



# INVESTING IN HIGH-SPEED BROADBAND NEEDED NOW MORE THAN EVER, ESPECIALLY IN NORTH CAROLINA'S RURAL COMMUNITIES

The COVID-19 pandemic has led North Carolinians to adjust our daily lives as we do our part to prevent the spread of the disease and flatten the curve. And the way we are adjusting highlights a critical, unmet infrastructure need, **particularly in our rural and underserved communities: expanded high-speed broadband access.**

North Carolinians are encouraged to get checkups via telemedicine appointments and those struggling are using the internet to connect with mental health professionals. Many are working from home, and students of all ages are connecting with teachers online to continue learning. People of faith are worshipping online, instead of congregating in person. Former Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Chairman Tom Wheeler recently cited a study that found that between January 29 and March 26 there was a 105 percent increase in people online between 9:00 AM and 6:00 PM.

Too many North Carolinians can't do these things because our country hasn't kept up with the connectivity needs of every community. According to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), in 2018, **about half of North Carolina households didn't have high-speed broadband because of cost barriers or because they didn't have the skills or a device to use it.** In the same year, **more than a quarter of a million households didn't have access to broadband.** And we know these numbers may even be an underestimate—an independent study found 42 million Americans don't have broadband internet access. That's twice the FCC's estimate. We also know these statistics may not account for places with slow speeds that hold back communities from commercial-scale use, or prevent classrooms and families from streaming video.

## CAL'S PRIORITIES:

- Make Sure There Are No Service Disruptions For Those Who Can't Pay
- Boost Funding For Existing Grant Programs, Including The Federal Communications Commission & Department Of Agriculture, To Expand Services To More Communities
- Make Sure Next Phase Of Federal Investment Helps Meet Unmet Infrastructure Needs

**We know the COVID-19 pandemic will require additional federal action. Here are ways we can work to fix this problem:**

**Service providers must act to make sure there are no service disruptions for those struggling to make monthly payments during this crisis, which will hit financially for many.**

Cal applauds Governor Cooper's executive order mandating that water and electric providers not cut off service during this time, and at his strong urging, all internet service providers that serve our state should follow suit. It is promising that a number of major internet and phone carriers across the country are taking steps to keep families connected regardless of ability to pay, and hopefully it will serve as an example to others.

**We need to boost funding for existing federal grant programs that help rural communities get connected.**

There are several existing grant programs within the federal government that award grants and loans to internet service providers and counties for the purposes of expanding rural broadband. For example, the FCC incentivizes ISPs to build infrastructure to expand services to more communities. The Department of Agriculture (USDA), Appalachian Regional Commission, and Economic Development Administration are among the federal entities that help counties and localities extend service in their communities, including for those who can't afford it.

According to Microsoft, from 2013 to 2018, the FCC and USDA together provided more than \$22 billion in subsidies and grants to telecommunications carriers for the purpose of expanding broadband in rural areas of the country.

In addition to boosting funding for grant programs like these, we should also be technology agnostic and use whatever tools will most quickly extend service to more families. This would help ensure more people can access telemedicine services or online learning resources for children in the home as quickly as possible.

**We should invest in infrastructure nationwide to meet the unmet infrastructure needs of our time while helping get the country back on its feet and put people to work.**

In addition to high-speed internet expansion, a significant investment in our nation's infrastructure should bring schools, hospitals, roads and bridges up to date. Doing so would save and create well-paying jobs putting people to work on these needed projects. There could be bipartisan support for investing in infrastructure in the fourth COVID-19 response legislation, including from President Trump.