COVID-19 Widens the Digital Divide

Communications infrastructure has the power to help rural, underserved areas of the United States achieve greater success, but it means the broadband industry must ramp up its commitment to connect more of the country.

By Michael Morey / *Bluebird Network*

Life, at least for now, has fundamentally shifted as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Sweeping through the country, this virus has been an acute strain in metropolitan areas and urban centers where high population densities make social distancing and containing viral spread extremely difficult. Yet, as this pandemic continues, one thing is clear: Urban epicenters are struggling greatly, but America's rural communities are being hit equally hard and struggling in their own ways.

At the time this article was written, rural areas appeared to see slower growth in COVID-19 cases than urban areas did, but the number of cases expanded quickly – and without the same level of awareness other hubs, such as New York City, had. As of April 15, the Smithfield Foods plant in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, was considered the largest coronavirus hot spot and the biggest single source of cases in the United States. The 518 employees and 126 related nonemployees in Sioux Falls superseded the 644 cases aboard the U.S.S. Theodore Roosevelt in Guam to become the largest infected hot spot in the United States.

In-depth tracking by the New York Times highlights other counties with the highest numbers of infections per resident in the country, including Lincoln, Arkansas; Marion and Pickaway, Ohio; and multiple counties in Louisiana, Iowa and more. Other significant workplace-based clusters have been identified in Iowa and Kansas and throughout the Midwest and Great Plains. Some meatpacking plants in these regions have slowed their work or even stopped production because of large outbreaks. What do these hot spots all have in common? They're rural.

BROADBAND IS A LIFELINE

Part of what makes rural cases so difficult is that these regions remain underserved in communications infrastructure capabilities – capabilities that act as vital lifelines in the digital era. A 2018 State of the States Report referenced by the FCC observed that during 2018, 2.3 million students lacked access to broadband services that met the commission's connectivity goal of 100 Mbps per 1,000 students and staff. Furthermore, reports from the FCC in the same year noted that 14 million rural Americans and 1.2 million Americans on tribal land were still simply seeking access to 4G or LTE. Progress has been made in these areas to extend much-needed internet connectivity, but a rift still exists. The 2019 Broadband Deployment Report revealed that more than 26 percent of rural Americans still lacked access to fixed advanced telecommunications options, but some industry experts say these numbers may be much higher.

This means that on top of the health harm this pandemic presents, impacts on rural communities are compounded by a range of associated disadvantages – the kinds that urban centers often don't face – that are being exacerbated by COVID-19. The world is turning to virtual means as a way of maintaining social connections, but digital capabilities also have become vital for essential businesses, public and private schools and necessary telehealth services. Data demands have risen across the board, and the average daily data usage across the United States reportedly jumped from 12 GB in March 2019 to 16.6 GB in March 2020 – a 38 percent increase seen across every device category. However, many organizations do not have the infrastructure to handle those demands, and therefore many people go without critical resources.

As social distancing and quarantine measures are implemented, a lack of capable internet connection means students in rural and underserved populations fall behind, and workers go without the ability to continue their duties remotely. Similarly, vulnerable populations are at even greater risk without access to mobile health services, which would help greatly; research shows that rural individuals live an average of 10.5 miles away from the nearest hospital. This distance is noticeably higher compared with the average 5.6 miles for people in suburban areas and 4.4 miles in urban locales. Simply put, people who live in rural communities often lack the ability to move their lives online, which is a fundamental barrier in a time when digital resources are essential for coping with the pandemic economically, socially and educationally.

REASONS BROADBAND LAGS
Barriers exist for several reasons, including the expense and complexity of building out broadband infrastructure in areas where geography is challenging. This includes areas such as Minnesota, where the frozen ground prevents fiber placement for most of the year, or West Virginia around the Appalachian and Allegheny Mountains, where especially rocky terrain creates logistical difficulties. Rural areas do not offer the same population densities as cities or suburban areas, making providers believe the investment outweighs the return.

These struggles are not new, and the digital gap between rural and urban locations has been a pressing challenge across the telecommunications industry for some time. The lack of awareness and action regarding the disparity can become deadly in today's extraordinary circumstances. It's important to understand that this issue is within the immediate scope of the pandemic and that COVID-19's broadband ramifications should, and will, continue to be an important driver for the industry in the months and years that follow.

POLICIES PROMISE IMPROVEMENT
Communications infrastructure has the power to help set underserved areas up for greater success moving forward, but that means that the broadband industry needs to focus on the future and seek to connect more of the United States. Policies are helping this mission, including the ACCESS BROADBAND Act, which awaits a Senate vote and could expand accessibility for rural populations, and the FCC's Keep Americans Connected Pledge, which works to continue service during the pandemic and facilitate the expansion and improvement of broadband programs for low-income people. The U.S. Department of Agriculture also launched a program in 2018 to promote high-speed internet in the rural United States, allowing telecommunications companies, rural utilities companies, internet service providers and municipalities to apply for funding through the ReConnect Program. However, the communications industry's deployment strategies must change to seek out and collaborate with legislative action to stem the disproportionate impacts affecting underserved regions. Programs are available that can support providers in these buildouts, and taking advantage of them will be key.

COVID-CAUSED INTERRUPTIONS
Although this pandemic continues to make it clear that building out virtual capabilities as soon as possible is critical, it also slows broadband processes in some areas. Bluebird Network, a Midwest provider with deep roots in rural communities, has seen this struggle to reconcile urgent need with often unavoidable interruptions firsthand. Technicians are still on-site in many cases to repair or install vital connectivity in service areas across Missouri, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas and the surrounding states. Every precaution is taken to ensure safety, but the idea of outsiders coming to customer locations can still be frightening. About 10 percent of Bluebird deployments have been postponed to accommodate concerns, but the need still remains.

When it comes to forging ahead during this singularly challenging time, however, Bluebird remains in growth mode. The company plans to continue growing its network and capacity in the same way it has for years. When everything opens back up, demand will skyrocket – and providers must be ready to support that demand so everyone can be better prepared if another event like this happens in the future.

Acting as a catalyst of change for this digital disparity is paramount, and COVID-19 brings this truth to the forefront, serving as the wake-up call that many may need to address this challenge fully. Rural areas and their communities require infrastructure that can connect and empower them, because telehealth, e-learning and other online capabilities will continue to become more central to life and success in the digital age. ❖

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