



Common Cents

New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute Blog

Initiatives Aim to Increase Rural Access to Broadband Internet Services

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Broadband internet availability and use is uneven between rural and urban areas of New Hampshire. A lack of key broadband infrastructure connecting many homes in rural regions has resulted in increased connection challenges that have been [exacerbated](#) by the COVID-19 crisis. The [crisis](#) has required individuals and families to transition many activities from face-to-face interactions to virtual communication, and has increased the necessity of reliable broadband internet services among Granite Staters. Key legislation recently [passed](#) by the New Hampshire Legislature, new [state level initiatives](#), and [federal investments](#) may aid in expanding broadband internet services to underserved areas of the state, and help ensure more Granite Staters will be online at sufficient broadband speeds in the future.

Internet use has become an integral part of many aspects of daily life; Granite Staters regularly use the internet to access and share information, apply to jobs, connect with friends and family, and engage in communication for a wide range of activities. Internet access is also key to an individual's ability to work or conduct business from home. The COVID-19 crisis elevated the importance of fast and reliable online connectivity, particularly as students began remote education, individuals and families utilized more video conferences for work, health care, and communicating with friends and relatives, and Granite Staters overall relied more readily on a constant connection sufficient for these tasks. The U.S. Federal Communication Commission [identifies](#) telecommuters and students as needing connection speeds up to those associated with [broadband internet](#), which are capable of downloads of at least [25 Mbps and upload speeds of 3 Mbps](#). Homes with multiple individuals requiring connections may require even [faster broadband speeds](#).

Fixed broadband services, meaning a home is physically connected to the internet at these speeds, are more limited in rural areas. Recent [data](#) from the Federal Communications Commission show that there are providers in all areas of the state that offer broadband services, but [survey data](#) suggest more limited access in rural areas,

and other [analysis](#) shows that businesses and homes in many rural areas use internet speeds below broadband levels. Adoption of internet connections at broadband speeds [have been shown](#) to lead to increased levels of income and economic growth in previously underserved regions, suggesting that fixed broadband connections in all regions of the state would enhance access to equitable opportunity.

A \$50 million initiative [supported by](#) federal emergency funds in response to the COVID-19 crisis was recently created by the Governor's Office for Emergency Relief and Recovery (GOFERR). This initiative, called [Connecting New Hampshire – Emergency Broadband Expansion Program](#), will provide support for new projects aimed at connecting underserved areas of the state to broadband internet by the end of this year. Details and program guidelines are currently being developed by the Office of Strategic Initiatives, the New Hampshire Department of Education, and the Public Utilities Commission. This initiative is not designed to fund existing rural broadband expansion commitments, but may potentially be used to fund planned or permitted projects not yet under construction.

Along with this GOFERR initiative, [House Bill 1111](#) which was recently passed by the New Hampshire Legislature, would allow for greater collaboration among communities in the state to build out broadband internet services with internet providers in rural areas. The bill would permit municipalities to create and join "communications districts," which would have their own governing boards, budgets, and ability to contract with service providers.

Reducing the disparities in broadband internet infrastructure between rural and urban areas of the state is integral to helping ensure Granite Staters have equitable opportunities to access remote education, telehealth services, the ability to work and conduct business from home, and other key resources and services online. Enhancing the accessibility and use of broadband internet is not only essential during the COVID-19 crisis; improving internet connectivity may also improve the overall economic wellbeing of rural regions of the state in the long term as well. The current legislation, awaiting approval by the Governor, and additional investments by the state and federal governments are key to helping ensure rural regions of New Hampshire achieve greater levels of broadband internet access.

- *Michael Polizzotti, Policy Analyst*