

Next Century Cities

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

MAY 25, 2021



The Appalachian Mountains

CONNECTIVITY ALONG THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL

Appalachia is well known for its music, literature, and rich natural resources. However, like many areas of the country, residents throughout the region struggle with reliable and affordable broadband access.

#SHOWMEYOURMAPS BROADBAND DATA REPORT

A first-of-its-kind report, NCC chronicled broadband data collection practices across the U.S. and its territories. Our report emphasizes the need and urgency to improve inaccurate broadband mapping.

THE EMERGENCY BROADBAND BENEFIT DAY OF ACTION

Next Century Cities led an Emergency Broadband Benefit Day of Action on May 14th, urging local and state leaders to build public awareness about the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program.



The Hudson River

Along the Appalachian Trail

This newsletter showcases broadband initiatives along the Appalachian Trail, a region that stretches from southern New York State to northern Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi. The Appalachian region is well known for its music, literature, rich natural resources, and persistent struggles with the digital divide.

Like many areas of the country, affordable and reliable broadband is precious and hard to come by in Appalachian communities. True to our commitment to elevate community-level impact, members of our Next Century Cities team sat down with local and state leaders from Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia to discuss the unique challenges and innovative solutions that are being used to improve broadband outcomes for residents.

Francella Ochillo

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Rural Georgia

Georgia

Written By
RYAN JOHNSTON

It's no mystery that the quality of the Federal Communications Commission's ("FCC") mapping data leaves something to be desired. The FCC's 14th Broadband Deployment Report estimated that 96% of Americans have access to broadband. However, organizations such as Microsoft and Pew Research have found that about 49% and 65% of Americans have access to broadband respectively. This discrepancy more highlights how much uncertainty surrounds who has broadband access.

Broadband Internet access has become a necessity as important as electricity.

It is a baseline required to work, learn, and interact with society from home and will continue to be for the foreseeable future. Clear and accurate mapping data is critical to ensuring that anyone who needs to be connected can be.

States understand how broadband, or the lack thereof, can impact their communities. In 2018, recognizing that 1.6 million Georgians lacked access to high-speed Internet, Georgia state legislators passed SB 402, Achieving Connectivity Everywhere (ACE) Act, which formed the Georgia Broadband Deployment Initiative ("GBDI"). The new law also created new grant initiatives, helped streamline how communities structure their broadband ordinances, created new designation for facilities or sites that can support at least one gigabit of service, and implemented a new long-term policy approach that governs broadband deployment along interstate highways and rights-of-way policies on state roads.

Read more about Georgia's deployment and mapping strategies [here](#).

Since 2013, E2D (“Eliminate the Digital Divide”) has worked to refurbish devices, promote digital literacy, and work toward the goal of ensuring that everyone in Charlotte, North Carolina, has equitable access to the digital tools and training they need to succeed in 21st century society. Though the pandemic exposed new challenges, it also introduced new opportunities for raising awareness and expanding the network of people working toward digital inclusion.

The digital divide existed long before the pandemic. According to Pat Millen, E2D’s Founder and President, the last year made people who were not previously aware of pervasive inequities “more sensitive to the dire effects of the digital divide.”

E2D’s model, which Millen describes as its “special sauce,” is hiring low income high school students to change digital outcomes in their community. By training, employing, and compensating them to refurbish computers, those devices are ultimately returned to neighbors in need. In addition to making devices available for local low income residents, the workforce development aspect of the program prepares students for the 40,000 technology jobs that are often difficult to fill in the City of Charlotte.

Millen describes the most recent 10 to 12 students chosen for the job from a pool of 200 applications as “the best of the best of the best.” While talent is everywhere, opportunity is not. E2D makes the sky the limit for students from impoverished backgrounds, offering the opportunity to learn about professions in computer science and engineering. One student who immigrated from Kenya participated in the program as a 13th grade student, spending half the year at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte and working quietly and productively in the E2D lab was recently accepted at the California Institute of Technology, which had a 6.4% acceptance rate in 2020.

Continue reading about North Carolina [here](#).

North Carolina

Written By

CORIAN ZACHER



Great Smoky Mountains, North Carolina



North Carolina Forest

Tennessee

Written By

LUKAS PIETRZAK

Gatlinburg, TN

To appreciate challenges associated with closing the digital divide, readers need only to turn their attention to Tennessee. Across the state, local leaders, advocates, and Internet service providers have been working for years to plan and implement broadband solutions. Local leaders in communities big and small have discovered countless barriers to connectivity.

NCC member municipality, Chattanooga, illustrates how local solutions can create one of the most well-connected internet hubs in the country. Through its electric utility provider, EPB, local officials deployed a fiber-optic network in an area once known for poor connectivity. Ten years later, it serves as a model for how communities can provide fast, reliable, and most importantly, affordable broadband access.

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ACCESS.**

Robust broadband networks have a far-reaching impact. "A study ordered up by Chattanooga's municipal utility credits its public broadband infrastructure initiative with an economic impact of more than \$2.69 billion over its first decade."

On the other hand, some communities in Tennessee are still facing an uphill battle to address connectivity gaps among their most vulnerable populations. 300 miles away, in NCC's 2020 case study on the City of Memphis, Brittany-Rae Gregory highlighted work underway to bridge the digital divide for Tennessee residents in urban areas. She explained that, "According to 2018 American Community Survey data, Memphis was the 20th most disconnected city out of the 623 cities... At the time, nearly 50% of Memphis households did not have cable, DSL, or fiber broadband."

Memphis' Chief Information Officer, Kimberly Bailey, is leading her team and private partners in a mission to improve digital opportunities for students and businesses.

Virginia

WRITTEN BY LUKAS PIETRZAK

The Commonwealth of Virginia is home to some of the greatest geographic and economic diversity in the country. From the nation's capital to the Chesapeake Bay and the Appalachian Plateau, Virginia can feel like a different state at all four corners.

Despite this diversity, state government officials are squarely focused on closing its digital divide in every city and county. Developing broadband solutions that fit communities from the coastline of Virginia Beach to the towering mountains of Tazewell County is an ongoing challenge. Still, every city, town, and county across the Commonwealth is united in the goal to connect students and employees to digital opportunities.

In 2018, two under-sea, transatlantic high-speed cables were anchored in Virginia Beach and introduced some of the fastest Internet speeds in the world to Virginia's shores. Microsoft, one of the cable sponsors, stated that speeds are "16 million times faster than the average home internet connection, with the ability to stream 71 million high-definition videos simultaneously." The US Navy, colleges, and growing businesses in the Hampton Roads region are already experiencing the benefits.

To expand those benefits, cities in the Southside are taking their advocacy a step further by creating the Southside Network Authority, the newest broadband authority in Virginia.

Local leaders from the five partner cities - Virginia Beach, Chesapeake, Norfolk, Suffolk, and Portsmouth hope to deploy a new fiber ring that will support business and residential broadband deployment across the region.

While many Southeastern Virginia residents have reliable broadband options, Western and Southwestern Virginia communities continue to face an uphill challenge. Leaders are working to overcome rural deployment challenges while also battling high levels of poverty.

Read more about about expanding high-speed service in Virginia [here](#).

Staunton, VA





New River Gorge Bridge, West Virginia

WRITTEN BY CORIAN ZACHER

In 2017, the West Virginia legislature created the West Virginia Broadband Enhancement Council within the West Virginia Department of Commerce. The Council has since released its [Broadband Strategic Plan](#) for 2020-2025 and a companion Broadband Development Guide, which explains basic terminology and technologies, highlights successful state and federal funding programs, and details policies and laws that communities need to navigate when deploying networks.

State-level resources provide local officials with essential tools for developing their own community broadband plans.

They also help local officials to learn about funding guidelines, find efficiencies, and identify collaboration opportunities.

While the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic brought new challenges, new funding opportunities surfaced for initiatives targeted at bridging the digital divide. That is priceless in a state with persistently high deployment costs due to low population density, especially in areas with onerous terrain.

West Virginia's Governor Jim Justice allocated [\\$50 million in CARES Act](#) funding for broadband development.

Additional funding made available through the American Rescue Plan may fund further expansion, with state and local officials [planning to invest](#) in broadband.

On April 28, 2021, Governor Justice [approved broadband legislation](#) designed to [fast track the permitting process](#) for high-speed infrastructure laid by municipalities and cooperatives. The law, which goes into effect on May 28th, will [allow consumers to file complaints](#) about service with the Consumer Protection Division of the Attorney General's Office.

Continue reading about broadband initiatives in West Virginia [here](#).

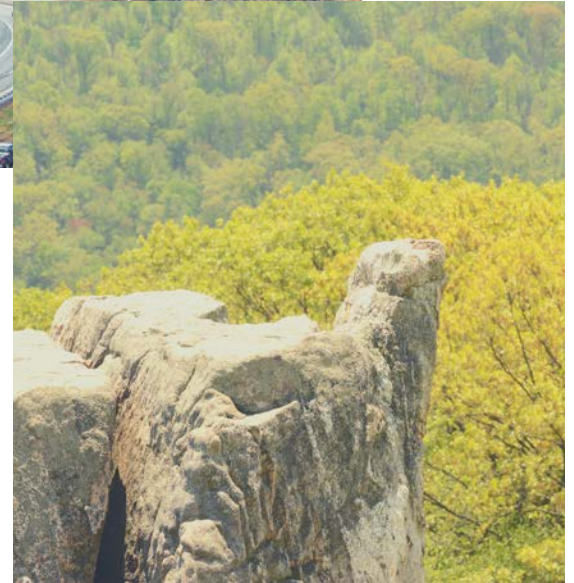


Sideling Hill,
Western Maryland
(pictured
left)

Catoctin
Mountain Park,
Maryland
(pictured
below)

Maryland

by Ryan Johnston



States play a critical role in bolstering local efforts to expand affordable and reliable broadband. All 50 states have taken steps to respond to increased demand and have prioritized expanding access.

As of 2018, 25 states had already explored the utility of dedicated state broadband offices. They are largely designed to serve as a central hub for implementing state strategies, leading on research and data collection that depicts the broadband landscape statewide. Importantly, state broadband officers can serve as critical intermediaries for localities, other state agencies, and the federal government programs.

In Maryland, its digital divide has impacted every community whether they are urban, suburban or rural. The Abell Foundation determined that 23% of homes were unable to get online.

On April 13th, Governor Larry Hogan signed into law Senate Bill 66, also known as the Digital Connectivity Act of 2021. The Bill establishes the Office of Statewide Broadband within the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development.

Learn more about efforts to expand broadband access and prioritize digital equity for Maryland residents [here](#).



Show Me Your Maps

Next Century Cities released a first-of-its-kind report chronicling broadband data collection practices across the United States and its territories. Reporting FCC conclusions alongside state and local data collection initiatives, the report reiterates the need and urgency to improve inaccurate and incomplete broadband mapping.

Read about broadband mapping initiatives in your state. Tell us about broadband challenges in your community using [#ShowMeYourMaps](#) on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#). We hope that you will join upcoming NCC events that delve deeper into some of the topics and local initiatives featured in the report.

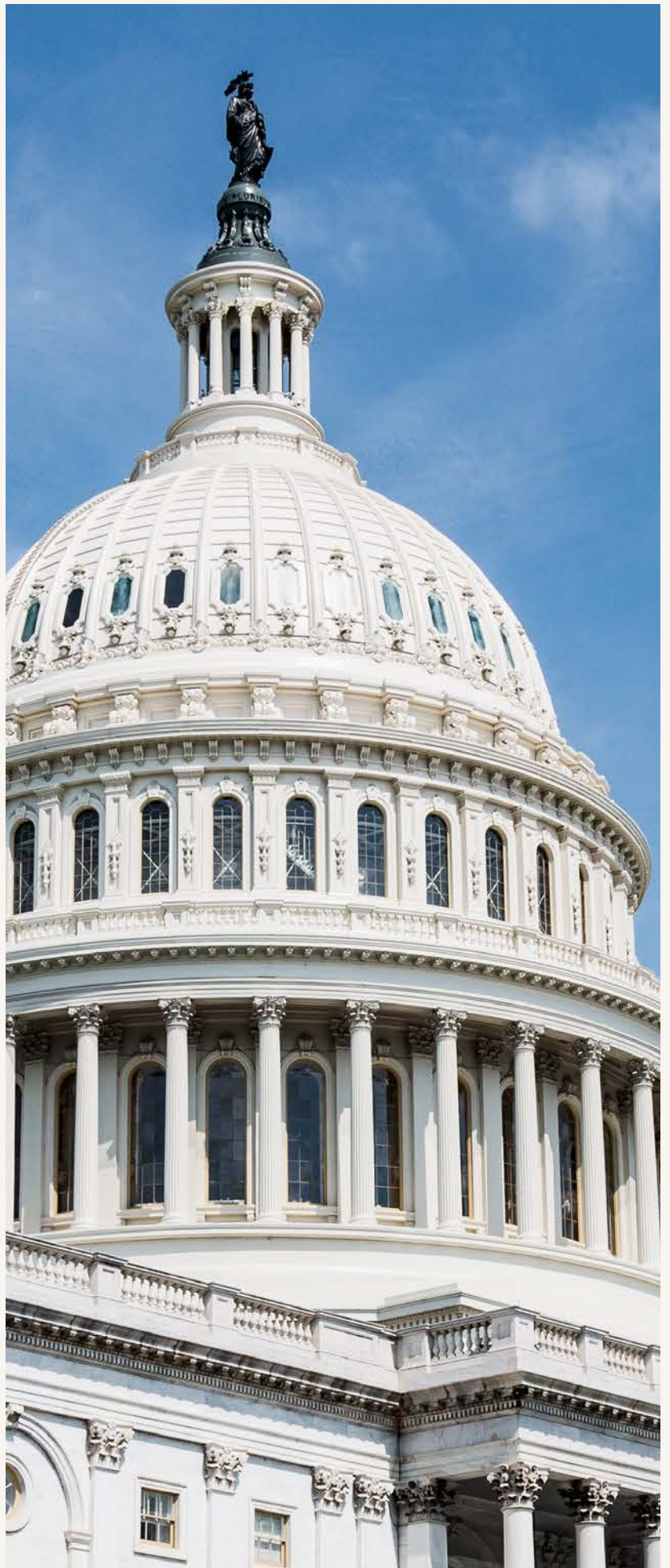
- [5/18/21 Press Release](#)
- [Report \(pdf\)](#)
- [Blog Post](#)

Next Century Cities Testifies Before Congress

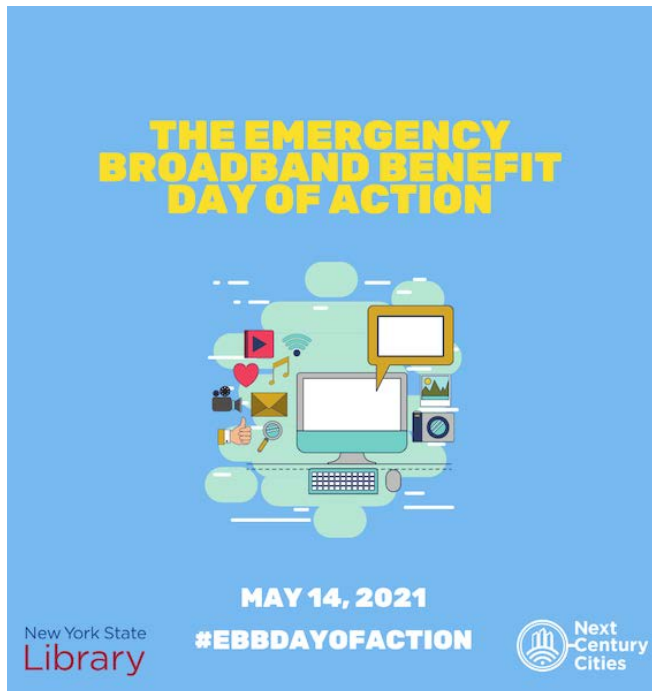
On May 6, 2021, Francella Ochillo, NCC's Executive Director, highlighted community-level perspectives in testimony before the House Committee on Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Communications and Technology. The hearing, "Broadband Equity: Addressing Disparities in Access and Affordability," also featured witnesses Joi Chaney of the National Urban League, George S. Ford from The Phoenix Center for Advanced Legal & Economic Public Policy Studies, and Public Knowledge's Chris Lewis.

Highlighting a variety of concerns relayed by local leaders, Francella emphasized the vastly different outcomes in economically resilient communities where broadband is ubiquitous versus communities where broadband is scarce.

Francella's full written testimony can be found [here](#). The entire hearing can be viewed via the Energy and Commerce Committee's [webpage](#). NCC's [blogpost](#) provides an in-depth recap.



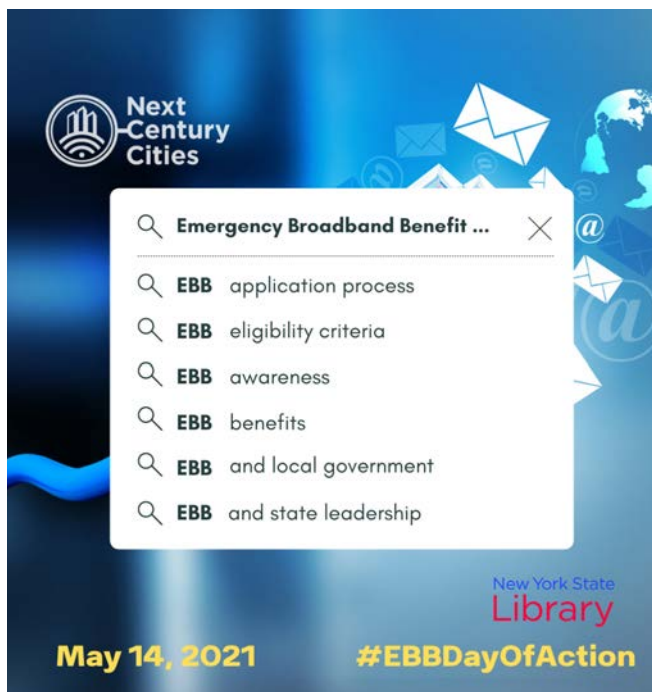
THE EMERGENCY BROADBAND BENEFIT DAY OF ACTION



Next Century Cities led an Emergency Broadband Benefit Day of Action on May 14th, urging local and state leaders to educate the public about the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program. The program offers a monthly discount to offset the cost of broadband Internet subscriptions and a one-time discount on a laptop, desktop, or tablet computer.

The enrollment period opened on May 12th. The program will continue until funding is exhausted or six months after the Department of Health and Human Services declares an end to the pandemic.

Using #EBBDayofAction, various leaders and organizations engaged on social media, sharing resources that they created to help households navigate the Program registration process.



Next Century Cities partnered with the New York State Library and New York State Broadband Office on a webinar hosted by NCC's Lukas Pietrzak. The discussion highlighted effective outreach strategies that are currently being employed by local governments, community partners, and state entities nationwide. Read more about the Day of Action [here](#).

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY BROADBAND FUNDING NOTICE



The State and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund (“SLFRF”) is a \$350 billion emergency fund to be used by eligible state, local, territorial, and Tribal governments to support the populations hit hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic.

On May 10, 2021, the U.S. Department of the Treasury (“Treasury Department”) issued its interim final rules (“IFR”), outlining how communities can use SLFRF funding. It will provide much-needed resources for cities and towns across the country to build and maintain broadband infrastructure and adoption programs. However, the proposed rules lack clarity on where funding can support broadband projects.

The IFR highlights that during the pandemic, broadband became essential for every facet of daily life. The Treasury Department also concedes that higher speeds and greater bandwidth are necessary to ensure that everyone across the nation can live and participate in society. Notably, the proposed rules do not rely on Federal Communications Commission Form 477 data to identify unserved or underserved areas, but instead sets a unique standard for SLFRF support.

Continue reading about this funding notice and how to submit comments [here](#).

THE NEXT CENTURY CITIES

SAVE THE DATE

BROADBAND ADVOCACY CONFERENCE

Next Century Cities will host our first virtual conference on July 21, 2021. It will feature local leadership from coast to coast who will highlight new broadband programs, insights on successful partnerships, and ongoing challenges in the broadband landscape.

You will not want to miss this event!

THE SHLB COALITION'S EMERGENCY CONNECTIVITY FUND WORKSHOP

The Federal Communications Commission recently announced the rules to apply for the E-rate Emergency Connectivity Fund ("ECF"), a historic opportunity for schools and libraries to connect students and patrons to home broadband. Unlike traditional E-rate funding, the \$7 billion ECF program will allow schools and libraries to pay for off-campus connectivity and internet-enabled devices, such as laptops and tablets. Any school or library seeking funding from this program will need to digest a host of new rules in a flash due to the very tight application windows.

The Schools, Health & Libraries Broadband ("SHLB") Coalition will host an ECF workshop on June 9th at 1:00 p.m. EST to provide schools, libraries, and vendors with the essential strategies and information needed to submit successful funding applications. **NCC members will receive a 10% registration discount using the code NCCECF.**



Special Workshop: E-rate Emergency Connectivity Fund

June 9, 1:00 - 4:00 p.m. ET | Online

Register at shlb.org/ecf



MICHIGAN MOONSHOT "HOW-TO" VIDEOS



Imagine if you had never connected to the internet before and were told that you now have access. What “simple” tasks would feel insurmountable at first? Setting up the internet in your home? Checking your connection and speed? What about downloading and using a browser to search for a job online, update and submit a resume, or maybe just read the daily news?

Merit developed an informational YouTube video series lovingly deemed “The Moonshot Minutes.” The goal of this series of short videos is to provide practical, easy-to-follow, basic internet tips and usage guidance for community anchor institutions to provide to end-users and share experiences from the community.

Do you know of any staffers, community leaders, or Merit Members who would be great candidates? In a brief recorded interview held online, they would ask experts one core question relating to almost any topic we can all relate to, ranging from internet connectivity and navigation to the experience of a remote work environment. Responses would be 3-5 minutes. For more information, please contact Ryan Fuller at ryfuller@merit.edu.



NCC Members Are in the News

Baltimore, MD | Baltimore County Executive, Johnny Olszewski Jr., announced plans to use \$2 million in grant funding toward extending high-speed internet access for at least 900 **Baltimore** County residents. Work on expansion will begin in later 2021 and must be completed by June 30, 2022. (The Baltimore Sun)

California | On May 14th, Governor Gavin Newsom announced plans to invest \$7 billion to address California's digital divide. With a goal of bringing affordable high-speed Internet to all households in the state, the proposal directs federal funding toward building a statewide fiber broadband network. Thirty-two NCC member municipalities are located in California including **Fresno**, **Los Angeles**, and **Mendocino County**. (KPIX)

Nebraska | The Nebraska Public Power District and the University of Nebraska at Kearney have partnered to administer surveys to rural residents to develop a clearer understanding of broadband connectivity and adoption needs in those communities. Nebraska is home to **Lincoln**, an NCC member municipality. (Columbus Telegram)

Ohio | Governor Mike DeWine signed HB-2, a bipartisan piece of legislation that will create the state's first residential broadband expansion program. The bill will allocate \$20 million in funding, allow carriers to use Ohio Electric Cooperative's pole attachments to deploy fiber-optic Internet in underserved areas, and immediately establish a grant program with oversight from the Broadband Program Expansion Authority. Ten NCC municipalities are located in Ohio including **Fairlawn**, **Hudson**, and **Zanesville**. (The Columbus Dispatch)

North Carolina | Governor Roy Cooper recommends investing \$1.2 billion to expand 100/100 Mbps service offerings to at least 98% of North Carolina households. The funding would also be used to increase affordability programs and promote digital literacy. An additional \$150 million would be designated for higher education technology programs aimed at developing a 21st century workforce. Residents in **Chapel Hill**, **Charlotte**, **Raleigh**, and **Wilson**, all NCC members, could be among the beneficiaries. (Governor's Office Press Release)

Maine | Camden and **Rockport** are the charter municipalities for Maine's Mid-Coast Broadband Coalition. This coalition is seeking to expand high-speed Internet access via a regional utility provider. Both cities currently have an interlocal agreement to establish a regional utility on their June ballots. Local leaders are optimistic that other communities will approve it shortly thereafter. (BroadbandCommunities Magazine)

Broadband Headlines

The Rural Broadband Financing Flexibility Act is Reintroduced | U.S. Senators Maggie Hassan and Shelley Moore Capito reintroduced the Rural Broadband Financing Flexibility Act on May 18, 2021. The proposed legislation would allow state and local governments to issue tax-exempt bonds to finance rural broadband projects. Additionally, if signed into law, the Bill would create federal tax credits that could be used for rural broadband projects. **(Senator Capito)**

National 4-H Council Tech Changemakers Program to Focus on Digital Inclusion | The National 4-H Council's 4-H Tech Changemakers Program is prioritizing digital skills and literacy, especially in rural communities and communities of color. The Tech Changemakers Program will be implemented by 23 Land Grant Universities, 11 of which are Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Teens in the 4-H Tech Changemakers program will be trained to teach vital digital skills and ultimately hope to impact over 50,000 adults in the 164 target communities. To date, at least 10,000 adults have acquired digital knowledge through the program. **(Yahoo)**

Broadband is Critical to Advancing the Rural Economy | According to the FCC definition of broadband, most of Marion County, Iowa has access to high-speed Internet. However, residents' reports indicate that Internet access is better characterized as being spotty with slow speeds. The area's broadband connectivity challenges make attracting new workers and businesses to the area particularly difficult. **(The New York Times)**

FCC Emergency Broadband Benefit Program Enrolls Over One Million Households | In its first week of the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program, more than one million households across all 50 states, Puerto Rico, American Samoa, and the Virgin Islands have enrolled. The Commission also highlighted that over 900 providers have signed up to provide service under the program. **(FCC News)**

House Republicans Unveil the American Broadband Act to Close the Digital Divide | The American Broadband Act, released on May 20th, seeks to close the digital divide by targeting investment in rural and unserved areas based on accurate mapping data. Under the current proposal, \$20 billion would be invested into promoting broadband infrastructure deployment over the course of five years. An additional \$3 billion would be set aside for rural wireless infrastructure deployment. Further, the is intended to remove barriers to investment and incentivize state and local governments to streamline permitting processes. Read the full American Broadband Act [here](#) or read the section-by-section summary [here](#).

Funding Opportunities & Job Announcements

IPMF opens applications for Digital Equity and Community Voices Funds. The Independence Public Media Foundation invites proposals for the 2021 Community Voices Fund and Digital Equity Fund. IPMF has an organizational goal of supporting creative, community-centered media and media-making projects in the Greater Philadelphia area. Both grants will contribute to projects that help to advance those goals. **Applications will be accepted until June 12, 2021 at 12 p.m. ET.** To learn more about the requirements, visit its [Grant Open Call](#) page.

The Wisconsin Public Service Commission will award the \$100 million in federal funding based on a model similar to an existing broadband expansion grant program. **Applications will be available on June 1st with a June 27th deadline.** Projects in NCC member municipalities **Madison** and **River Falls** may be eligible for grant funding. State legislators are currently considering an additional \$200 million in broadband funding proposed for the 2021-23 biennial budget.

Commerce Department's NTIA Announces \$288 Million in Funding Available to States to Build Broadband Infrastructure. The United States Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) announced \$288 million in grant funding for broadband infrastructure deployment. Funds will be awarded to partnerships between a state, political subdivisions of a state, and providers of fixed broadband service.

The City of Boston is hiring a Broadband Digital Equity Advocate. The Broadband Digital Equity Advocate will lead policy and planning initiatives aimed at increasing broadband affordability and availability in addition to providing all Boston residents with the skills and resources they need to connect. The announcement is available [here](#).

CO.LAB in Chattanooga, Tennessee, is hiring a Program Director. CO.LAB is a nonprofit startup accelerator that supports entrepreneurial growth in southeast Tennessee. They work with companies ranging from Main Street businesses to tech startups scaling into major markets. The CO.LAB Director of Programs will serve as a strategist, program developer, leader, and manager of the full range of CO.LAB programming.

More Opportunities

Common Sense Media is hiring for two positions. The Common Sense Media team has announced openings for their **Broadband State Policy Fellow** and a **Staff Assistant** on the Advocacy Team. The State Policy Fellow will manage Common Sense's state-level digital divide broadband outreach and advocacy agenda and support connectivity work at the federal level. The Staff Assistant will be responsible for supporting Common Sense's chief advocacy officer and the advocacy team on day-to-day duties and special projects.

Michigan Moonshot is hiring a Program Manager for the Moonshot initiative. The candidate will focus primarily on broadband data collection, community engagement, and educational content program management. Note that this is a term-limited position for a duration of approximately two years from the date of hire with the possibility of extension. Review the details **here**.

NTEN is hiring for its 2021 Digital Inclusion Fellowship. The NTEN fellowship is a year-long opportunity that assists nonprofit leaders with connecting residents in their respective communities. The cohort will include 11 fellows based in cities across the US: Atlanta, Austin, Cleveland (2), Huntsville, Kansas City, Nashville, Provo, Salt Lake City (2), San Antonio. The application period closes on **June 11, 2021**. Access the application **here**.



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