

Commonwealth Connect Initiative: Additional Assistance for Localities

Now more than ever before, Americans rely upon the internet to carry out everyday tasks and the public forum now takes place online. Banking, job searching, retrieving educational materials, or accessing telehealth all require access to high-speed broadband. Currently, people and businesses are being left on the sidelines as more than 230,000 Virginia homes and businesses struggle to gain access to high speed internet service.

Recognition of the lack of broadly-shared access to the new digital society and economy is what led Governor Northam to announce his vision of a Commonwealth in which everyone has the infrastructure necessary to access the internet. In 2018, Governor Northam announced that the Commonwealth should achieve functionally universal broadband coverage within 10 years. In just three years since this announcement, over half of the digital divide around broadband access has been closed. Through state resources alone, the Commonwealth has deployed approximately \$124 million in grant funds, leading to the connection of over 140,895 homes and businesses. To accelerate this success, Governor and General Assembly have invested an additional \$700 million to achieve universal broadband access by 2024.

The Commonwealth broadband team continues to pursue every available option to expand broadband access. The team's work to achieve universal broadband service has centered around three areas: planning, policy, and funding assistance.

- Planning
 - The broadband team works with local governments to identify gaps and coverage and develop plans and best-practices to fill those gaps.
- Policy
 - The broadband team continues to work with the Governor to refine executive branch policies and procedures, and the General Assembly on issues best addressed by legislation
- Funding
 - The broadband team supports the development of state and federal grant applications to fund gaps in existing coverage and makes one-time capital grants through competitive grants bring broadband to unserved areas.

The combination of these three approaches continues to produce results for the unconnected in the Commonwealth; however, much more work must be done. The Commonwealth owes it to the unconnected to not only continue, but accelerate these efforts and will take every action necessary to connect communities as quickly as possible.

Additional Assistance for Localities: The Commonwealth Connect Fund

If we are going to ensure all Virginians share in the prosperity of the digital age, we must ensure unconnected Virginians are brought online as quickly as possible. While

significant progress has been made, one of the biggest hurdles is finding local matching dollars to supplement broadband expansion. Many of the least connected localities are also the least affluent in Virginia, and without resources they struggle to compete for state grant funding.

To assist these fiscally distressed counties to better compete for state and federal dollars, the Commonwealth has launched a multi-million dollar capital campaign to match corporate and philanthropic donors with localities struggling to put together the resources to expand broadband infrastructure. These funds will be matched directly with struggling localities seeking broadband grants. Investments by pledgers to the Commonwealth Connect Fund will be leveraged many times over to reach universal broadband coverage in that locality and help them solve this critical problem and ensure that their children can be educated, their citizens can get 21st century healthcare, and their economies can avoid being left behind.