Education SUPERHIGHWAY

CLOSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE WITH BROADBAND ADOPTION CENTERS

Overcoming The Barriers to Broadband Adoption

The Opportunity

There are 28.2 million households in the United States without high-speed broadband. After decades of public and private investment in broadband infrastructure, **affordability is now the number one cause of the digital divide.** Nearly two-thirds of unconnected households have access to a home broadband connection but are offline primarily because they cannot afford to connect. This is **the broadband affordability gap.**

This broadband affordability gap is present in every state in both urban and rural communities.[1] This gap has become one of the primary inhibitors of access to economic security and opportunity, including access to healthcare, education, job training, and the social safety net. It is a reality centered in our nation's lowest income communities and disproportionately impacts people of color[2].

Congress has recognized the need to address the affordability gap and plans to invest over $20 billion[3] in the nation's largest-ever broadband affordability program. By removing the cost burden of getting online, we have a historic opportunity to close the digital divide for the majority of Americans left offline.

The Challenge

Subsidies alone are not enough to close the affordability gap. Federal subsidy programs for internet services - both old and new - have experienced low adoption rates. The FCC's Lifeline program, for example, has been the federal government's primary vehicle to get eligible low-income Americans connected for the last ten years, yet only 24% of eligible households subscribed to the program prior to the pandemic. Similarly, the recently implemented Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) has an estimated adoption rate of approximately 16% as of October 2021.

What keeps households from adopting high-speed broadband when it is available in their area and fully subsidized? The primary barriers fall into three categories: Awareness, Trust, and Enrollment Challenges.

Awareness

Most unconnected households are unaware of the Emergency Broadband Benefit and how it can help them get connected. A recent national survey of low- and lower-middle income households found that only 25% had heard of the program.[4]

Trust

Many unconnected households are concerned about sharing personal information as part of the sign-up process and are skeptical the Emergency Broadband Benefit will actually cover the cost of their home broadband connection.

Enrollment Challenges

Signing up for the Emergency Broadband Benefit is time-consuming, confusing and requires households to provide details of their income status or other documentation that many cannot easily access.[5]

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1. The affordability gap is the largest portion of the digital divide in 43 states and makes up 58% of the digital divide in states with rural populations that exceed the national average. In the eleven states where more than 40% of the population is rural, the broadband affordability gap constitutes 59% of the digital divide and in the four states where over half the population is rural, affordability is still the cause of 53% of households lacking home broadband.
2. The affordability gap is concentrated in communities where 25% or more of the households lack home broadband. These areas, which we refer to as "America's most unconnected communities" represent only 30% of the U.S. population but 67% of the 18.1 million homes that have access to the internet but cannot afford to connect. These communities have 43% more households below the poverty level, 57% more black households and 49% more Latinx households.
3. Includes the $3.2 billion Emergency Broadband Benefit Program (part of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021), the $14.2 billion Affordable Connectivity Benefit and $2.75 billion (over five years) Digital Equity Act (both part of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act).
4. Digital Connectivity During the Pandemic: A national survey of low- and lower-middle income households, a research partnership between EveryoneOn and John B. Horrigan, PhD, 2021.
5. Another factor is that information and support in languages other than English is limited. This is a critical barrier as primary English speaking households are ~3x more likely to have broadband than limited English speaking households.

Creating a Model That Works: Broadband Adoption Centers

To close the broadband affordability gap, communities must combat the key barriers that households face in adopting free and discounted Internet plans: low awareness, lack of trust, and enrollment challenges. While adoption of affordable broadband plans has been low on a national scale, examples of successful adoption programs at the local level prove that it is possible to achieve much better results.

Case Study: Clark County School District (Las Vegas, NV)

When the pandemic hit, Clark County School District (CCSD), the fourth largest district in the country, had to shift approximately 320,000 students to remote learning. CCSD, along with Communities in Schools (CIS), partnered with state and community leaders and Internet service providers (ISPs) to build an initiative called Connecting Kids Nevada. The initiative's goal was to ensure every student had access to an Internet connection and learning device at home.

CCSD and CIS worked with Cox Communications to provide Internet access to low-income families via Connect2Compete, an affordable internet plan sponsored by the initiative at no cost to the families through June 2021. Connecting Kids Nevada set up a virtual Family Support Center where school district staff members were trained as call agents to connect with families to sign them up for Connect2Compete. CCSD and CIS negotiated an agreement with Cox that enabled callers to sign families up for service directly. This minimized family interaction with the ISP, thereby removing significant sign-up barriers common with low-cost Internet programs, such as lack of trust and long wait times. The Family Support Center was managed by CIS and ran from August through December of 2020. The Family Support Center took more than 45,000 calls, reached over 99% of CCSD families, and helped to connect nearly 18,000 CCSD families to the Internet at home.[6]

Connecting Kids Nevada built a sophisticated marketing and outreach campaign, tracking progress within their Student Information System. Diligent data tracking enabled efficient and targeted outreach. With CIS's coordination, community-based organizations leveraged their networks, distributed information through door-to-door outreach, and canvassed highly frequented locations such as food distribution centers, helping to reach families who hadn't picked up their phone.

Case Study: Chicago Connected (Chicago, IL)

In Chicago at the onset of the pandemic, Mayor Lori E. Lightfoot announced the launch of Chicago Connected, a multi-year public-private partnership between Chicago Public Schools (CPS), the philanthropic community, and leading ISPs. The partnership aimed to assist the 100,000 CPS students who did not have an active Internet connection at home and were unable to attend classes virtually.

CPS worked collaboratively with the city and ISPs to assess household digital needs in order to build targeted adoption strategies. With improved data, the team worked with Comcast, RCN, AT&T, and WOW, to analyze and update address-level data and gain insight into connectivity options for CPS student households.

Chicago Connected adopted a sponsored service model, providing high-speed Internet to households for four years by directly paying for Internet service for families most in need. They made the enrollment process as straightforward as possible by not requiring background checks or social security numbers to verify eligibility. They also ensured that families would not receive upsells. This was critical to building public trust in the program.

The initiative utilized a robust outreach plan to contact families, using several communication waves that prioritized those most in need. Chicago Connected partnered with 35 community based organizations to raise awareness and build trust. Each eligible household received a general robocall, robotext, and flier about the program, followed by U.S. Postal mail and emails containing their specific activation codes. Since its launch, over 40,000 families have enrolled in Chicago Connected.

6. https://newsroom.ccsd.net/considerable-gains-made-in-connecting-student-to-devices-and-internet/

The successful efforts in Las Vegas and Chicago demonstrate that while the barriers to broadband adoption can be high, coordinated, intentional, and data-driven outreach efforts can overcome obstacles and drive adoption. Adoption campaigns looking to replicate the results of these two examples should focus on four crucial differentiators:

1. **Data: identify unconnected households and create a system for tracking progress**

   Both Clark County and Chicago realized that in order to build a successful program they needed to be able to target and prioritize their efforts. Clark County built a robust data tracking system that integrated their existing Student Information System and allowed them to run a successful calling campaign. Chicago Connected worked with the city and ISPs to identify high-need households and direct their efforts accordingly.

2. **Outreach: create an adoption campaign that layers outreach tactics similar to grassroots political organizing**

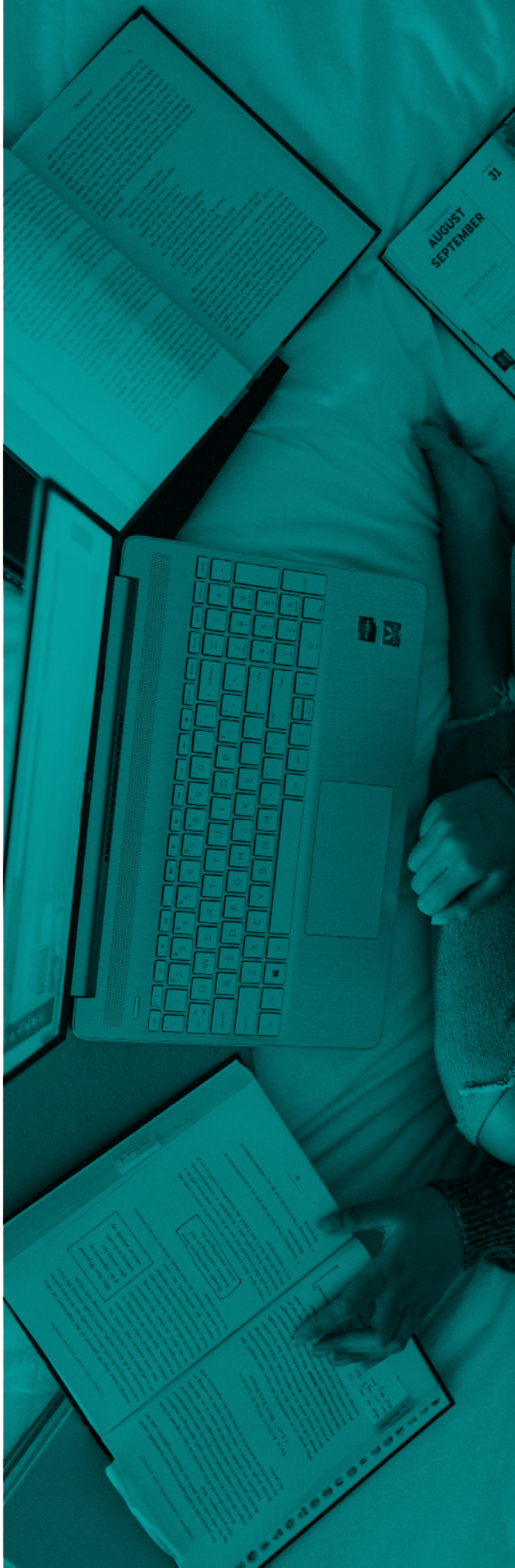
   Clark County started with a general awareness campaign that drove inbound calls to their call center. Once data indicated that inbound calls were waning, the call center was able to shift to targeted outbound calls directly to families who had still not been reached. After calling efforts had been exhausted, community based organizations and school districts were able to target a much smaller list of remaining families. Similarly, Chicago Public Schools contacted families using several communication waves that prioritized those most in need. Each eligible household received multiple outreach touches to raise awareness of the program, followed by U.S. Postal mail and emails containing their specific activation codes.

3. **Trust: leverage community-based partnerships to recruit, train, and manage a team of outreach staff**

   Clark County staffed the call center with school district staff who were familiar with the communities they were calling. On average, calls lasted fifteen to twenty minutes. Callers approached each call with a concierge mentality: while their goal was to get each family access to home broadband, they addressed needs outside of connectivity and in certain cases referred families to social workers. This empowered callers to address additional challenges that may have prevented a family from signing up for service. In Chicago, community based organizations were responsible for conducting outreach to families to support program enrollment and provide newly-connected households with digital literacy and skills development training.

4. **Ease: reduce the enrollment burden for eligible households**

   A key component of the successes in Clark County and Chicago was the removal of the enrollment barrier. Both initiatives found ways to make signing up for broadband as easy as possible. In Clark County, because of the agreement with Cox Communications, callers were authorized to sign families up directly while on the phone. In Chicago, the sponsored service program did not require documents such as social security numbers or ask for background checks. Making enrollment a one-step process and removing blockers was critical to success.



EducationSuperHighway's Broadband Adoption Center Program

EducationSuperHighway's Broadband Adoption Center program is modeled after the examples from Clark County, Chicago, and similar successful initiatives around the nation. The model focuses on the following key elements:

1. **Identify unconnected households and track progress:** Address-level connectivity data and household contact information are confidentially collected through partnership with local institutions such as school districts and housing authorities. For example, EducationSuperHighway's K-12 Bridge to Broadband Program, a data collaboration between ISPs and school districts, confidentially and securely identifies unconnected K-12 households and the Internet service options available to them. This information allows outreach efforts to target households with the highest need, track outcomes, and shift strategies as needed.

2. **Recruit and train trusted outreach staff:** Outreach is done by people who are trusted in the community such as school staff or community-based organizations. Outreach staff are trained on calling and texting tools, call scripts, and enrollment processes. The staff are compensated for the work; broadband adoption efforts that rely on volunteer-based staff are less effective.

3. **Streamline enrollment:** Outreach staff walk individuals through the entire enrollment process. EducationSuperHighway works with local and national ISPs throughout the process to facilitate sign-ups. Where ISPs allow, families can be pre-qualified for eligibility and/or directly enrolled into affordable Internet plans by outreach staff.

4. **Execute a tiered outreach strategy:** A general awareness campaign (typically around two weeks in length) is conducted to soften the ground for targeted outreach. Outreach staff use a combination of calling, texting, and in-person touches over multiple rounds of targeted outreach to contact unconnected households, educate them on connectivity options, and guide them through the sign-up process. Depending on the number of unconnected households that are being targeted, the outreach phase can last six to ten weeks with the goal of reaching 90% of households. Larger city or statewide efforts should plan to conduct outreach over a longer period of time.

The total cost of running a Broadband Adoption Center is estimated to be $75 per household. This estimate includes expenses associated with calling and texting platforms, general awareness materials, and compensation for outreach staff.

How Policymakers Can Enable Broadband Adoption Centers

Collect Household-Level Connectivity Data
State and local governments must start with a clear understanding of the problem by collecting household-level data on who is and is not connected. Armed with this information, states, cities, and counties can use the data to inform broadband adoption efforts. EducationSuperHighway is now working with ISPs participating in the K-12 Bridge to Broadband program to make its confidential data exchange platform available to states and cities to identify unconnected households in low-income communities.

Include Funding for Broadband Adoption Centers in State Broadband Plans
As part of the bi-partisan Infrastructure Bill, states must submit a plan to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) for how they intend to use their broadband infrastructure and Digital Equity Act funding. NTIA should require that all state broadband plans include investments in marketing and direct outreach campaigns to unconnected households and the creation and staffing of broadband adoption centers.

Establish Statewide Broadband Adoption Centers
While it may be advantageous to have trusted local institutions conduct outreach to unconnected households as part of a coordinated broadband adoption effort, states should consider performing enrollment assistance functions at a single broadband adoption center. This will create economies of scale, increase the hours enrollment concierges are available, ensure multiple languages can be supported, and improve the enrollment support experience. In addition, it will allow the state to have a single point of contact with ISPs, facilitating the rapid resolution of issues and enabling the state to partner with them to simplify the enrollment process.

For more information about running a broadband adoption program in your school district, city or state please contact info@educationsuperhighway.org.

Appendix 1: Emergency Broadband Benefit and the Affordable Connectivity Program

The Emergency Broadband Benefit, a $3.2 billion[7] program of the Federal Communications Commission, assists families unable to afford broadband internet service during the COVID-19 pandemic. Eligible households[8] receive a discount of up to $50 a month for broadband service ($75 for eligible households on qualifying Tribal lands), as well as a one-time discount of $100 toward the purchase of a device such as a laptop, desktop or tablet.[9] Participating internet service providers are reimbursed for these discounts. The FCC has delegated the administration of the EBB to the Universal Service Administrative Company (USAC).

The process to apply and enroll is as follows:

Step One: Determine and acquire proof of eligibility. A household is eligible if a member meets at least *one* of the stated criteria,[10] such as an income at or below 135% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines. Acceptable documents to demonstrate eligibility vary by criterion.

Step Two: Apply via one of three options:

1. Directly with an eligible service provider[11]
2. Online via the National Verifier
3. By mailing an application (English or Spanish) and documents proving eligibility:
   USAC, Emergency Broadband Support Center, P.O. Box 7081, London, KY 40742

Step Three: Identify and contact a participating internet service provider[12] and select one of its eligible plan(s) after receiving approval (if the household did not apply directly with them). Eligible households must apply for the EBB program as well as contact a participating internet service provider and select a qualifying plan.

Step Four: Once an application is submitted and approved, and a participating service provider and qualifying service plan selected, the household may enroll in the EBB program.

Applying online is ideal, since approval may be immediate, but requires an internet connection and the ability to upload qualifying documents. Mailed applications are lengthier to process, especially if any documentation is missing or if the USAC is unable to confirm eligibility from the documents submitted. Furthermore, if the applicant is highly mobile, additional mailed correspondence may not be received.

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7. The Consolidated Appropriations Act became law on December 27, 2020, establishing an Emergency Broadband Connectivity Fund of $3.2 billion. See FCC "Emergency Broadband Benefit".
8. A household is defined as a "group of people who live together and share money (even if they are not related to each other)." See USAC, "What is a household?"
9. The household must contribute between $10 and $50 toward the cost of the device.
10. A full list of criteria may be found at FCC "Emergency Broadband Benefit" or USAC, "Do I Qualify?"
11. Only certain internet service providers have been approved by the FCC to use an alternate application process and to enroll households directly.
12. See also the USAC's online tool to find a participating provider.

The bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act currently being considered in Congress would provide $14.2 billion for the creation of the Affordable Connectivity Fund,[13] updating and expanding the EBB. The following chart compares the two benefits.

Name	Emergency Broadband Benefit	Affordable Connectivity Program
Fund	Emergency Connectivity Fund	Affordable Connectivity Fund
Allocation	$3.2 billion	$14.2 billion (in addition to the $3.2 billion in the EBB)
Income Eligibility	135% of the federal poverty guidelines	200% of the federal poverty guidelines
Other Determinants of Eligibility	Government assistance programs such as SNAP, Medicaid, SSI; eligibility for benefits under the Free and Reduced Price School Meal program, demonstrated loss of income post February 29, 2020, etc.	Same, except that demonstrated loss of income post February 29, 2020 is eliminated, and participation in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children is added.
Benefit	$50 per month ($75 for households on qualifying Tribal lands)	$30 per month ($75 for households on qualifying Tribal lands)
Additional Benefits	One-time $100 device credit	Appears unchanged
Duration	Temporary until fund is used up, or six months after the end of the pandemic, whichever comes first.	Until funds are used up[14]
Eligible Service Plans	Only certain service plans are eligible	Consumer can select any service plan offered by the internet service provider
Notable Additions		Participating service providers are required to conduct "public awareness" campaigns, in collaboration with public interest groups and non-profit organizations, to highlight the value of the Affordable Connectivity Program as well as inform the public about the benefits of broadband and internet access.

13. See Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Division F - Broadband, Title V - Broadband Affordability, Sec 60501-60506, pages 2170-2192.
14. Congress projects that the funding will last for five years

About EducationSuperHighway

EducationSuperHighway was founded in 2012 with the mission of upgrading the Internet access in every public school classroom in America. Having completed our mission we are now focused on bridging the digital divide by bringing free internet access to households in America's most unconnected communities to create economic security and opportunity.

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