

3 Key Components Define Effective State Broadband Programs

Dedicated offices, planning and technical assistance, competitive grant programs are essential to expanding high-speed internet access



Overview

States throughout the country have created programs to expand broadband connectivity for their residents. And although the configuration of these programs varies, research has indicated that the most successful ones include the same core components: a state-level broadband office with full-time staff, systems to support local and regional planning and technical assistance, and well-funded competitive grant programs for internet service providers, such as telephone and cable companies, wireless internet service providers, electric cooperatives, and municipal utilities.¹ Together, these elements foster community engagement, enable effective stewardship of public funds, and ensure that state and local activities remain focused on achieving universal broadband access.

Broadband office

A “broadband office” is a centralized entity within state government with a full-time focus on expanding high-speed internet access, including distributing funds and providing planning and capacity-building support to communities. To ensure that these offices can effectively fulfill those functions, states must provide adequate funding and dedicated, full-time staff who understand broadband issues, can manage grant administration, and can work with the wide range of affected stakeholders.

What do broadband offices contribute to efforts to expand access?

- Capacity within state government to address deployment and adoption of high-speed internet.
- A clear point of contact for stakeholders interested in the state's broadband plans.
- The structure, support, and authority to execute the planning, capacity building, and competitive grant programs that increase service availability.
- A venue for building strong relationships with multiple stakeholder groups and a trusted resource for broadband information.
- A neutral voice when educating policymakers and community leaders.
- Coordination and partnership building to advance broadband projects and policy.

Planning and technical assistance for local and regional entities

When undertaking a broadband expansion effort, communities must first engage in a variety of planning activities, and states can support these efforts by providing, ideally via their broadband offices, funding and technical support. Planning typically happens in two phases: strategic and technical. Strategic planning involves defining goals, cultivating stakeholder buy-in, identifying existing assets, conducting surveys or other demand (economies of scale) research, reaching out to internet service providers, and examining potential models for deployment, such as working with the incumbent provider or launching a publicly owned and operated network. Technical planning follows those steps and consists mainly of network design, business planning, and, if applicable, submission of applications for funding. Ideally, planning should be directly tied to funding.

However, local governments' capacity to conduct this sort of extensive planning varies widely across jurisdictions, and many communities, especially rural and underserved ones, may not have the necessary expertise, staff, or financial resources. State programs that provide support for or lead planning efforts can help build the capacity and provide the resources that communities need to be successful.

What do planning and capacity building contribute to broadband expansion efforts?

- A more active voice for community members in designing local broadband networks and negotiating public-private partnerships.
- Evidence for the private sector of a community's desire and willingness to pay for expanded service.
- Clear funding priorities and project timelines for grant administrators.
- An achievable outline for how a project will connect the entire community, not just the most profitable sections, to high-quality, affordable internet at speeds that will be useful over the long term.
- A chance to define local priorities and objectives related to digital equity and economic development.
- Opportunities to form partnerships and advance community goals, especially when funding is not available or secured.

Competitive grant program

Competitive grant programs provide limited subsidies to internet service providers to extend service into rural and unserved areas and, when well-designed, can correct the market failures that have left many people without access to high-speed, reliable internet.

What do well-designed competitive grant programs contribute to broadband efforts?

- A set of evaluation criteria for proposed projects that includes items such as demonstrated community support or economic need in the service areas. These criteria help states make decisions based on factors other than just cost per household served.
- Matching funds from the applicant and eligible partners, such as localities, to cover a certain percentage of the project's cost, demonstrate commitment from the applicants, and help ensure efficient use of public funds.
- An emphasis on faster speeds, such as by requiring scalable technology and prioritizing projects that meet speed requirements, to help ensure that funded projects can meet future usage needs without additional state investment.
- Alignment between community plans and applicants' proposals to confirm that infrastructure projects meet local needs and help funders manage risk by ensuring that communities have assessed their options and gained resident and partner buy-in.
- Effective stewardship of public funds via clear accountability measures for grant recipients to help ensure that funded proposals achieve their intended purpose and help project leaders assess and communicate progress to policymakers and the public. Robust accountability provisions may include well-structured challenge processes to allow input from both incumbent and applicant providers; clear milestones for deployment, reporting, data collection, and field visits to monitor project progress; and post-grant requirements, such as abiding by the principles of net neutrality.
- Reduced costs of deployment in high-cost areas.
- Greater availability of broadband connections and progress toward secondary goals, such as use of networks to strengthen local economies.

Conclusion

Many states have broadband programs that are working to close the digital divide. Achieving universal access to high-speed internet service—within a community or state or the country—is a complex process that requires careful consideration. Research has shown that when state programs have a dedicated office, offer localities support for planning and capacity building, and provide competitive grant funding, they are more likely to have success in achieving state access goals.

Endnote

- 1 The 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>.

For further information, please visit:
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