May 27, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
U.S. House of Representatives
H-232, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Republican Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
H-204, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
S-230, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Democratic Leader
U.S. Senate
S-221, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Leader McCarthy, Leader McConnell and Leader Schumer,

Congress' action since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic to increase federal resources for broadband expansion, boost access to telehealth services, and support distance learning underscores the urgency of addressing the digital divide in these challenging times. With Americans in every part of the country working and learning from home, high-speed, reliable internet has never been more essential to daily life.

For the tens of millions of Americans still living without this service, working, attending school and accessing healthcare is now more difficult than ever, if not impossible. In short, the economic necessity of unlocking the promise of the digital world for all Americans has never been greater. As you consider future funding and policy measures to close gaps in broadband connectivity and digital skills, we encourage you to coordinate with and support states—most of which are working to address this challenge.

States are making progress in closing the digital divide

The Pew Charitable Trusts' Broadband Research Initiative was established in 2018 to research and analyze options for expanding broadband access.[1] Our research has revealed that states make invaluable contributions to increasing the number of Americans connected to broadband. Nearly all states have active statewide broadband initiatives using one or more of five key activities: engaging a diverse set of stakeholders, establishing a policy framework, supporting planning and capacity building, providing funding for deployment and operations, and assessing their impact and adjusting efforts to better meet the needs of their communities.[2]

These efforts are making meaningful progress in increasing connectivity and offer several insights for federal leaders. First, Tennessee and Minnesota have grant programs which focus on funding networks that will remain useful years in the future. They are technology neutral and either encourage[3] or require[4] that grant-funded networks are built so they can be upgraded to significantly higher speeds. Second, Minnesota, Virginia, and Colorado provide grants for middle mile deployment[5] to help decrease the cost of last mile deployment to homes and businesses, which can improve the business case for deploying to high-cost areas. Finally, states

are increasingly implementing accountability measures – such as grant reporting and data collection – to ensure that states and their partners are making progress toward their goals.[6]

While our research found that funding for deployment and operational support is vital, funding was not the only component of success. Instead, successful programs have capitalized on the role of the state and its ability to engage a diverse set of stakeholders, including elected officials, community members, internet service providers, business owners, educators, and health care professionals. This engagement enables states to develop approaches that are tailored to the needs of its economy, communities, and policy priorities —such as California's regional broadband consortia, West Virginia's emphasis on data collection, or Maine's community broadband planning grants.[7]

Federal policymaking can amplify state broadband efforts

Federal support can help these activities take hold and expand in states. States have different geographies, internet service providers, budgetary constraints, and policies—all of which inform how states are currently responding to the digital divide and what support they need.[8] For example, some states may have projects that are "shovel ready" and need additional funding to move forward. Other states may need guidance on community engagement and planning processes to assess their state's digital divide and options for solving it. Federal policy measures that do not take these variations into account may miss opportunities to build on progress already being made.

State efforts highlight emerging trends in broadband

Many state broadband initiatives are adapting to the latest trends in how broadband is being used and can inform federal efforts to address broadband challenges. Through the course of our research, several stakeholders highlighted the importance of higher upload speeds, which historically have been significantly lower than download speeds. For example, the Federal Communications Commission's current definition of broadband is 25 Megabits per second download (Mbps) and three Mbps upload.[9] But in order to share a presentation, market products, or host a video conference, users need upload speeds that are almost as fast as, if not equivalent to, download speeds.[10] This consideration was one reason Minnesota chose a goal of all households and small businesses having access to speeds of 100 Mbps download and 20 Mbps upload by 2026; and why the state's grant program requires that all state-funded technology be scalable to speeds of 100 Mbps download and 100 Mbps upload.[11] Although fast upload speeds were already becoming key to engaging in today's economy, this need seems even more relevant as Americans operate under social distancing guidelines.

Additionally, states are increasingly noting that having a connection is just part of the equation. Community members need computers and the skills to use them for more than sending email— more so now that students are expected to learn from home, members of the workforce are looking for jobs, and patients need to connect with doctors via telehealth. Without adequate devices or digital literacy skills, we run the risk of leaving more Americans behind in today's economy.

Conclusion

As you consider proposals to close the digital divide during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, we encourage you to recognize the diverse needs of states. Coupled with accountability measures, flexibility can help states build on the progress that our research shows states are making through their existing initiatives.

Thank you for your leadership in working to get broadband to Americans who need it. We look forward to your continued attention to these important matters. Should you have any questions, or if we can be of assistance, please contact me at 202-540-6505 or kdewit@pewtrusts.org.

Kathryn de Wit
Manager, Broadband Research Initiative
The Pew Charitable Trusts

CC:
The Honorable Steny Hoyer, Majority Leader, U.S. House of Representatives
The Honorable James Clyburn, Majority Whip, U.S. House of Representatives
The Honorable Steve Scalise, Republican Whip, U.S. House of Representatives
The Honorable John Thune, Majority Whip, U.S. Senate
The Honorable Dick Durbin, Democratic Whip, U.S. Senate
The Honorable Collin Peterson, Chairman, House Committee on Agriculture
The Honorable K. Michael Conaway, Ranking Member, House Committee on Agriculture
The Honorable David Scott, Chairman, House Agriculture Subcommittee on Commodity Exchanges, Energy, and Credit
The Honorable Austin Scott, Ranking Member, House Agriculture Subcommittee on Commodity Exchanges, Energy, and Credit
The Honorable Frank Pallone Jr., Chairman, House Committee on Energy and Commerce
The Honorable Greg Walden, Ranking Member, House Committee on Energy and Commerce
The Honorable Michael F. Doyle, Chairman, House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Communications and Technology
The Honorable Robert E. Latta, Ranking Member, House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Communications and Technology
The Honorable Pat Roberts, Chairman, Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry
The Honorable Debbie Stabenow, Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry
The Honorable Joni Ernst, Chairman, Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Subcommittee on Rural Development and Energy
The Honorable Tina Smith, Ranking Member, Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Subcommittee on Rural Development and Energy
The Honorable Roger F. Wicker, Chairman, Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation
The Honorable Maria Cantwell, Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation

The Honorable Brian Schatz, Ranking Member, Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Subcommittee on Communications, Technology, Innovation, and the Internet

[1] Pew Charitable Trusts, "Broadband Research Initiative," Pew Charitable Trusts, accessed 5/13/2020, https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/projects/broadband-research-initiative.

[2] Pew Charitable Trusts, "How States Are Expanding Broadband Access" (2020), https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2020/02/how-states-are-expanding-broadband-access.

[3] Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development, "Broadband Accessibility Grant—Program Guidelines" (2019), https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/ecd/documents/broadband/FY20%20Grant%20Program%20Guidelines%20Revised.pdf. ;

[4] Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, Office of Broadband Development, "2019 Minnesota Broadband Grant Application," accessed Oct. 17, 2019, https://mn.gov/deed/programs-services/broadband/grant-program.

[5] Ibid. ; Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development, "2019 Virginia Telecommunications Initiative Program Guidelines and Criteria," accessed Oct. 17, 2019, https://www.dhcd.virginia.gov/virginia-telecommunication-initiative-vati. ; Colorado Department of Local Affairs, "Policies for Funding of Local Government Broadband Planning and Infrastructure Projects" (2015), https://drive.google.com/file/d/1S01Y2P6GmdBKOOxjmZ8yFx7YjfvDqStY/view.

[6] Pew Charitable Trusts, "How States Are Expanding Broadband Access."

[7] Ibid.

[8] Pew Charitable Trusts, "No One Approach Fits All States in Efforts to Expand Broadband Access" (2019), https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2019/07/31/no-one-approach-fits-all-states-in-efforts-to-expand-broadband-access.

[9] Federal Communications Commission, "2020 Broadband Deployment Report" (2020), https://www.fcc.gov/document/new-fcc-report-shows-digital-divide-continuing-close-0.

[10] Pew Charitable Trusts, "How States Are Expanding Broadband Access."

[11] B. Coleman (Principal, Community Technology Advisors), interview with The Pew Charitable Trusts, April 2, 2019.