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How Nine States Are Expanding Broadband

Pew report explores efforts to connect communities

In a report to be released later this month, The Pew Charitable Trusts examines actions by state governments to expand broadband access to the millions of Americans who still lack it and identifies five practices associated with successful deployment efforts.

Broadband is increasingly intertwined with the daily functions of modern life and is a critical piece of efforts to address some of today's most important policy challenges: transforming agriculture, supporting economic development, improving access to health care, and modernizing education, among others. Despite the growing importance of high-speed, reliable internet, the Federal Communications Commission estimates that 21 million Americans still lack connectivity. Other sources place this number as high as 162 million.

Recognizing this problem, governments at all levels are trying to expand deployment to unserved and underserved communities. Although much of the public conversation on broadband focuses on federal and local efforts, Pew's research shows that states play a crucial role in ensuring that all Americans have access to this vital technology.

Pew examined state broadband programs nationwide and found that they have many similarities, but also differences that reflect the political environment, the state's resource levels, the geography of the areas that remain unserved by broadband, and the entities that provide service.

While it is clear that there is no one-size-fits-all approach for state expansion efforts, some measures that many states have taken are promising. This report identifies and explores these promising practices through examples in nine states: California, Colorado, Maine, Minnesota, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. Pew identified the practices through conversations with more than 300 broadband stakeholders, including representatives of state broadband programs, internet service providers (ISPs), local governments, and broadband coalitions.

These promising practices are:

- **Stakeholder outreach and engagement.** All states with broadband programs are working to engage stakeholders at both the state and local levels. At the state level, this includes broadband task forces and councils, as well as partnerships among state agencies. At the local level, it includes support for broadband committees and education of local stakeholders.

- **Policy framework.** Many states have created a policy framework for broadband deployment by setting well-defined goals and a clear policy direction in legislation and tasking agencies or setting up separate offices to lead statewide broadband programs. They are identifying and addressing barriers to facilitate broadband deployment in unserved and underserved areas. And they are connecting broadband to other policy priorities, including economic development, transportation, health care, and agriculture, to build partnerships and leverage more funding for expansion efforts.

- **Planning and capacity building.** States have plans that define goals and objectives that provide a baseline against which to measure progress. Some also support local and regional planning efforts that help educate community members and build the local capacity necessary for successful broadband infrastructure projects. Local and regional planning efforts can help communities identify their needs and goals, start conversations with providers, evaluate options, and move toward implementing infrastructure projects.

- **Funding and operations.** Some states are providing funding to support broadband deployment in unserved and underserved areas through grant programs that fund a portion of the cost of deployment in these communities. They are also ensuring accountability by requiring that grantees demonstrate they are providing the service they were funded to deliver while also providing the state with the data needed to evaluate the program and progress toward defined goals.

- **Program evaluation and evolution.** States that support planning efforts and fund infrastructure projects are evaluating the performance of these efforts and incorporating lessons learned. States continue to update program goals and activities as their programs mature, addressing broadband adoption and working to help communities make full use of their broadband infrastructure.

Beyond the practices themselves, the research findings underscore that state policy matters. States are taking steps to spur investment in middle- and last-mile infrastructure and close gaps in adoption. Whether they have focused on broadband for many years or have started their programs more recently, states are connecting areas where traditional models for broadband deployment have not worked.

For further information, please visit:

pewtrusts.org/broadband-research-initiative