

Broadband Access and Disparities

To begin, a basic understanding of broadband is necessary in order to fully realize the nature of its importance. The Federal Communications Commission defines broadband as “any technology capable of supporting the transfer of data exceeding 200 kbps in at least one direction (upstream or downstream)” (Flamm & Chaudhuri, 2007). Kbps stands for kilobits per second. Verizon also provides information regarding the broadband services available. They state that “broadband provides high-speed internet access via multiple types of technologies including fiber optics, wireless, cable, DSL and satellite” (*What is Broadband*).

While access to broadband may not be the most important issue on the totem pole, broadband access is an issue that still needs attention. There have been many studies surrounding this problem, ranging from short-term solutions to ways in which rural counties can get said access. Before diving deeper into the specifics of what is already researched about this topic, it is important to know that limited broadband access is more than simply lack of internet. It affects a variety of everyday activities in one's life.

In some rural communities and/or impoverished households, broadband access is limited and the level of income can determine who can access it (Flamm & Chaudhuri, 2007). Because there is a fee to obtain internet, in the case of low-income communities, decisions must be made regarding whether to buy internet. Taking San Antonio as an example, a case study was carried out where it was discovered that disparities were not only present between rural and urban areas but also within the cities themselves where unequal access to broadband was existing (Reddick et al., 2020). The cause of such disparities seems to revolve around unequal distribution and access between marginalized and low-income communities. In Tennessee, for example, 27% of its residents do not have access to internet connectivity (“Broadband by the Numbers,” n.d.).

To some extent, there has been some level of intervention from both the government and independent organizations to build the gap in broadband disparity. In 2013, a fund by the Federal Communications Commission was granted to extend broadband access to rural communities, especially since access to broadband also improves better health care services (Federal Communications Commission, 2013). More recently, as of last month, a temporary federal program was put into place. Termed Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB), this \$3.2 billion dollar program helps individuals access technology, especially those who may have been affected by the pandemic (Knapp, 2021). Within the program are specific parameters for each family. A \$50 discount, as well as a one time discount of \$100 to buy a source for the internet, are provided (Knapp, 2021). While this solution is good for the time being, it is only temporary. Concerns have been raised about what will occur when these funds are depleted. Therefore, a more structured change is needed, and an example of this is seen with the Federal Communications Commission. Here, it is centered on reforming its “universal service support program for health care” (Federal Communication Commission, 2013). The FCC realizes the importance of allowing this access, specifically in rural areas, because not only will it save lives, but will lower health care costs as well (Federal Communication Commission, 2013).

However, this is not a one-person job; rather, more institutions and partners need to join efforts in order to effectively speed up the progress of allowing broadband access. Libraries, for example, have been one of the most prominent places for broadband access, where members of the community can frequent and attain high speed internet (DeGuzman et al., 2020). Knowing that, it is worth integrating other institutions such as schools and government offices to be broadband hubs, so long as those facilities are open to the public and can accommodate them.

In our instance specifically, we are working with THRIVE, and it is vital to understand their successes. They have been successful in raising awareness for this cause, as well as jumpstarting efforts to provide access. In order to build on this, we must follow their core values of stewardship, relationship-building, inclusiveness, results-oriented, and quality (Thrive). By using these values, THRIVE is helping those people in the Tri-state area, specifically some of the “600,000+ Tennesseans who have no access to a wired connection capable of 25 MBPS,” which is the required broadband access speed (“Broadband by the Numbers,” n.d.). Our ultimate goal, as stated by Geoff Millener, senior programs and operations officer for the Enterprise Center, is as follows: “Broadband can be built to unite, equitably, and without prejudice. We can make our region a place where both innovation and investment in such infrastructure benefit everyone who lives here, no matter ethnicity, rural or urban, or sector” (Thrive Regional Partnership, n.d., p. 1).

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