

Broadband Access Challenges Persist for Residents of Federally Subsidized Multifamily Housing

The availability of federal infrastructure money creates opportunities to close service gaps.

By Anna Read and Kelly Wert / *The Pew Charitable Trusts*

Despite increasing recognition of the importance of broadband, many residents of federally subsidized public and multifamily housing have no access to high-speed internet service. Others may be able to get online only in restricted spaces, such as common areas, or have access in their units that is unreliable or unaffordable.

In 2016, the most recent year for which data is available, the ConnectHome Baseline Internet Access Survey found that only 34 percent of public housing households had high-speed internet access, 35 percent were under-connected, and 31 percent had no access at all. ConnectHome is a cross-sector collaboration working on expanding broadband availability for households that receive assistance from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

SHRINKING ECONOMIC, SOCIETAL INEQUITY

This limited broadband access, meanwhile, can exacerbate long-standing economic and societal inequities. To shrink the gap, federal lawmakers last year included billions of dollars in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021 (IIJA) to help bring high-speed internet service to more Americans, including those in public and other federally assisted multifamily housing.

Residents of such housing are disproportionately members of groups already

less likely to be connected than the national average: low-income households, people older than 65, and people with disabilities. With greater access, residents could attend online classes, apply to jobs online, and access resident services more efficiently, among other standard internet uses these days.

The federal government has long recognized the need to help more Americans get online, with multiple programs and policies across federal agencies. A 2017 HUD rule requires the installation of broadband infrastructure for new construction or substantial rehabilitation of any multifamily rental housing receiving HUD funding. Still, this rule covers only a tiny portion of the federal housing stock.

Federally subsidized multifamily housing tends to be located in areas that have already faced historic disinvestment. Meanwhile, internet service providers (ISPs) tend to focus on areas where more households can afford service and decline to install or upgrade wiring in low-income neighborhoods. Factors such as these make accessing affordable broadband service difficult.

UNIQUE CHALLENGES

Public and other federally assisted multifamily housing pose unique challenges for broadband access and adoption, partly because many developments were built before wiring all



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buildings for internet service was common practice. Infrastructure constraints make adding new wiring difficult. Some developments also have contracts with ISPs that limit how they can provide broadband to residents, such as prohibiting buildingwide Wi-Fi.

Complicating the situation, the application and eligibility verification processes for initiatives such as Lifeline and the Affordable Connectivity Program can be burdensome. For example, many applicants struggle to navigate online application requirements without an existing broadband connection, and some face hurdles in getting their documentation approved. Both initiatives provide subsidies to households to offset the monthly costs of a relationship or the long-term cost of devices. Even when service is available, residents of federally assisted, multifamily housing often need support services, such as digital literacy training. These factors add costs that can make establishing connections challenging for housing providers already working with limited funding.

The 2017 HUD rule helped ensure that all new and substantially renovated

HUD-funded housing is built for modern broadband needs, but much HUD-funded housing does not fall into either category. At the same time, housing providers may not have the resources to install broadband in existing units that are not up for renovation.

In recognition of this challenge, public housing organizations were listed as eligible recipients or projects for the \$65 billion broadband provisions in the IJJA. This funding presents a rare opportunity to improve connectivity for communities on the wrong side of the digital divide.

IJJA PROGRAMS HOLD HOPE

Two programs created through the IJJA – the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program and State Digital Equity Planning Grants – establish infrastructure and adoption funding that could benefit federally assisted, multifamily housing residents. For instance, BEAD prioritizes projects that provide fiber connections to end users in unserved locations, which can include a single unserved area. That means an unserved building could qualify even if the surrounding

neighborhood has service. The rules also expressly say that Wi-Fi deployment in multifamily buildings is an eligible use of funds. BEAD requires all projects to provide a low-cost option to “eligible subscribers,” which includes households receiving federal rental assistance.

States and territories that have developed plans to bring affordable, high-speed broadband service to their unserved and underserved locations also may allocate funding for digital literacy, broadband sign-up assistance and technology support, digital navigators, and subsidies toward broadband subscriptions. Digital navigators work with community members to make use of connections through the device and digital skills assistance. Offering these services could make a big difference in helping low-income households use new links and get online.

The digital equity program also recognizes the importance of these nondeployment uses so people can fully participate in the digital economy. States will receive funding to create digital equity plans that address issues beyond access to essential services. Each project must include “a holistic

MULTIFAMILY BROADBAND

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implementation strategy that addresses the barriers to participation in the digital world, including affordability, devices, digital skills, technical support, and digital navigation.”

Both programs emphasize the importance of engaging diverse groups of stakeholders in developing plans and suggest including public housing authorities or operators of HUD-assisted housing in the process. For the Digital Equity Act Planning and Capacity Grant programs, a public or multifamily housing authority can be designated the

“administering entity” to receive and administer grants and develop plans.

As state policymakers begin to develop plans to take advantage of these federal programs, they should consider ways of addressing connectivity challenges in low- and moderate-income housing. Housing stakeholders, meanwhile, should be sure to engage with their state broadband offices to offer input.

Additional research is needed on the state of broadband access, affordability and adoption in public and multifamily

housing. The Pew Charitable Trusts will continue to work on these critical issues as public housing authorities, housing providers, and communities throughout the country prepare to receive these funds. ❖



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