

Government Subsidized Broadband Networks Should Strive to Serve the Unserved

Broadband access in the home is increasingly important for a number of reasons, education being one of the most critical.

Connected Nation says 55 percent of parents nationwide see their children bring home schoolwork that requires internet access.¹ In December of 2010, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce commissioned a study titled, “The Impact of Broadband on Education,” which said:

“[Broadband] provides students, parents, administrators, and educators with a platform for enabling a wide range of innovative tools, services, applications, and hybrid approaches to teaching and learning. Broadband-enabled tools are increasingly being used to create efficiencies and cost-savings in the administration of education across all levels.”²

Especially in rural areas, many Americans lack access to wireline broadband. The Virginia Center for Innovative Technology (CIT) estimates that 11 percent of the population in Roanoke County, Virginia, is unserved by broadband internet access.³ With connectivity on the rise as a vital component of educational success, providing broadband access to unserved households should be a priority for policymakers.

Expanding broadband services to reach the unserved is often a question of cost. Unserved populations tend to live in rural areas, where it is difficult to justify building a capital-intensive broadband infrastructure to serve a small customer base. Much like how our nation expanded electric service into rural areas with the same economic barriers, **government support and partnerships can be effective tools to expand service into new geographic territories.**

In addition to those without access, cost is also an issue for millions of low-income Americans. The FCC reports that “even in areas where broadband is available, approximately 100 million Americans still do not subscribe.”⁴ In these cases, there are programs offered by private broadband providers, such as Connect2Compete from Cox Communications and Internet Essentials from Comcast, which offer residential broadband access for as low as \$9.95 per month for eligible families.

Although a partnership approach is sensible, some municipalities are creating duplicate networks over existing service territories. State and federal money (and taxpayer dollars) are often used to build networks that do not serve the residents who foot the bill. Meanwhile, these projects ignore the greater charge of this funding: to expand existing broadband infrastructure so every family has a chance to enhance educational opportunity, utilize advances in telemedicine and benefit from a number of other technology advances made accessible through reliable broadband internet access.

¹ <http://www.connectednation.org/BlogPost/its-digital-learning-day>

² https://www.uschamber.com/sites/default/files/legacy/about/US_Chamber_Paper_on_Broadband_and_Education.pdf

³ <https://www.wired.virginia.gov/broadband/virginia-statistics>

⁴ <https://www.fcc.gov/reports-research/reports/broadband-progress-reports/eighth-broadband-progress-report>