

Fast, reliable internet access a must to close digital divide

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When life went online in March 2020 due to pandemic stay-at-home orders, ensuring access to high-speed broadband service quickly became one of our state's highest priorities.

Now, nearly a year later, task forces have been assembled, executive orders have been issued and the Legislature faces a flurry of new broadband bills with a dizzying array of both new and old proposed solutions to close the Digital Divide, some with price tags in the billions. Many of the bills do little to remove the existing barriers to broadband adoption that are a root cause of digital inequality.

California also needs to develop additional infrastructure necessary to provide broadband access in all corners of our state.

Long before the pandemic, connecting Californians to high-speed, reliable Internet access has been the highest priority of the state's Internet Service Providers.

California Cable & Telecommunications Association (CCTA) members have expanded Internet adoption by providing free Internet services to schools and libraries, free computers and devices, free digital literacy training and reduced-cost Internet services for low-income households. We know how to bring Californians online, and we know there is no silver bullet and no amount of funding that will connect 100% of Californians without a sensible plan to improve both Internet access and adoption.

We need to work together to minimize the most common barriers to broadband adoption – cost of service, lack of devices, lack of awareness of reduced-cost service options, and lack of digital skills.

CCTA partnered with state Sen. Steven Bradford to introduce [SB 743](#), which will provide grants to fund free or low-cost Internet services, devices, onsite computer labs and digital literacy training for low-income public housing residents.

CCTA is also sponsoring legislation to immediately get students connected with free or low-cost Internet access and the proper devices. Collectively, these bills will do more to immediately expand digital inclusion for low-income public housing residents and K-12 students than any other proposed policy solutions.

California also needs to develop additional infrastructure necessary to provide broadband access in all corners of our state. To get us there, we need to focus on a few fundamental principles, rather than adding new complex programs layered on top of old programs that have failed to achieve their intended outcomes.

In the last 25 years, California's Internet providers have devoted more than \$40 billion in private investments to build and develop infrastructure and networks across the state to bring high-speed, reliable broadband technology to more than [96% of Californians](#). Closing the remaining gap will require both public and private investments.

California's first priority should be to establish policies that foster even more private investment—not less—by expediting permit approvals and removing unnecessary barriers that delay broadband infrastructure deployment.

Second, we need to utilize public funds where they are needed most – in unserved rural areas with sparse populations. Since 2008, CCTA and our members have supported the California Advanced Services Fund (CASF) for this specific purpose – CASF provides grants to expand broadband infrastructure to connect unserved households and is funded through surcharges on customers' monthly phone bills.

Several bills would require collecting billions more for CASF and expand what the program can fund. California cannot waste public funds on overbuilding existing broadband networks when we still have a small pocket of households without access to broadband technology.

Third, we need greater transparency into how CASF funds are being spent, what areas remain unserved and what other funding sources are available.

After 10 years of funding CASF, the state should not ask residential customers to pay higher surcharges on their monthly bills when we still lack the most basic insight into how existing funds have been allocated, what results have been achieved, and where unserved areas remain.

To bring all Californians online, we need a plan that works. Let's work together to remove nuanced requirements that delay broadband infrastructure development, ensure public funds are put to their highest and best use, and require more transparency.

CCTA and its members have decades of knowledge and experience in bringing Californians online and, together with our policymakers, we can develop and implement policies that will provide coverage to all who seek it.

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Editor's Note: Carolyn McIntyre is the president of the California Cable & Telecommunications Association.