July 1 and January 1 starting in 2026, until funds run out, and it is still active today. The incremental cost of expanding from 200 to 225 hotspots, including device procurement and data plan contracts, is modest compared to the educational and economic benefits of ensuring that youth have the access they need to succeed. We encourage the Board to treat this not as an optional enhancement but as a baseline investment in equity.

B. Housing Element

The Housing Element process itself is funded through existing Planning Department operations and grant programs. Ensuring that the Element includes youth-centric provisions is largely a matter of policy will rather than additional direct cost. However, implementing specific housing programs — such as first-time homebuyer assistance or ADU incentive programs — may involve:

- State Infill Infrastructure Grant Program funding for qualifying affordable housing projects.
 - CalHome Program funds for first-time homebuyer down payment assistance.
 - Local inclusionary housing ordinances that require affordable unit set-asides in new market-rate developments.
 - Public-private partnerships with mission-driven affordable housing developers.
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Conclusion

We respectfully urge the Board of Supervisors to act on both of these recommendations. Individually, each addresses a real and pressing need. Together, they form a foundation for a county that young people can afford to live in and fully participate in.

When a young person in Nevada County cannot complete their homework because they have no internet access at home, that is a failure we can remedy. When a young adult who grew up here, attended our schools, and wants to build their life here cannot find a home they can afford, that is a loss our community will feel for generations. These are not abstract policy questions, they are the daily realities of our peers, our siblings, and ourselves.

We are asking the Board to invest in us, not as future residents, but as current ones. Nevada County's future depends on whether the young people who are here today have a real opportunity to stay. We believe this Board has both the authority to help make that possible.

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