

# Equitable Broadband Access: 3 Ways States are Bridging the Divide

Billions of dollars in federal funds have been made available for nationwide broadband expansion, and it's up to state and local governments to decide how to allocate those funds equitably and effectively.



Broadband access is crucial for modern communication, education, work, and entertainment. It allows users to access and transmit data, including text, audio, video, and other types of content, at fast speeds compared to traditional dial-up.

Broadband enables individuals, businesses, and communities to take full advantage of online resources and services, making it an essential component of digital inclusion and economic development. To bridge the gap between those who have high-speed internet access and those who do not, government leaders have prioritized closing the digital divide and ensuring broadband access for all.

[The Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment \(BEAD\) Program](#) provides \$42.45 billion to expand high-speed internet access by funding planning, infrastructure deployment and adoption programs in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.

For leaders across state governments, the BEAD program is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to finally close the geographic gaps in broadband access, but ubiquitous broadband access does not come without challenges. In a recent roundtable hosted by GovExec and Comcast Business, experts gathered to address the current status of broadband accessibility and the specific obstacles to expanding infrastructure in their states. During the conversation, participants explored three strategies for securing public-private partnerships and provided valuable insights into how technology can drive innovation for the benefit of public sector employees and citizens.

## 1. Assess the community digital divide

High-speed internet access is foundational for community success in the 21st century and is considered a critical economic issue. The shift to remote models of work underscored this point, revealing a digital divide as some faced connectivity challenges while working from home. Federal subsidies to cover the costs of broadband service seek to address issues of



adoption. To bridge these gaps, state and local leaders are focusing their efforts on digital equity, enabling people to access what they need for social and economic well-being. There's no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to connectivity, though, and according to Alicia Matthews, Vice President of Government & Regulatory Affairs at Comcast, governments need to think critically about how to serve their communities effectively.

For instance, Colorado's diverse geography of deserts, mountains and canyons poses unique challenges for broadband access. In some locations, where wireless connections are impractical due to geography and cost, a mix of different technologies is considered to bridge the digital divide.

The ability to access and use affordable high speed internet connection today is key for health, education, workforce and every other part of modern life. Yet, there's a worry about its long-term sustainability, mainly because affordability is not only essential for boosting internet adoption but also for motivating providers to invest in their infrastructure. But if done right, affordable and accessible broadband can connect users directly and help them achieve mission success.

## 2. Determine the nature of the gap: access or adoption

The broadband network is comprised of three segments: backbone, middle mile and last mile. The backbone links global internet networks. The middle mile connects the last mile to the backbone. The last mile involves the final connection to homes and businesses. In most cases, the lack of access can be addressed by expanding last mile networks. In some states, there may be a need for middle mile infrastructure.

According to an industry CIO in Nevada, the primary goal is to enable public-private partnerships and empower local providers to address connectivity challenges. They've conducted extensive mapping throughout the state, which identifies where existing fiber and cable networks are located, collaborating with

current providers and focusing their efforts on areas where providers are unable to extend their services.

Nevada leaders plan to connect around 400 physical structures with fiber strands to create an open-access middle mile network that local providers in underserved and unserved areas can use. The intent is to make it more feasible for local providers to expand the last mile network into neighborhoods.

With respect to adoption, an official from Ohio's Department of Development reported the state conducted surveys and collected data to address digital skills and opportunities. By engaging various stakeholders, including providers, state partners and public housing partners, [Ohio's community accelerator program](#) trained over 30 communities to develop infrastructure projects that work toward digital equity and closing the digital divide as infrastructure investment is rolled out.

## 3. Collaborate with stakeholders

Collaboration is essential to address not only infrastructure expansion but also adoption measures such as digital literacy to make the internet accessible and valuable for everyone.

Vermont leaders have adopted a regional approach to digital inclusion with homegrown coalitions that work at the local level, focusing on digital literacy, equity, and opportunity. By involving local voices, the aim is to create sustainable solutions that address the unique needs of each community and feed into a statewide plan. This engagement with local communities ensures that they invest in local partnerships and initiatives, promoting digital equity from the ground up.

Similar steps are being taken in North Carolina as leaders focus on connecting with their communities and prioritizing their needs. Gov. Roy Cooper has advocated for greater flexibility for county and municipal governments to build, finance and establish public-private partnerships recognizing that local perspectives are crucial to success.

To empower county governments, North Carolina is launching the [Completing Access to Broadband program](#). Using a procurement model that prequalifies over 40 internet providers based on county needs, the program provides county managers with a menu of partner options and encourages joint mapping of unserved and underserved locations.

These efforts provide additional opportunities for leaders to partner with stakeholders to continue an open dialogue, understand each other's needs and build out programs that are essential to achieving widespread broadband access in their state.

With this approach, county governments, providers, and state officials work together to identify needs such as the number of locations served and unserved, and where internet speeds do not meet the FCC's definition to ensure that every North Carolinian has high-speed internet access and knows how to use it effectively.



**Learn more about how Comcast is helping expand broadband access.**