

# Why a National Conversation on the Digital Divide Is Needed Now

Broadband accessibility is not just about building network infrastructure. It is also a matter of digital literacy and affordability.

By Jessica Denson / *Connected Nation*

**W**hen I think about the current broadband conversation in the U.S., two clichés come to mind: “It’s a perfect storm” and “The stars have aligned.”

Before 2020, explaining why the U.S. needed to invest in expanding high-speed internet infrastructure was not always easy. Lawmakers or community leaders often did not understand or could not justify spending money on what can often be an expensive venture.

Fast forward to 2021, and the level of broadband-related federal funding is mindboggling – upward of \$370 billion. Now that the infrastructure bill passed, that figure rises by billions of dollars more. That’s because with the pandemic came a new understanding of the reasons that investment is necessary, not in a few years but immediately.

The pandemic has been brutal for everyone, especially during those first few months of 2020. Millions of U.S. workers suddenly had to telework. Likewise, millions of U.S. children suddenly had to access remote learning to take part in classes. Millions of senior citizens were told to limit exposure to COVID-19 by accessing telehealth instead of going to in-office health care visits. The only problem? Millions of kids, parents, veterans, senior citizens, low-income families and others did not have access to the high-speed internet they needed to do these things.

It’s important to point out that it is not just about the infrastructure. Many people on

the wrong side of the digital divide may have had access to broadband in their area, but they could not afford it, did not have a computer or laptop to access it or did not understand how broadband could help them or even how to use it.

## ALL-DIGITAL PREPARATION

However people look at it, the bottom line is that the U.S. was ill-prepared for transitioning to an all-digital world.

Oddly enough, this year is a particularly meaningful year for Connected Nation. The national nonprofit organization is marking 20 years of service in 2021, and it has long been at the intersection of this conversation. Connected Nation has a mission to “improve lives by providing innovative solutions that expand access, adoption, and use of high-speed internet and its related technologies to all people.”

Years before the pandemic shocked the nation into understanding that broadband was a critical need, Connected Nation worked directly with communities, school districts, state and federal leaders, and digital inclusion allies to create understanding and action to close the digital divide across the U.S.

For two decades, staff members have worked tirelessly in the field and with partners explaining why the country must invest at the local, state and federal levels to expand broadband access, adoption and use. Among



other things, Connected Nation developed 650-plus community-specific Technology Action Plans.

It also provided telework training and digital job placement assistance through its Digital Works program, hitting 1,000 job placements amid the pandemic. Connected Nation worked with school districts to track and improve technology and classroom connectivity needed for digital learning. Finally, the organization provided more granular broadband coverage mapping and analysis to better inform decision-makers so they can invest in places that genuinely lacked broadband access.

Connected Nation's leadership and staff could never have predicted that celebrating the nonprofit organization's platinum anniversary would be under these current circumstances.

Community leaders and lawmakers no longer ask why they should invest but instead ask, "How can we do this?" Much of the money needed to expand access, adoption and use is there, the understanding is there, and the willingness is there.

That is why *now* is the moment to make real change in this country. It

truly is a perfect storm – a time when the stars have aligned when it comes to the opportunity to improve broadband access across the U.S.

### **A NATIONAL CONVERSATION**

On November 17, Connected Nation hosted a national conversation on the digital divide.

The know-how needed to tackle such a complicated and technical project rests with everyone who has been in the broadband space for years – nonprofit organizations, government agencies, broadband leaders, digital inclusion allies, internet service providers and others. The Connected Nation conversation brought these groups together to take stock of the current circumstances and actions needed to usher in change. What's been done right? What's failed, and why? What still needs to be done to close the digital equity gap across the U.S.?

This event, titled "20 Years of Connecting the Nation: A National Conversation on the Digital Divide," featured live, in-studio expert panel discussions from three U.S. cities: RFD-TV and American Farm Bureau studios in Washington, D.C.; Fort

Bend Independent School District in Sugar Land, Texas; and KGW8-TV in Portland, Ore.

Attendees heard stories from business owners and farmers working in rural communities, teachers and students impacted by remote learning, doctors and mental health practitioners advocating for telehealth expansion, and others. People walked away with a real-world understanding of how internet connectivity directly impacts lives and what can be done to expand access to all. Everyone belongs in a Connected Nation.

*Watch a recording of the event at [www.cn.org](http://www.cn.org).* ❖



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