

# Broadband Access Goes from Luxury to Necessity

The U.S. has finally gained ground on the digital divide. Let's not lose it now.

By Heather Gate / *Connected Nation*

Over the years, expanding broadband access, adoption and use has at times seemed like “The Little Engine That Could”: *I think I can. I think I can. I think I can.* The telecom industry works hard every day to chip away at the digital divide and continue up the hill with many other little engines.

Looking back at the past two decades, it's often been a challenge to convince others that expanding high-speed internet to all people is possible – and that it's not a luxury or a privilege but a necessity.

Cue the pandemic. A little over a year ago, COVID-19 disrupted everyday life as we know it. Schools and businesses started closing, and people were sent home to quarantine, exposing the depth of the digital divide. That's when a seismic shift in what was viewed as important – and doable – occurred. In the words of the great composer Duke Ellington, “A problem is a chance for you to do your best.”

After years as a digital inclusion practitioner, I was amazed at how in just a matter of months, new funding was made available for important broadband infrastructure, and key policy considerations and changes emerged to advance telehealth availability and make remote schooling more equitable. I hope this focus on closing the digital divide continues well after the pandemic ends.

## PANDEMIC-DRIVEN PROGRAMS

First, let's look at the broadband funding, policies and programs that emerged in short order in response to the pandemic.

The Coronavirus Aid, Recovery, and Economic Security (CARES) Act signed in March 2020 allocated \$375 million for broadband and related technologies. The funding was intended to help states, local communities and tribal communities address digital divide issues the pandemic exacerbated. This included \$50 million awarded to the Institute of Museum and Library Services as an emergency investment to “enable libraries and museums to prevent, prepare for, and respond to the coronavirus, including by expanding digital network access, purchasing internet-accessible devices, and providing technical support services to their communities.”

In addition, the funding allocations included \$200 million for the FCC to establish the COVID-19 Telehealth Program to increase telehealth services in rural areas and \$125 million to the Rural Utilities Services for its broadband deployment pilot program and telehealth and distance learning programs.

The Keep Americans Connected Pledge that began in March 2020 called on broadband providers to promote assistance for Americans impacted by coronavirus disruptions. To ensure that Americans would not lose broadband connectivity because of these exceptional circumstances, the FCC chairman asked providers to pledge to not terminate services to customers (both business and residential) disrupted by the pandemic, to waive late fees, and to open Wi-Fi hot spots in communities that desperately needed them.



Interventions to connect schoolchildren during the pandemic, including giving them laptops, have resulted in the estimated number of disconnected kids dropping from 16 million to 12 million.

More than 800 providers and associations signed the pledge to provide much-needed relief to millions of Americans. In addition, many providers offered free or low-cost broadband plans and devices to customers.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 signed in December 2020 included more than \$7 billion to help improve connectivity in the U.S. This included funding for a new temporary emergency broadband program for low-income households and people newly unemployed because of the pandemic. It also included funds to make telecommunications networks more secure, deploy new broadband networks in rural and tribal areas, connect minority communities, support telehealth, improve broadband maps, better coordinate federal broadband efforts and provide more spectrum for 5G.

When the pandemic forced schools to end in-person learning, school districts arranged for parents to pick up devices, such as hot spots

and Chromebooks, to support virtual learning. Many states and school districts mobilized, using federal CARES Act funding, broadband discounts and partnerships with private companies to connect students and enable online learning.

More recently and most notably, the \$3.2 billion FCC Emergency Broadband Benefit Program provides reimbursements to participating providers for offering discounts on the price of broadband internet access service (and associated equipment), a connected device or both to eligible households during the emergency period.

The federal government also temporarily lifted burdensome regulations on telehealth, making it more accessible for health care providers and patients. It offered waivers to make it easier for providers to offer services to Medicare and Medicaid patients, limited restrictions on delivering telehealth services across state lines and appropriated funding to telehealth. This was critical in limiting unnecessary exposure to the coronavirus.

### **LEVERAGING MOMENTUM FOR LONG-TERM PROGRESS**

The country is doing more than many thought it could do to close the digital divide. There's no reason to stop doing it after the COVID-19 pandemic is over.

This, in my opinion, is what every one of us should want our local, state and federal leaders to remember as more people receive the vaccine and the pandemic wanes. Though some measures implemented in response to the pandemic were temporary, it's important to examine the lessons learned and move forward with new policies and ideas.

I am excited to return to the way things used to be – for instance, going to movie theaters and getting back to my mission to visit every state of the union with my daughter before she turns 18.

I have no doubt that more challenges lie ahead, but I am cautiously optimistic that the pandemic will end sometime soon. And though I long for a return to normal, I am certain we are going to have to embrace a *new* normal – and

Once the pandemic is over, let's not make students give back devices, make telehealth harder to access, or stop investing in broadband infrastructure.

that we must embrace it when it comes to digital inclusion.

Let's take stock of what we did well in response to this crisis. Then, let's do it even better in the future.

Let's not make students give back devices. According to a report released by EdSurge in January, an analysis from Common Sense, Boston Consulting Group and the Southern Education Foundation revealed that interventions to connect schoolchildren have made a dent in the digital divide – resulting in the estimated number of

disconnected children dropping from 16 million to 12 million in December 2020. Understanding that some devices were hurriedly deployed and may need to be used in the school building, districts need to evaluate efforts to implement a deliberate plan of bridging the homework gap.

Let's not make telehealth harder to use again. It's a convenient, money-saving way to access health care. It's also critical for areas that have lost hospitals. Let's evaluate the temporary policy changes and find ways to make

changes that benefit patients and providers permanent.

Let's keep funding investments in broadband infrastructure. Both rural and urban communities need good access to powerful internet at affordable prices. The most powerful catalyst to providing unserved and underserved communities with broadband is to know where they are. The Consolidated Appropriations Act included funding to improve broadband maps. This is important because accurate broadband maps are the key to linking available private or public funding resources to unserved or underserved communities.

Let's evaluate temporary programs and determine a path forward. Once the COVID-19 emergency is behind us and programs such as the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program end, we must evaluate lessons learned and move forward with improved programs.

Let's continue to work together. The COVID-19 pandemic mobilized private companies; nonprofit organizations; associations; and local, state, and federal governments to seek immediate solutions to the disruptions the lockdowns caused. These partnerships will continue to be important after the crisis – so why not continue to work together? We simply cannot go back to the way things were in February 2020. We cannot return to pre-COVID-19 times.

Sure, there are still big challenges. Millions of people are still on the wrong side of the digital divide. But the country has come so far and is that much closer to digital equity in this country. With more people engaged, the future looks brighter.

U.S. leaders must not lose the ground gained during the pandemic. Instead, let's use it as a foundation for what's next. ❖

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