



OPINION

Critical broadband access getting attention — finally



By **BARBARA O'CONNOR and EVAN SCHMIDT** POSTED 08.12.2021

Gov. Newsom's words rang true last month when he stated, 'access to the Internet is as vital as water and electricity.' Internet access is a human right, and California must treat it as such.

The gaps between the connected and unconnected have never been clearer as California continues to grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic. The lack of access to online classes, employment opportunities and telehealth visits became more apparent when COVID-19 shut down our state. But even as the economy opens up again, some things have changed forever, like the significance of ubiquitous broadband access.

It's been a breath of fresh air to witness the attention broadband access has received in the past 16 months.

A [recent survey](https://www.cetfund.org/action-and-results/statewide-surveys/2021-2/) (https://www.cetfund.org/action-and-results/statewide-surveys/2021-2/), sponsored by the California Emerging Technology Fund and conducted independently by the University of Southern California found that nearly 10 percent of the state's households—more than 3.5 million people—are not connected at home to the Internet and another 6 percent—more than 2.3 million people—are connected only with a smartphone.

Thus, 15% of Californians are digitally-disadvantaged.

The research finds that the Digital Divide remains especially challenging for a significant number of low-income and Latino households, seniors and Californians with disabilities. Income is a key determinant in whether or not a household has Internet access, which should not be the case. Among households earning less than \$40,000 a year, 29 percent have no connection or only have access through a smartphone.

It's been a breath of fresh air to witness the attention broadband access has received in the past 16 months, including through many legislative initiatives led by Senate President pro Tempore Toni Atkins and Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon. The state's transformative investment is a first step towards where we need to be to ensure Californians of all income levels have access to

broadband.

First, connect middle-mile construction for high-capacity fiber lines—as provided for in the legislation—with last-mile deployment.

The governor said we have “6 billion reasons to be proud,” (<https://www.gov.ca.gov/2021/07/20/governor-newsom-signs-historic-broadband-legislation-to-help-bridge-digital-divide/>) as he signed AB156/SB156, for a historic investment of \$6 billion to expand high-speed broadband infrastructure and affordable access throughout California. But, we also have 6 million more reasons to double down to reach all the digitally-disadvantaged in California.

Yes, we should be proud as the governor suggests, but being smart about investments is imperative as well. We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make good on our promise to those millions of disadvantaged households who will need affordable, high-speed and ubiquitous Internet to compete in the workforce and economy of today and tomorrow.

We must get this right.

Three critical elements remain to be addressed after the governor and Legislature agreed on this year’s landmark broadband package to boost our return on investment and accelerate deployment to connect all residents. California must implement an aggressive strategy that will maximize immediate impact.

First, connect middle-mile construction for high-capacity fiber lines—as provided for in the legislation—with last-mile deployment. It is essential to focus immediately on providing Internet access to the hardest-to-reach residents— in rural, unserved communities, tribal Lands, and poor urban underserved neighborhoods. The construction of a middle-mile-only network will not assure last-mile connectivity in a reasonable timeframe.

We must maximize the state’s investments in overcoming the Digital Divide and ensure they address the root problems.

However, the construction of publicly subsidized open-access middle-mile infrastructure that includes last-mile deployment achieves the best of both objectives — ensuring immediate Internet access for unserved and underserved households while also allowing other last-mile providers to access the middle mile. This increases competition and expands consumer choices, also fostering more affordable prices.

Affordability is the main reason (<https://www.cetfund.org/action-and-results/statewide-surveys/2021-2/>) that keeps these households from connecting to the Internet, with digital literacy and the lack of an appropriate computing device also being relevant factors.

Second, incorporate effective public-private partnerships. Public-private partnerships with a record of proven investment and work product should be encouraged and rewarded when they leverage previous public investments (by consumers and taxpayers) in existing middle-mile backhaul and backbone development. This will help avoid duplication of middle-mile infrastructure, serve public interests, and push the envelope of innovation.

Third, and finally, coordinate actions among local and regional governments. State investment should be aligned with collaboration among local governments through regional agencies, including Regional Broadband Consortia and Metropolitan Planning Organizations, to streamline and expedite permitting and achieve economies of scale.

We must maximize the state’s investments in overcoming the Digital Divide and ensure they address the root problems, or we will continue to leave behind millions of Californians.

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Editor’s Note: Barbara O’Connor, Ph.D, is professor emeritus, California State University Sacramento, and Chair of the California Emerging Technology Fund Board of Directors. Evan Schmidt is CEO of Valley Vision which manages the Connected Capital Area Broadband Consortium and the Sacramento Coalition for Digital Inclusion.