

Gigabit Opportunity Act Could Bridge Rural to Urban Broadband Divide

COVID-19 has highlighted how the U.S. lags global competitors in critical infrastructure, including rural broadband.

By Kat Cammack / *U.S. House of Representatives*

The past two years presented some very challenging situations for U.S. businesses, families and workers. Millions were locked down and forced to work remotely, and access to the internet and broadband infrastructure continues to be a critical underpinning of the U.S. economy and everyday life. According to Pew Research, nearly 90 percent of U.S. adults surveyed say “the internet has been essential or important for them during the coronavirus outbreak.” That is quite a testament to the reliance Americans have on the internet.

If the pandemic has taught Americans anything, it’s that the U.S. lags other global competitors in critical infrastructure, including rural broadband. This deficit in access hurts people coast to coast.

More than 10 percent of constituents in my district in North Central Florida live without access to non-satellite internet with speeds of at least 25 Mbps for download and 3 Mbps for upload. The non-satellite 25/3 Mbps standard exists because some people consider it a reasonable, minimum standard for broadband. Unfortunately, even this standard is quickly becoming obsolete in an increasingly internet-reliant world that heavily depends on quick upload and download speeds for everything from e-commerce to virtual education and work.

CLOSING THE RURAL DIVIDE

Because I’m a millennial, many of my colleagues often rely upon me for insight into younger Americans’ challenges and issues. Access to reliable, high-speed internet is one of them. I’ve heard from many of my constituents about their challenges in accessing affordable broadband in many rural areas. These communities often present significant logistical challenges to traditional broadband companies looking to expand service cost-effectively. As a result, many of the hardworking folks in small, rural towns must make do with what they have. For example, many students in rural Putnam, Bradford, and Union counties use the Wi-Fi at fast-food chains to do schoolwork and other tasks requiring a dependable internet connection. This is not acceptable.

BROADBAND COMMUNITIES readers are undoubtedly aware of the necessity of affordable broadband access, particularly in underserved rural and urban communities, and the demand for these services has increased exponentially. According to Pew Research, the percentage of U.S. adults who use the internet has nearly doubled since 2000.

During my first year in Congress, I was proud to hold several roundtable discussions with businesses, law enforcement leaders,

broadband providers, and other stakeholders to learn more about the individual needs of underserved communities. We spoke about how government can help facilitate the bridging of services in more rural communities, such as those in my district. I regularly communicate with broadband providers such as Windstream, AT&T, Cox and SpaceX. They are all working on expanding service to rural communities across the nation.

GIGABIT OPPORTUNITY ACT

I understand the challenges in implementing a widely available, high-speed broadband internet system. Therefore, I am proud to sponsor the Gigabit Opportunity Act (GO Act), H.R. 3377, which seeks to bridge the digital divide that separates nearly 19 million Americans from access to affordable, quality broadband internet. This critical piece of legislation works in two primary ways to tackle these challenges: it targets development in underserved areas and incentivizes private investment. Under the targeted development umbrella, there would be procedures for the FCC to publish a Uniform Model Broadband Deployment Act. This would include guidelines for state governments on developing and maintaining gigabit opportunity zones.

These zones are considered eligible if they meet specific qualifications, such as being in low-income areas and lacking access to broadband services at the standard 25/3 Mbps speeds or being in areas that face economic development roadblocks because of their lack of broadband coverage. The second aspect of the bill focuses on incentivizing private investment and cutting bureaucratic red tape. Under these provisions, broadband providers would receive tax benefits from capital gains invested in the property being used to provide services in these opportunity zones.

Over the next decade, the country's ability to bridge the digital divide will dictate its competitiveness in an increasingly global, interconnected,

The Gigabit Opportunity Act seeks to bridge the digital divide by targeting development in underserved areas and incentivizing private investment in broadband.

digitally reliant economy. The GO Act presents real-world solutions to this critical challenge. This should not and cannot be a partisan issue. I am determined to broker discussions among and propose solutions to a diverse, bipartisan coalition in Congress. The pathway into the 21st century is laid in digital bricks, and it's Congress's job to lay this road brick by brick until all Americans have the opportunity to walk the digital path together. Only then will this country have bridged the gap between rural and

urban, digital and analog, opportunity and impediment. ❖



Congresswoman Kat Cammack is the youngest Republican woman in the 117th United States Congress. She represents Florida's Third Congressional District and serves

on the House Homeland Security and Agriculture Committees.

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