

CONNECTING COUNTIES INITIATIVE



ISSUE BRIEF – EXPANDING BROADBAND ACCESS

While dependable data on broadband access is difficult to obtain, the U.S. Census Bureau collects figures on broadband subscription rates, less than 70% of households statewide have a broadband internet subscription -- and in the least connected counties, less than half of the households have broadband. Additionally, large percentages of individuals in the northeastern, southeastern, and western parts of the state do not own a computing device like a desktop, laptop, smartphone, or tablet. Lack of affordable service and limited access to devices contributing to the widespread digital divide issue in North Carolina. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the need for broadband and the challenges those without a reliable connection face in conducting everyday business, education, and livelihoods. The need for broadband access to conduct daily activities has never been more evident.

The Opportunity:

The passage of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) in Spring 2021 unlocked an unprecedented opportunity for states and counties to make significant investments in broadband expansion projects. In North Carolina, the state appropriated more than \$1 billion to expand access to high speed internet access. Coupled with nearly \$2 billion in direct investments to counties, North Carolina has never been in a better position to make significant progress in closing the digital divide.

The Initiative:

NCACC President and Washington County Commissioner Tracey Johnson has been a longtime advocate for expanding broadband access across the state. An estimated 42% of Washington County households have a broadband internet subscription, making Washington the state's 5th least connected county. President Johnson is going to focus her presidential year on highlighting the progress being made with the broadband investments while illuminating best practices and success stories so that counties can learn from each other and replicate successful broadband projects. President Johnson will appoint a task force of county commissioners who will explore the different aspects that are critical to ensuring high speed, affordable internet access for all county residents. The task force will compile a suite of resources so that counties can follow best practices to implement broadband expansion projects.

The Task Force:

President Johnson appointed a task force, co-chaired by Bertie County Commissioner Ron Wesson and Cabarrus County Commissioner Steve Morris. This task force is comprised of county commissioners and staff who are committed to focusing on exploring the complexities and opportunities of broadband expansion.