



California coalition calls for immediate funding to close the digital divide

Sydney Kurlle | Apr 8, 2021

A cross-sector coalition urged Governor Gavin Newsom to connect Californians with a one-time, \$8 billion investment in high speed 100 Mbps broadband infrastructure and programs. The coalition which represents education, health, local government and economic policy organizations believe this investment in broadband infrastructure and support services is critical to improving health, equity, education and the economy statewide now and for years to come.



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A recent report by the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) found that the cost of building future-proof fiber connections to every unserved building and house in the state would be \$6.8 billion. Included in the CPUC's budget request is \$2.2 billion to construct a statewide middle-mile network with open access fiber and \$4.6 billion to provide 100/10 Mbps fiber optics to buildings and houses currently without it.

The coalition says these amounts are both needed in order to sufficiently serve the population.

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“Either of these pieces—known as the middle mile or the last mile—would be insufficient if implemented alone. Together, they can transform the educational, economic, and quality-of-life landscape statewide by providing unconnected properties access to reliable broadband.”

The investment also includes \$1.2 billion for broadband adoption programs including devices, digital skills training, service subsidies and language access necessary for Californians to be able to use the broadband service available in schools, homes and businesses.

The expansion of language access as a part of broadband adoption programs is an important part of ensuring the equity of these services. A recent report from Health Affairs found that there are disparities in telehealth use among California patients with limited English proficiency between 2015-2018.

The report found that patients with limited English proficiency used telehealth had a lower rate, 4.8%, versus 12.3% among proficient English speakers. The authors of the study said that COVID-19 only exacerbated the issue.

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“Telehealth has the potential to address disparities, but only if it meets all patients’ needs, no matter what language they speak; otherwise, evidence of digital divides will continue to appear. Policymakers and providers must pursue linguistically equitable care in emerging technologies. The rapid shift to telehealth during the COVID-19 pandemic along with the disproportionate impact on underserved populations heightens the importance of technology equity as a health policy and public health focus.”

However, according to a report from the University of Southern California and the California Emerging Technology Fund 91% of California’s households have access to high-speed internet. This is up from 2019 when only 88% of households had access.

Despite gains in access, the report also reveals that some low-income Californians are caught in the digital divide: 16% are unconnected and 10% depend on smartphones. They lack home internet just when schools, jobs and even medicine have moved their services online in response to the coronavirus pandemic. Households that are only linked to the internet via a smartphone are deemed “under-connected” by researchers because smartphones have more limited capabilities.

Carmela Coyle, President and CEO of the California Hospital Association, said that the push to bridge California’s digital divide is a push for greater equity in every corner of the state.

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“This is especially important for health care, as the COVID-19 pandemic has brought into stark relief long standing health disparities that can no longer be ignored. As we build for the future of health care, one that will increasingly rely on new technologies like telehealth, it’s vital that all communities have equitable access to these new methods of care.”