

This brief is one of a series based on a review of broadband deployment policies in all 50 states, published in Pew's State Broadband Policy Explorer.



Key Elements of State Broadband Programs

Programs take different forms, share common goals and activities

Introduction

States play a crucial role in efforts to expand broadband to the millions of Americans who still lack access to this vital service. Nearly all states have responded to the growing demand for reliable, high-speed internet by creating broadband offices or designating responsibility for broadband to a state agency, task force, or council. While their structures might vary, state programs share many similarities, including working with local officials and other stakeholders to close gaps in service, managing data on broadband access, and administering grant programs.

Who is in charge of broadband programs?

Nearly three quarters of states have created a dedicated broadband office within an agency or designated an existing agency—such as departments of economic development or information technology—with authority for expanding broadband. Others have formed broadband task forces or councils. In some cases, these entities are tasked with overseeing broadband efforts, while in other states, they serve as a first step toward establishing a broadband program.

Offices and agencies

The choice of where to locate a broadband program reflects many considerations, including the agency or department's relationship with policymakers and other stakeholders and experience with program priorities, such as geographic information systems or grant management.¹ Minnesota and California are among the states that

have created dedicated offices, housing them in the Department of Employment and Economic Development and Department of Technology, respectively.²

About one third of states have tasked an agency or agencies with achieving broadband goals. Iowa's Office of the Chief Information Officer is responsible for streamlining, consolidating, and coordinating access to and availability of broadband and related infrastructure and administering the state's broadband grant program. And Alabama has given the Department of Economic and Community Affairs responsibility for overseeing the state's broadband efforts.³

Still other states have structured their efforts across multiple agencies. Colorado tasked the governor's Office of Information Technology with overseeing and coordinating state agencies' broadband activities, which include grant programs funded by the Department of Local Affairs and regulatory agencies.⁴ And Georgia created a coordinated multiagency effort, led by the Georgia Department of Community Affairs and the Georgia Technology Authority.⁵

Broadband task forces and councils

Many states have set up broadband task forces and councils, which can complement their broadband program's efforts or serve as an important part of those efforts. These entities are charged with facilitating coordination, identifying opportunities for expanding broadband deployment and adoption, and making policy recommendations to the governor and legislature. The composition of task forces and councils varies depending on their goals and mandates, and may include representatives of state agencies, internet service providers, local officials, nonprofit organizations, and state legislators.

Despite their similar charges and membership, broadband task forces and councils have a few key distinctions. Broadband task forces study the scale of the challenge and make recommendations on how to move forward. Kansas, for example, established a broadband expansion task force in 2018 to make recommendations on broadband deployment efforts, including developing criteria for creating a statewide map showing where reliable, high-speed internet is available and identifying funding sources to support broadband deployment. The task force's 17 members include internet service providers, state legislators, local government advocacy organizations, and ex-officio representatives of state agencies.⁶

Or they may be formed to help advance a program's goals. In 2019, North Carolina's governor created a task force that included many department heads to offer recommendations for closing any gaps. It evaluates the state's progress on meeting targets in its broadband plan, which the Broadband Infrastructure Office is responsible for implementing.⁷ As with some other task forces, its duration is limited: it is to carry out its work through 2021. Kansas's task force is scheduled to sunset in June 2020.

Broadband councils often have a more formalized and centralized role. Some serve as a part of a broadband program, coordinating the activities of multiple entities or agencies engaged in broadband efforts. The California Broadband Council is composed of state agency chairs or their designees and a member each of the state Senate and General Assembly. It's tasked with facilitating information sharing and coordination across state agencies to advance broadband deployment in unserved and underserved areas.⁸

A council may also be the primary entity responsible for broadband. West Virginia's Broadband Enhancement Council, which is supported by the West Virginia Development Office, is charged with exploring opportunities for expanding broadband service and use, leading data collection and mapping efforts, and overseeing the disbursement of federal funds to support planning and deployment. Its membership includes representatives of state agencies and residential and business broadband users from both rural and urban communities, as well as members from the state Senate and House of Delegates.⁹

What do broadband programs do?

Although state broadband programs may have different administrative structures, all are engaged in these activities to connect more homes and businesses:

- **Stakeholder engagement.** State broadband programs play an important role engaging with stakeholders at both the state and local levels. Washington’s authorizing statute for its broadband office addresses coordination and engagement with entities involved in broadband, including local and tribal governments, nonprofit organizations, and utilities.¹⁰
- **Data management.** Policymakers need reliable data on broadband deployment to effectively target funding and evaluate the impacts of grants and other activities. Many state broadband programs are tasked with collecting and analyzing data to better understand where broadband service exists. Maine authorizes the ConnectME authority to collect data on deployment, revenues, and subscription rates from broadband providers.¹¹
- **Planning.** Broadband programs are engaged in planning at both the state and local levels. At the state level, programs are responsible for drafting plans to expand broadband availability in areas across the state that lack it. For example, North Carolina requires its chief information officer to develop a deployment plan that includes recommendations for achieving universal broadband access, such as connecting reliable, high-speed internet to economic development and closing the gap in students who are able to use broadband to complete assignments.¹² And in Georgia, the Department of Community Affairs mandates that local governments outline efforts to support broadband as part of their comprehensive plans, which document goals related to issues such as land use, transportation, and housing.¹³
- **Administering a grant program.** At least 27 states have established funds to expand broadband access, although not all of these are active or funded. Tennessee’s Department of Economic and Community Development, for example, administers grants that support “last mile” connections to unserved homes and businesses.

Beyond these four functions, some state programs are engaged in additional activities to advance their broadband goal. For example, Georgia has a Broadband Ready Site designation to certify industrial and commercial sites offering service at speeds that can support business, education, health care, and government applications.¹⁴ And in Nevada, the office that coordinates the state’s broadband policy has worked with the Department of Transportation to put policies in place requiring that conduit—the empty pipe that internet cables run through—be installed when the state builds or upgrades transportation infrastructure.¹⁵ It also helps the Telecommunications Advisory Council evaluate applications from telecommunications providers to access this conduit in exchange for expanding fiber infrastructure in other areas of the state.¹⁶

Conclusion

State broadband programs take a variety of forms. But regardless of how they are structured, the programs reflect policymakers’ recognition of the critical importance of reliable, high-speed internet access in the modern economy and the need for effective coordination among agencies to bridge the digital divide. By engaging stakeholders, collecting and analyzing data, planning for local and statewide buildouts, and supporting deployment efforts through grants, states are making progress toward closing the digital divide.

Endnotes

- 1 D. MacKenzie (executive director, Minnesota Office of Broadband Development), interview with The Pew Charitable Trusts, April 3, 2019; S. Arnold et al. (Tennessee Department of Economic & Community Development), interview with The Pew Charitable Trusts, May 2, 2019; A. Huffman et al. (North Carolina Department of Information and Technology—Broadband Infrastructure Office), interview with The Pew Charitable Trusts, June 6, 2019.
- 2 Minnesota Stat. 116j.39.2, <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/116j.39>.
- 3 Iowa Code 8B.4, <https://www.legis.iowa.gov/docs/code/2020/8B.4.pdf>.
- 4 Alabama Executive Order 704 (2015), <http://adeca.alabama.gov/Divisions/energy/broadband/Broadband%20Docs/Broadband%20Executive%20Order.pdf>.
- 5 Colorado Executive Order D 2012-037, Establishing Broadband Responsibilities in the Governor’s Office of Information Technology (2012), <https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/archives/governor-hickenlooper-executive-orders#eo2012>.
- 6 Georgia Code Ann. 50-40-2 (2018), <https://law.justia.com/codes/georgia/2018/title-50/chapter-40/article-1/section-50-40-2>.
- 7 Kansas Stat. Ann. 66-1286 (2018), http://www.kslegislature.org/li/b2019_20/statute/066_000_0000_chapter/066_012_0000_article/066_012_0086_section/066_012_0086_k/.
- 8 Governor of North Carolina, Executive Order 91, Establishing the Task Force on Connecting North Carolina, Promoting Expansion of Access to High-Speed Internet and Removing Barriers to Broadband Infrastructure Installation (2019), <https://governor.nc.gov/documents/executive-order-no-91-establishing-task-force-connecting-north-carolina-promoting>.
- 9 California Gov. Code. 8885-8889 (2018), [https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displayText.xhtml?lawCode=GOV&division=1.&title=2.&part=&chapter=13.&article=.](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displayText.xhtml?lawCode=GOV&division=1.&title=2.&part=&chapter=13.&article=)
- 10 West Virginia Code § 31g-1-3 (2017), <http://www.wvlegislature.gov/wvcode/ChapterEntire.cfm?chap=31G&art=1§ion=3#1>.
- 11 Washington Rev. Code 43.330.534, <https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=43.330.534>.
- 12 Maine Rev. Stat. 35-a, 93-9207, <https://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/statutes/35-A/title35-Asec9207.html>.
- 13 North Carolina General Assembly Session Law 2015-241, S. 7.23.(a), an Act to Make Base Budget Appropriations for Current Operations of State Departments, Institutions, and Agencies, and for Other Purposes (2015), <https://www.ncleg.net/enactedlegislation/sessionlaws/html/2015-2016/sl2015-241.html>.
- 14 Georgia Code Ann. 50-40-2; Georgia Code Ann. 36-70-6 (2018), <https://law.justia.com/codes/georgia/2018/title-36/provisions-applicable-to-counties-and-municipal-corporations/chapter-70/article-1/section-36-70-6>.
- 15 Georgia Code Ann. 50-40-61 (2018), <https://law.justia.com/codes/georgia/2018/title-50/chapter-40/article-4/section-50-40-61>; Georgia Department of Community Affairs, “General Information,” 2018, <https://broadband.georgia.gov/designations/general-information>.
- 16 Nevada Rev. Stat. 408.5501 Et Seq. (2017), <https://www.leg.state.nv.us/nrs/nrs-408.html#NRS408Sec5501>
- 17 Nevada Rev. Stat. 408.55028 (2017), <https://www.leg.state.nv.us/nrs/nrs-408.html#NRS408Sec55028>.

For further information, please visit:

<http://pewtrusts.org/broadband-research-initiative>

Contact: Catherine An, communications officer

Email: can@pewtrusts.org

Project website: <http://pewtrusts.org/broadband-research-initiative>

The Pew Charitable Trusts is driven by the power of knowledge to solve today’s most challenging problems. Pew applies a rigorous, analytical approach to improve public policy, inform the public, and invigorate civic life.