Keep America Learning: Bridging the Digital Divide Across the Lifelong Learning Spectrum
Executive Summary

Education is the surest path to opportunity. Unfortunately, at a time when nearly all educational pursuits across the lifelong learning spectrum involve an online component, a devastating number of learners are excluded because they lack access to quality internet connections and digital devices. According to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), at least 14.5 million Americans do not have access to reliable, high-speed internet at home - and the actual number is likely much higher. More than 1.5 million K–12 learners have struggled to engage in education during the pandemic because they do not have access, due to lack of infrastructure and other barriers to adoption, such as cost for reliable, high-speed internet service. Additionally, 57 percent of college students found accessing a reliable, high-speed internet connection challenging.¹

In August of 2020, Western Governors University (WGU), which has a long history of serving adult learners, established an Online Access Scholarship Program intended to close the digital gap for existing and new WGU learners without access to affordable or reliable internet. The scholarship covers the cost of broadband as well a computer device to complete their degrees.

The effort launched by WGU is important, but in the context of the expansive digital divide, it is only a small stop-gap measure. As states grapple with economic recovery in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving an estimated 10.7 million people unemployed in December 2020², it is critical to put the structures and policies in place that allow all adults seeking credentialing and training opportunities to access flexible, online learning. America cannot afford to allow adult learners to be offline and left behind.

Broadband is as necessary to the everyday interactions and priorities of modern society as roads, and the shift to online learning, work, telehealth and even grocery shopping due to the pandemic has only underscored broadband’s significance. America must channel the same farsightedness, vision, and ambition that drove the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, which authorized the building of 41,000 of miles of interstate highway to knit the country together, and which ultimately saw an estimated $6 in economic benefit for every $1 spent.³ Creating access to broadband for all is a similarly far-reaching initiative, one that will have significant upfront costs but will also yield considerable dividends. When there is broadband in every home, every home can be a place for educational and workplace opportunities, creating unparalleled opportunity for individual prosperity and economic growth.
Addressing infrastructure alone will not be enough to meet the needs of America’s adult learners and workers. While many rural and tribal communities cannot access high-speed internet, there are many other Americans who cannot afford internet access or devices regardless of internet availability, and others are without the digital literacy skills to meaningfully participate. As policymakers tackle the digital divide, core issues center the work: last-mile and middle-mile infrastructure, affordability, quality, device adoption and digital skills training, public-private partnerships, and data and mapping to answer key questions. This brief recommends short-term and long-term actions to bridge the “digital divide” for adult learners and, in doing so, to build a more resilient future for America. Because the digital divide is too complicated to provide a one-size-fits-all solution, this paper puts forth the following broad recommendations:

- **Allow broadband and devices to be within reach of all learners**
- **Assess and address digital skills and training**
- **Commit to expanding broadband to every home through expanded infrastructure**
- **Focus on quality**
- **Build the foundation for online learning by leveraging leadership, mapping, and data**

This paper also includes several illustrations of the recommendations in action, with the acknowledgement that there is still much room in broadband policy to pilot and expand promising concepts. It is also important to recognize that while these recommendations are designed with adult learners at the center, they will serve all residents of a state well, paving the way to a more vibrant and resilient ecosystem of opportunity for all learners, workers, and residents.
The Problem

Limited availability of broadband, unequal internet subscription adoption across race, income, and education levels, device access gaps, and digital skill gaps impede not only individual opportunities, constraining who can learn and work remotely, but also social and economic progress. According to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), at least 14.5 million Americans do not have physical access to the high-speed internet connections at home; other research suggests the actual number might easily be double. The number expands dramatically when we consider the number of Americans who do not adopt available internet services because of unaffordability, lack of internet-enabled devices, and/or poor digital skills. The digital divide was a critical equity issue prior to COVID-19, limiting higher education and job opportunity, but the pandemic magnified the significance of the divide and made it a true crisis. Millions of Americans have been sidelined by unemployment and other pressures from COVID-19, and technology is a critical path for these individuals to access training and find their way back to work, which in turn will rebuild our economy.

The twenty-five year old Telecommunications Act of 1996 committed to the importance of broadband at educational centers—K–12 school buildings and libraries—providing discounts for connectivity through E-rate and leading to an impressive 95 percent of those locations being wired. However, COVID-19 has underscored the importance of building upon E-rate work as the “classroom” for many students has become the kitchen table. It is not merely institutions that need access, but individuals and not only children, but adults. Adult learners and workers without high-speed internet access are at an enormous disadvantage, crippling individual opportunity and the economy. Policymakers committed to bridging the digital divide for adult learners and workers must tackle the following challenges:

**Affordability:**
Even where broadband is available, the cost of internet service and/or devices bars many adults from learning or working online, with a disproportionate impact on people of color and already underserved communities.

**Digital Skills and Training:**
Digital skills are critical, both in education and the workplace, yet an estimated one in three Americans has limited or no digital skills.

**Last-Mile and Middle-Mile Availability:**
Broadband is not equally available, with a dearth of options in rural areas.

**Quality:**
Even where the internet is available and households have the financial means to opt in, not all internet bandwidth is sufficient to allow for online learning and work.

**Public-Private Partnerships for Mapping and Data:**
Policies and funding decisions that impact adult access to online learning occur at the federal, state, and local levels; these efforts should also be coordinated with what is happening at institutions of learning in order to achieve maximum impact. In addition, policymakers lack thorough data to drive decision-making around the best ways to enhance access to online learning and work, including understanding which households have broadband, the quality of available broadband, the state of the digital skills gap, and data around which policy interventions are most effective.
Policy Recommendations
Allowing Broadband and Devices to Be within Reach of All Learners

Investments in infrastructure will not fully pay off unless policymakers concurrently solve for the costs that keep adult learners and workers from accessing learning and employment from home even where the infrastructure is in place. This means making internet installation and monthly costs affordable, as well as enabling access to a computer. Currently, among American households with incomes below $30,000, 44 percent do not have broadband access and 46 percent do not have a computer. Those who could benefit most from additional learning and work options are least likely to have access. All reasonable options should be on the table to make broadband and devices affordable for adult learners, such as scholarships, providing funding directly to consumers, and leveraging public-private partnerships.

What Does Enabling Access to Broadband and Devices Look Like?

• The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 appropriated $3.2 billion to subsidize the cost of internet connectivity for qualifying households through the Emergency Broadband Benefit. Qualifying households include those who are: eligible for the federal Lifeline program, eligible for existing discount broadband programs, have children eligible for free and reduced school lunches, have a household member who is a Pell Grant recipient, or have a household member who is unemployed. The household will get a benefit of up to $50 a month for internet service, and the benefit increased to $75 on tribal lands. The Emergency Broadband Benefit also provides up to a $100 reimbursement to participating internet providers who offer discounted internet-enabled devices to eligible households between the price points of $10 and $50. This is a temporary program that will expire once funds are depleted, but a wide variety of stakeholders including nonprofits and service providers such as Verizon and AT&T have advocated for a permanent subsidy for low-income households.

• States can explore opportunities to advance public-private partnerships that can achieve the goal of keeping Americans connected and learning, as a successor to the now-expired Keep America Connected pledge.

• While federal financial aid and some state aid programs allow funds to cover the cost of a computer, policymakers should drive toward allowing all federal and state financial aid programs to cover devices and ongoing internet costs. In addition, states should consider the best way to support higher education institutions in providing scholarships similar to the Online Access Scholarships provided by Western Governors University, whether through disseminating best practices, facilitating shared purchasing, or providing direct fiscal support.
Building the infrastructure and making broadband accessible are critical steps, but they do not create all of the conditions necessary for adults to access learning and work from home. One-third of American workers do not have the skills to use technology effectively. While many states have begun chipping away at the digital skills divide—notably through libraries, many of which are closed due to COVID restrictions—in order to truly address the divide, states will have to take a targeted approach. This includes assessing the digital skill gap in their state, understanding what skills are most critical for higher education and employers, and ensuring that digital skill training offerings are accessible to those most in need and aligned to the most critical skills.

**What Does Assessing and Addressing Digital Skills Look Like?**

- State policymakers can assess the extent to which digital literacy is creating a barrier to access. Unemployment filings may be one way to collect information on digital literacy skills and to conduct outreach to individuals with digital literacy needs.

- States should convene higher education institutions and employers to understand which digital skills are imperative and to ensure digital literacy initiatives in the state align to those skills.

- Digital literacy initiatives can be deployed through existing structures; for example, state library systems are a familiar entry point for adult learners and workers seeking to upgrade digital skills.

- States can partner with private industry to catalogue and deploy resources and free curriculum, such as those available through Microsoft, at scale.
Committing to the Infrastructure for Broadband in Every Home

There is an array of barriers to access for adult learners, including cost of broadband, cost of devices, and challenges with digital literacy, but infrastructure is a critical stumbling block that must be addressed. There is no one way to create infrastructure; states will likely need to piece together a variety of solutions to meet the needs of different regions and households, but the important element is making a commitment to broadband for every home and building a long-term plan to achieve this goal.

What Does a Commitment to Infrastructure for Broadband in Every Home Look Like?

- At least 20 states have already made a commitment to broadband at a high level by establishing a task force or a broadband office; 10 states that have not already created a state leadership structure should do so. These task forces or offices should create long-term plans with clear, quantifiable goals about household access and report out on progress in disaggregated fashion. For example, Wisconsin has set a goal that “every Wisconsinite [will] have affordable access to broadband service...by January 1, 2025.”

- States can maintain a “cross-industry dialogue” among a variety of providers, alongside regulators and policymakers, to determine what must be in place for providers to bring service to communities without access in a way that allows companies to achieve economic benefits. Fiber-optic, cellular, and satellite networks must all be part of the conversation to find a cost-effective solution to availability in rural areas.

- State broadband efforts could include programs to help build local capacity and leadership on broadband. For example, Virginia has programs designed to help build local capacity, and, as part of its goal to achieve universal broadband by 2028, requires localities to have granular 10-year plans to meet that goal in order to access state funding.

- There are examples of communities providing broadband access for all residents; states can explore ways to incentivize and support municipal broadband initiatives as a means of closing the digital divide. However, 22 states still have significant barriers to municipal broadband.

- For other examples of initiatives to expand broadband structure, consult the National Governors Association paper on Governor Strategies to Expand Affordable Broadband Access.
Keeping Pace with the Speed of Learning and Work

Building the infrastructure and creating access to the internet, devices, and digital skills training are critical steps forward, but policies that stop there may still leave higher education out of reach for too many adult learners. The quality of internet connection matters. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has defined broadband internet at a 25/3 Mbps minimum speed for households, but many internet connections don’t meet those standards, meaning that speed is insufficient to engage in heavy-use tasks like online learning and video conferencing. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown the current minimum speed may be insufficient for households with multiple members working and learning from home simultaneously. The current minimum speed will also have limits as our relationship to the internet continues to evolve. States should invest in internet infrastructure that can meet the needs of today and tomorrow through committing to improving quality in places where speed and lack of stability impede the ability to access online learning and working. As work from the Benton Institute for Broadband and Society has stated: “No area of America should have second-rate broadband.”

What Does Focusing on Quality Look Like?

• State goals around broadband should incorporate quality; for example, Maine has enacted its broadband goal into code, and it includes a mandate around “secure, reliable” broadband.

• Any statewide initiatives to expand broadband access should mandate quality access that meets specified minimum thresholds and that is sufficient for online learning and working.

• States can look to provide better information to adult learners and workers about internet speed available to them, modeled off of efforts by some cities to assess internet speeds and share clearer information on speed to their residents.
Building the Foundation for Online Learning by Leveraging Leadership and Information

The digital divide is a complicated area of policy, requiring dedicated attention to understanding the federal, state, and local landscape and knitting together resources to address an interconnected array of problems. For example, the federal government makes money available to expand broadband access, but it comes from various agencies. As another example, last-mile connections are especially important and are significantly impacted by local policies. States must designate an individual, agency, or group as the broadband leadership within the state, with the capacity to thoughtfully assess broadband in an ongoing fashion, problem-solve with a wide variety of stakeholders, and braid together a variety of funding streams. In the post-COVID era, as we see institutions of higher education increasingly step in to help connect students to broadband and devices, they are another key stakeholder who should be thoughtfully engaged in policy conversations.

These leadership groups within states should utilize data to make strategic decisions. States have identified many important questions they need answered to solve the broadband divide for online learners and workers and are also cognizant of where lack of data impedes their ability to answer those questions. Common questions include: Where is broadband available? Where it is available, who is using it? Does the quality of broadband meet learning and working needs? What is impeding availability or usage? What impact are policy initiatives having? Do we have data-supported examples of effective policies or practices to improve availability, access, or digital skills?

What Does Building the Foundation for Online Learning by Leveraging Leadership, Mapping, and Data Look Like?

• If a state already has an individual or agency with broadband responsibility, it should conduct a realistic assessment of whether there is sufficient capacity to oversee a multifaceted, collaborative broadband strategy and add capacity as appropriate. This approach will require providers to help coordinate data. If there is an unclear individual or agency with broadband responsibility, states should designate authority. For example, West Virginia has a Broadband Council housed within its Economic Development Agency that has been able to enact state solutions.

• States with a taskforce or broadband office should assess how they have engaged institutions of higher education in planning efforts and engage stakeholders from higher education in planning and problem-solving conversations.

• States and metro areas can deploy their own data collection to answer identified policy questions; for example, Vermont annually surveys and maps the availability of high-speed internet throughout Vermont. Georgia’s Achieving Connectivity Everywhere (ACE) Act allows the state to pilot more precise mapping of broadband access. Louisville and several other metro areas piloted new initiatives to get better data on connectivity speed and costs via crowdsourced data.

• Any significant statewide broadband initiative to improve access to online learning and work should track and report out on outcomes, improving state and national understanding of “best practices.”
Recommended Resources

The National Governors Association has released a paper that details state strategies and best practices to advance broadband infrastructure and increase accessibility.

The Broadband DATA Act (S. 1822) was enacted to improve the accuracy of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) broadband mapping in rural America.

The Pew Research Center has an array of reports on broadband, including the Broadband Research Report, which shares results from their study of broadband policy across 50 states and highlights best practices.

The Benton Institute for Broadband and Society advocates for affordable, open broadband and has an array of publications and resources.

The National Digital Inclusion Alliance supports digital inclusion through a variety of strategies including practitioner support, awareness efforts, and research.
References

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