

The End of the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency: Broadband Investments



The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for broadband to connect people to health care services, the classroom, and each other, and accelerated investments in broadband infrastructure. Broadband access has been a means to connect people to health care providers and address distance and transportation barriers. Unequal access to broadband can impede access to health care, especially virtual care. Some of the policies implemented to increase broadband availability during the pandemic include:

- ★ American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) state funds, which were used to make improvements to broadband infrastructure
- ★ Subsidies for broadband access like the [Emergency Broadband Benefit Program \(EBB\)](#)

Impact

- ★ States have [disbursed about \\$148 billion](#) of the \$193.5 billion allocated for state Fiscal Recovery Funds (FRF), 5.7% of all state FRF funding have been [allocated towards broadband](#), and 31 states have allocated their FRF for these purposes*
- ★ [Nine million households were enrolled](#) in the EBB Program when it ended on December 31, 2021
- ★ Households in some [tribal areas enrolled in the EBB program in relatively large numbers](#)

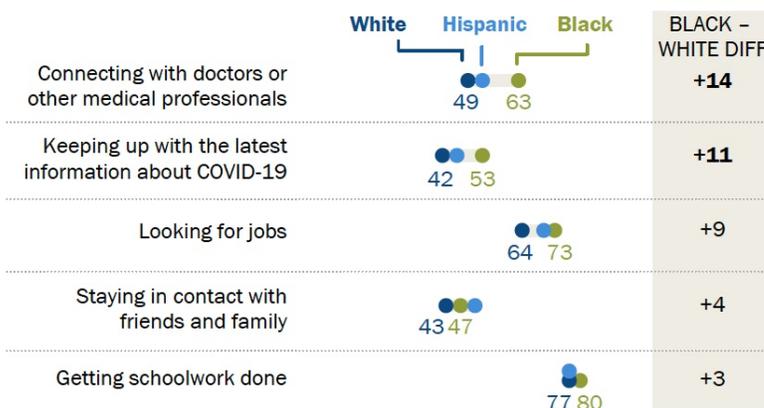
*As of September 2, 2022

Implications of the Digital Divide

- ★ Sixty-three percent of Black adults report that not having high-speed Internet access at home is a [major disadvantage in connecting with doctors or other medical professionals](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to 49 percent of white adults
- ★ [Black adults and Hispanic/Latino adults](#) are less likely to have broadband service at home compared to white adults
- ★ Only about [half of adults making less than \\$30,000](#) have broadband access at home
- ★ Seventy-two percent of rural residents have [broadband access at home](#) compared to 77% of urban residents and 79% of suburban residents
- ★ Sixty percent of [health care facilities outside of metro areas](#) lack broadband access

Black adults more likely than White adults to say lack of high-speed home internet is major disadvantage in connecting with doctors, keeping up with COVID-19

% of U.S. adults who say that people who do NOT have high-speed internet access at home are **at a major disadvantage** during the COVID-19 pandemic when it comes to each of the following



Note: Statistically significant differences are in bold. White and Black adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race. Respondents who did not give an answer or who gave other responses are not shown. Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 25–Feb. 8, 2021.

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“Tablets, computers, internet, anything like that you can forget that. Most of the people don’t have it, and the only way the ones that do have it is through their kids.”

-Focus group participant, South Carolina



17% OF OLDER ADULTS SURVEYED SAID THAT THEY DIDN'T LIKE THEIR VIRTUAL CARE EXPERIENCE BECAUSE THEY COULDN'T GET THE INTERNET OR TECHNOLOGY TO WORK

Source: [United States of Care and West Health, Older Adults' Experiences with Virtual Care Two Years Into the Pandemic](#)

December 2022



Initiatives

Federal Initiatives

- ★ [The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act](#) (signed November 15, 2021), or Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, provided \$14.2 billion to extend the EBB program to a longer-term broadband affordability program called the [Affordable Connectivity Program](#) (ACP)*

*There are differences in eligibility and benefits between the EBB and ACP.

State Initiatives

- ★ Georgia: \$408 million in grants to [expand broadband access](#) (using state FRF)
- ★ Florida: \$400 million to Department of Economic Opportunity to [expand broadband to unserved areas](#) (using state FRF)
- ★ New Jersey: Launched [NJHealthConnect @ Your Library](#), a statewide telehealth program (using state FRF)
- ★ California: \$6 billion in a [statewide broadband plan](#) to bridge the digital divide, with \$2 million in direct funding for last-mile network construction in rural and urban areas that prioritizes unserved and underserved residents
- ★ Delaware: Launched [Telehealth Kiosk and Device Lending Initiative](#) at local libraries to increase access to health and social services



Recommendations

Federal Policy Recommendations

IMMEDIATE PRIORITIES

- ★ Work with community-based organizations (CBOs) to boost awareness of broadband programs like the [ACP](#) and [Lifeline](#) broadband program

LONGER-TERM SOLUTIONS

- ★ Provide funding for states to expand broadband access

State Policy Recommendations

IMMEDIATE PRIORITIES

- ★ Work with CBOs to boost awareness of broadband programs like the [ACP](#) and [Lifeline](#) broadband program
- ★ Allocate ARPA state funds to expand broadband access in unserved and underserved areas (ARPA funds must be obligated by December 31, 2024 and spent by December 31, 2026)
- ★ Cover audio-only health services so people without broadband can access the health care services they need

LONGER-TERM SOLUTIONS

- ★ Provide funding to anchor institutions like libraries and schools that provide broadband access to people

“The only problem that I didn’t like about [virtual care] is because the internet service... all of a sudden it go out, then we have to keep calling each other back. That’s the only thing I didn’t like about virtual. You gotta have a good internet.”

- Focus group participant, South Carolina

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This one-pager is part of USofCare's playbook, "The End of the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency: Lessons Learned from the Pandemic and Implications for People."

