



# Legislative Brief

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STRONG

## PATH TO A CONNECTED TEXAS

### BACKGROUND

Broadband is imperative to building future-ready communities in Texas and across the country. Without access to high-speed internet, many rural and underserved communities are becoming increasingly isolated and left behind. Broadband can serve as a lifeline, connecting students to online degrees and connecting sick patients to medical care locally unavailable. According to Gov. Greg Abbott's Broadband Development Council's 2020 report, almost 1,000,000 Texans do not have access to broadband at home. The issue has only been exacerbated by COVID-19 as connectivity has become essential to follow public health guidelines, school closures and remote work.

The National Association of Counties (NACo) discovered approximately half of our nation's counties are experiencing internet speeds below the Federal Communication Commission's (FCC) minimum broadband standards of 25 megabits per second (Mbps) for download and 3 Mbps upload.

Unfortunately, connectivity data provided to the FCC is often inaccurate and inflated. Current FCC connectivity data illustrates that many communities are overlooked and disconnected. Currently, the FCC requires internet service providers to submit connectivity data through a Form 477 process twice a year to indicate broadband network coverage at a census block level. The data discrepancy is due to the lack of granularity in the data and the type of data that is being collected. This means an entire census block is often marked as 'served' with broadband if just one home has coverage. As a result, the FCC erroneously classifies these markets as connected and competitive.

As a part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, Congress has approved funding for the Broadband DATA Act, requiring a more in-depth analysis of coverage data and developing a national availability map. The act also included funding for the FCC's **Emergency Broadband Connectivity Fund** which includes financial aid for households struggling to pay for internet connection during the pandemic. While these are important programs in addressing the digital divide, they merely represent 'first steps' in solving the numerous and consequential side effects of data disparity.

### CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES TO A CONNECTED COMMUNITY

#### ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

While the ability to recruit and retain new and emerging sectors to the local economy is important, fostering entrepreneurship and the growth of small businesses is just as important for rural communities. Small businesses help build economic resiliency in a community and e-commerce helps diversify entrepreneurs' sales channels, making their companies more resilient.

Connectivity also enables communities to promote unique cultural and natural assets through tourism, expanding local revenue by creating new economic opportunities without raising taxes on residents.

#### EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

A majority of teachers assign homework that requires broadband and digital skills are an essential part of the school curriculum. However, connectivity challenges limit access to these opportunities and many students are facing the reality of falling behind their better connected domestic and global peers.



The needs of today's workforce are shifting with the advancement in technology. With the growth of the digital economy, more jobs are being offered remotely in instances where employees have access to reliable and fast internet speeds. These remote employment opportunities are helping address rural migration by allowing individuals to earn competitive living wages without leaving their communities.

Without access to affordable high-speed internet, workers in underserved economies are being left behind as employment opportunities go elsewhere.

### HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

The COVID-19 pandemic has proven the essential and efficient tool that telehealth can be in bridging the gap between remote communities and critical health services. The program offers management and ongoing care of existing medical conditions, periodic checkups, mental health, substance abuse and family-centered case management.

Additionally, many rural Americans rely on social services such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). In fact, 14.6% of rural households rely on SNAP compared to only 10.9% of urban households. Access to reliable internet is an important tool for these residents to apply for and access these resources.

### JUSTICE AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Broadband allows communities to provide telehealth programs and other services for inmate populations that not only cut costs, but also addresses significant security and health concerns associated with transporting inmates. From prescription drugs, nursing evaluations and treatments to remote arraignment and sentencing platforms, broadband plays a critical component in alleviating many financial pressures on our criminal justice system.

Law enforcement officers (LEOs) also rely on broadband services while in the field. Around the country, officers use telehealth technology to connect LEOs to mental health clinicians when responding to crisis calls. Major upgrades are underway to improve emergency communication through Next Generation 911 (NG911) and the development of a public safety broadband network by the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet). FirstNet

offers a digital communication tool for first responder teams to communicate with one another in the field and receive important information from 911 call centers. ★

### Solution/Call To Action

If these service gaps are to be addressed, there are some basic steps Texas can take, including:

**Compile Complete and Accurate Data:** To effectively build our state and nation's broadband network, all stakeholders must first rely on accurate and complete connectivity data as a foundation for resource allocation. Without it, we run the risk of overlooking major gaps in our nation's broadband coverage and leaving entire communities and populations behind.

**Allow Local Solutions:** 25 states, Texas included, have placed limitations or outright bans on municipally-owned broadband networks. By removing local governments from the solution, these states have effectively created an unsolvable equation. States should empower local governments to leverage public and private investments towards bridging the digital divide.

**Reducing Cost of Deployment:** Texas counties support Gov. Abbott's Broadband Development Council's recommendation to join 44 other states in creating a state broadband plan, establishing a state broadband office and developing funding programs to incentivize development in underserved areas. Furthermore, counties support strategic partnerships between state, municipal and county governments in leveraging existing infrastructure projects with 'dig once' coordination through utilizing existing utility infrastructure.

**Engage with Federal Partners:** Continue to monitor and engage federal agencies to provide the maximum federal funding for Texas residents. Encourage state leadership, alongside our congressional leadership, to draw down federal programs and matching funds to fix and improve broadband capabilities across Texas.