The COVID-19 pandemic sheds light on the existing economic and technological disparities felt by our rural communities across North Carolina. Limited or non-existent broadband access is an extreme barrier for connectivity on many fronts; from students and teachers struggling to access online learning platforms, to individuals in need of integrated care services receivable through telehealth. Staying connected, especially in these unprecedented times, requires our collective action. Together, we must ensure that every North Carolinian from the mountains to the coast has affordable access to broadband.

The implications of connectivity, along with access to the technology and the know-how to take advantage of that technology, are paramount to having a well-equipped workforce, thriving small business sector, a level playing field for all students, and access to healthcare providers regardless of one’s zip code. For 21st century rural communities, what was previously a need has become an imperative. The bottom line is that broadband is a necessity and not a luxury.
There are an estimated 322,267 youth [under 18] without access to broadband.

95,478 urban
63,264 regional city and suburban
163,525 rural

Source: U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey, 2018

Recommended Actions

• Provide $50 to $100 million of increased funding, for implementation and administration of the broadband grant program, Growing Rural Economies with Access to Technology (GREAT), to greatly expand eligibility, accessibility, and adoption.

• Establish a revised broadband definition that creates a minimum service threshold of 25/5 that can be used for grant funding.

• Encourage public-private partnerships by clarifying the ability of local governments to raise and spend funds for broadband infrastructure and to lease existing assets to private and nonprofit partners to help expand broadband to the last mile.

• Operationalize the state-level ‘dig once’ policy to cut costs and increase efficiency in laying broadband infrastructure.

• Address broadband adoption rates by establishing an incentive-based program to provide low-cost options in underserved areas, fund technology access and digital literacy programs, and explore a subsidy program for low-income households.

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