

BROADBAND ACCESS IN THE US



NETGAIN PARTNERSHIP

HIGH-SPEED INTERNET ACCESS CAN BE LIFE OR DEATH DURING A PANDEMIC

THE CHALLENGE AHEAD

Advocates have long pushed for policy reforms to bridge the 'digital divide' and make broadband internet accessible and affordable for all. Yet with the nation in the throes of a deadly pandemic, millions of households cannot access or afford the internet at home just when they need it most. As many people are isolated in their homes indefinitely, the COVID-19 pandemic has starkly exposed how unequal access to the internet harms historically marginalized communities. Without broadband access, millions can't work from home, continue their education remotely, communicate with loved ones, or see their health care provider. The quarantine to date has already deepened many of our country's existing economic, educational, and social inequities. The recent CARES Act did not address the need for internet access, raising the stakes for future relief bills, like the HEROES Act, which includes a range of support for broadband access, but faces an uphill battle in the Senate. If passed, the HEROES Act would create emergency benefits for internet service in the event of a family member losing their job, enhance the FCC's Lifeline program for subsidized phone and internet service for families with

low-incomes, support online distance learning efforts and expedite the buildout of rural broadband networks -- among many other much-needed benefits.

[41 million people in the US – nearly 43% of the population – don't have home internet access](#)

WHY IT MATTERS

Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, our lives were increasingly lived online, with everything from the job search process to a student's homework occurring digitally. The pandemic has accelerated and intensified digital inequities that were already keeping millions of individuals and families from connecting to loved ones, keeping their jobs, and accessing their health care providers and other crucial services. The issue is most acute in historically marginalized communities already facing multiple forms of injustice. Low-income households, older consumers, and people living in Tribal or rural communities lack access to the internet, face higher costs to connect, and often live in areas without the infrastructure necessary for broadband. Many of those impacted are people of color.

TOP INTERVENTIONS

From demanding digital equity reform in the historic CARES Act stimulus package to fighting for critical Lifeline funding that lowers the cost of phone and internet for low-income consumers, groups on the frontlines of broadband access are not backing down. Solutions that address the ever-expanding digital divide are needed now more than ever as millions of Americans lack access and opportunity to work, go to school, bank, buy groceries, connect with their health care provider, and otherwise participate in society. Public interest groups are working tirelessly to garner new broadband provisions for hardest hit communities in the second phase of federal relief.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

Leading public interest groups are using a variety of creative approaches to secure broadband affordability and accessibility for all.

The **Allied Media Project** has innovated [mesh wireless technology](#), which allows neighbors to form their own local network and share an internet connection in spite of the government's continued failure to provide affordable and accessible broadband during the pandemic. The **American Indian Policy Institute** provides [research, analysis, and education](#) to support Indigenous groups nationwide that have taken action to protect their communities from COVID-19. Organizations have united to urge the FCC to expand the Lifeline program to meet the acute need for broadband during the pandemic, and **MediaJustice** leads the coalition to expand Lifeline program assistance to the millions of Americans who cannot afford phone and internet services. The **National Digital Inclusion Alliance** works alongside practitioners to facilitate [information sharing](#), relay on the ground experiences to the press, and provide resources on digital literacy during the pandemic. The **National Consumer Law Center** is fighting to [protect consumers](#) from losing essential utility services in their homes and to expand low-income discount and recovery programs, as well as equal access to broadband and wireless services. Local leaders have the power to elevate the national conversation on universal connectivity, and **Next Century Cities** [support local leaders](#) as they develop tailored, community-based solutions.

MORE INFORMATION

The [NetGain Partnership](#) is a philanthropic collaboration between the Ford Foundation, Knight Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, Mozilla Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Omidyar Network and Wallace Global Fund that seeks to advance the public interest in the digital age. NetGain works hand-in-hand with the nation's leading philanthropic organizations to address our most pressing challenges at the intersection of technology and digital society. As COVID-19 rages on, NetGain is deeply concerned about the impact of the pandemic on technology and society, especially as the crisis exacerbates economic and social inequities across the world and challenges our democratic institutions. There is a significant need for funders and civil society organizations to access critical information to help them understand the current and future impacts of COVID-19 on society and the unique role that technology and the internet are playing as the crisis continues.

ABOUT NETGAIN

To learn more about NetGain's work or hear their latest briefing series on top technological challenges and harms that have emerged as a result of COVID-19 and actionable responses from civil society to address them, please visit:

<https://www.netgainpartnership.org/events/covid19/broadband-access-in-the-us>

For funders who are interested in the specific policy proposals outlined in this one-pager or have questions, please visit <https://mediademocracyfund.org/>

ABOUT MEDIA DEMOCRACY FUND

Media Democracy Fund (MDF) works at the crossroads of digital technology and social justice and is the leading convener between public interest grantees, funders and allies in the broadband fight, as well as the larger digital rights field.