

# Closing the Digital Divide: Approaches from Local Government Leaders

Internet access is no longer a want, it's a need. Providing equal access to broadband connectivity has become top of mind for local government leaders country wide. The challenges around the digital divide are real. Without affordable, accessible broadband, families can't work from home, participate in virtual learning or access telehealth.

The new influx of federal funding will support programs this year, but what happens next?

The digital divide is a big, complex problem. But cities across the country are taking steps forward. Identified during a small group discussion of local government leaders, including City and County Managers, Chief Innovation Officers, Directors of Technology and a Digital Equity Coordinator, here are some ideas about how local governments can start to move the needle on the digital divide.

## Understanding digital inequities in your community.

To close the digital divide, the first step is finding gaps within your community. Here are some strategies that local governments have used successfully to understand the digital inequities in their communities. ▶

## Diagnosing the Digital Divide.

### 1 Set a baseline.

Leveraging private sector partners to identify coverage areas in certain geographies.

### 2 Host meetings for community members.

Leveraging libraries, parks and recreation facilities, churches or other common gathering locations and ask key questions:

*Examples: How were you impacted by the pandemic? Do you have internet access at home and how do you access the network? What digital features do you want the city to roll out? What is your priority as a resident?*

### 3 Conduct surveys.

This ranges from knocking on doors, outreach coordinated with trusted non-profits and community groups, and online surveys for those with internet and/or device access. Miami Dade's Thrive305 effort surveyed over 26,400 residents and conducted various discussions and workshops to source ideas and identify top community priorities.

**Regardless of method, it's essential to follow up after outreach with what you're doing next. This ensures that participants become stakeholders in your initiatives and are encouraged to continuously contribute to the conversation.**

## Common gaps.

Just like any good research effort, it's important to have a hypothesis going in about what the problem might be. Here are some of the problems that have been uncovered by other local government leaders to frame your thinking. In most communities, the problem includes everything listed below. But understanding the mix enables local government leaders to prioritize investments that will generate the biggest impact in their community.

1

### Infrastructure:

Many cities just don't have the physical networks in place to offer broadband to all residents.

2

### Affordability:

For some low-income, food insecure or elderly residents, getting dinner on the table is more important than getting and maintaining Wi-Fi in a home.

3

### Uptake & Access:

Sometimes getting residents to adopt new technology and getting devices into their hands is the barrier.

4

### Digital literacy:

Even if residents have access to affordable service, many residents don't know how to leverage the technology to leverage resources.

## Exploring solutions.

Once you've identified the specific digital divide gaps you need to solve, here are some examples of how local governments across the country are addressing the problem of digital equity.

**If infrastructure is the challenge,** refer to [Opelika, AL](#) who built their own fiber networks with bond funding to increase household fiber access from 0% to 70%.

**If affordability is the challenge,** see how local governments like Miami Dade, Florida and Opelika, Alabama are bridging the cost gap.

Many cities are extending free Wi-Fi coverage to city buildings, parks and other public infrastructure to expand access.

Miami-Dade's Housing Authority updated their [RFPs](#) to ensure that all new public developments included free or affordable Wi-Fi.

States agencies and not-for-profit organizations across the country are partnering with Verizon to enable communities to provide low-income residents with internet access in a fast and easy way. Some of the many examples from across the country include [California](#), [Nevada](#), [Massachusetts](#), and [Georgia](#).

**If uptake and access is the challenge,** The Chief Leschi School District in Puyallup, Washington ran [hot spot distribution programs](#) at elementary, middle and high schools to ensure that students without Wi-Fi access at home had enough data to complete homework assignments.

Little Rock, AR leveraged [take-home lunch programs](#) and other federal assistance programs already setup for vulnerable residents as distribution channels for hardware and/or information to help residents apply for internet financial aid.

Fort Wayne Community Schools (FWCS) developed a [1-1 plan](#) to ensure each student had access to a personal device. After seeing who qualified for the federally funded Free and Reduced Lunch Program, they distributed over 7,500 hot spots to students.

**If digital literacy is the challenge**, Miami-Dade, FL [hosted digital literacy](#) workshops

in community centers to help the elderly and children from low-income households shift to the new digital world - like how to open bank accounts online.

Ohio's Office of aging has allocated \$80,000 to [help the elderly go virtual](#). The office has equipped senior citizens with technology devices, classroom and one-on-one training, and weekly socialization activities.

**Search for more ways local governments are closing the digital divide using [The Atlas case study database](#).**

## Finding the money.

**CARES Act, CRRSAA, ARPA and now IIJA....local governments have been given 'once in a lifetime' money to support infrastructure expansion.**

- 1** Los Angeles, CA [has dedicated \\$12M](#) of its American Rescue Plan Act funds to closing the digital divide. Their efforts include library laptop and hotspot lending, fostering community hubs, public Wi-Fi at parks, and educating the elderly on digital literacy.
- 2** Emergency Broadband Benefit Program provides a direct benefit for residents that covers \$30 of a household internet bill each month.
- 3** Emergency Rental Assistance program makes funding available to assist households that are unable to pay rent or utilities, including internet.
- 4** American Rescue Plan or other federal program funding could be used to develop outreach programs that provide free Wi-Fi access and digital literacy workshops for students, often focused on creating sustainable pathways for technological skill development.
- 5** Education Stabilization Fund enabled governments to provide hot spots and technology to students in the shortest possible time frame.
- 6** The Georgia Department of Education [utilized CARES Act funding](#) to provide 4G LTE Internet Access to 12.5M students across 11 states.

## Ensuring Long Term Access.

**Federal funding has enabled local and state agencies to develop strategies to address the digital divide. But the funding won't last forever. Here are what some local government agencies are doing to ensure long-term access for their community.**

### 1 Prioritize broadband in budgeting.

There is a need for internet access. Even without specific funding, money for creating and managing broadband infrastructure should be penciled into capital budgets.

### 2 Consider innovative financing mechanisms and public private partnerships.

Some governments are exploring innovative ways to [utilize Social Impact Bonds](#) bonds to expand broadband access.

## Just the beginning.

The digital divide is big and its impacts are felt countrywide. While local governments are starting to address the problem, there are a lot of outstanding questions critical to closing the divide.

### [Learn more](#) about how Verizon is working with communities to address the digital divide.

*This resource summarizes a discussion by local government leaders on November 16, 2021. Views expressed by the participants are their own and do not imply an endorsement of the views or of the entity they represent. In addition, reference to any specific solution or entity does not constitute an endorsement or recommendation by Verizon.*

## Big Outstanding Questions.

- 1 *What are the options for gaining access to those in need?*
- 2 *What can 5G do for my community and how do I [combat misinformation](#) about it?*
- 3 *How do we collaborate with the private sector to enable more internet access?*
- 4 *How do we ensure that it's affordable after the federal funding dries up?*