



# 2021 Policy Priorities

**NEXT CENTURY CITIES**

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Biloxi, Mississippi



# WHO WE ARE

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Next Century Cities (“NCC”) is a non-profit, non-partisan membership organization that advocates for fast, affordable, and reliable broadband internet access across the United States. We work alongside municipal officials in communities of all sizes and political stripes to eliminate America's digital divide. In collaboration with local government leadership and allies, NCC provides expertise, conducts research, creates resources, and hosts events that empower communities in broadband proceedings at every level of government.

The only organization of its kind, NCC supports local efforts to expand digital opportunities and infuses local perspectives into broadband policymaking at every level of government. Working on behalf of and in coalition with our member municipalities, NCC works towards ubiquitous broadband access. Our goal is for every resident, regardless of zip code, to have the requisite tools to participate in a digital society and economy.

# IMPACT OF OUR WORK

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High-speed connectivity has become a necessity, particularly in the COVID-19 pandemic landscape in which working, learning, and connecting online is compulsory. Reliable and affordable broadband networks are also critical for local governments to be able to attract new businesses, create jobs, provide health care, improve educational outcomes, and support emergency response efforts.

NCC member municipalities represent geographically, economically, and demographically diverse communities and are all aware that universal connectivity can transform the quality of life and create new opportunities for residents to age in place. NCC documents local challenges and success stories in policy proceedings, public comments, articles, conferences, training workshops, and social media campaigns that help shape local, state, and federal broadband access and adoption programs.

Canton, Ohio



# JOIN OUR MOVEMENT

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Next Century Cities is made up of mayors, councilmembers, technology officers, economic development managers, and other local officials who join on behalf of their communities. There are no membership dues. Philanthropic support allows Next Century Cities to develop resources that advance their broadband goals in counties, cities, towns, and villages across the country.

To learn more about how NCC advocates for municipalities or to become a member please email [info@nextcenturycities.org](mailto:info@nextcenturycities.org) or visit our website at [nextcenturycities.org](http://nextcenturycities.org). Private sector allies and philanthropic partners should email [francella@nextcenturycities.org](mailto:francella@nextcenturycities.org) to learn about partnership opportunities. Find updates about our work on Twitter [@NextCenCit](https://twitter.com/NextCenCit) or on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/NextCenturyCities](http://www.facebook.com/NextCenturyCities).

# POLICY PRIORITIES

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Next Century Cities is focused on improving broadband access and increasing adoption while advocating for a robust, competitive broadband marketplace. The high level priorities detailed below provide examples of NCC's work at various levels of government. Each is aimed at providing access to high-speed, affordable, and reliable internet connections to every resident in every community. An index of last year's accomplishments are archived in NCC's [2020 yearbook](#).

## Expanding Broadband Access

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COVID-19 unceremoniously revealed that municipalities of all sizes continue to struggle with bringing broadband within their reach for each of their residents. Network access is of particular concern for hard-to-reach populations. Accordingly, NCC works with local officials and community leaders to articulate infrastructure needs. Our partnerships and advocacy help municipalities to remove barriers, access resources, and identify connectivity solutions that meet their community's needs.

## **Infusing Local Perspectives Into Federal Policymaking.**

Without insights from local officials and community leaders, federal broadband deployment strategies will remain deficient. Still, local input is rarely solicited to inform federal broadband deployment and funding strategies. NCC provides opportunities for local officials to share community-level impact and learnings into federal proceedings that involve the Federal Communications Commission, National Telecommunications and Information Administration, and U.S. Congress.

For example, local officials have expressed the ongoing need for inclusive grant funding programs that provide communities with options to address unique deployment challenges. Many have explained how the persistent use of inaccurate mapping data excludes communities in need from limited federal funds. And as the nation increases investment in 5G technologies, the success of 5G networks depends on its proximity to fiber which is absent in many of the communities most impacted by the digital divide. NCC continues to document these local insights and others which are easily overlooked in the federal policymaking process.

## **Building Bridges Between Local & State Leadership.**

At the state level, NCC conducts outreach and develops opportunities for local officials to engage with state leadership. At a time when anywhere from approximately [20](#) to over [100](#) million people still do not have access to minimum broadband speeds, local governments are simultaneously battling prohibitions or crippling restrictions on municipal broadband projects in [22 states](#). Building bridges between local governments and state broadband officers is critical to eliminating unnecessary barriers and, importantly, identifying much-needed resources for a variety of broadband solutions.

Local economies are directly impacted by, and local officials are ultimately responsible for, addressing gaps in connectivity. In many states, municipal governments can only operate within the confines of explicit state laws. This form of state governance can often rule out effective solutions before they are tested for success. However, when local leaders have opportunities to share their insights and community needs with state officials, it facilitates collaboration and pilot-driven experimentation, which is key to expanding broadband initiatives across counties, districts, and states. Those conversations bring the far-reaching impact of the digital divide to life and mobilize interests in improving access.

# Advocating for Accurate Broadband Data & Pricing Information

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Accurate data that identifies where broadband access is or is not available is central to not only bolstering applications for broadband funding, but also to understanding the unique challenges different parts of the country experience with expanding broadband access.

For instance, residents in states with largely rural areas and difficult terrain may be considered “served” under the FCC’s map even though the provider that serves that area may charge exorbitant fees to initiate a connection. In other communities, affordability barriers or digital literacy may be a persistent obstacle. Given that local officials are better able to identify barriers to access and adoption, NCC urges policy makers to engage with local governments in order to collect information rather than relying on broad assumptions about deployment.

Price is also a major barrier to adoption. Broadband mapping is incomplete without determining whether those connections are affordable. Now that broadband access is indispensable for working, learning, obtaining healthcare and access to government services, local officials are working to understand how affordability interferes with broadband adoption.

Long before the pandemic, NCC helped policymakers at all levels of government to understand why internet access has shifted from being a luxury to a necessity. Our publications illustrate that when robust broadband connections are unaffordable, under-resourced households and communities are put further at a disadvantage.

# Promoting Robust Competition

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NCC is made up of local officials who believe that a robust, competitive marketplace helps to maintain lower prices and drive innovation. Notably, the vast majority of Americans only have the choice between [one or two providers](#) for high-quality internet access. Even in areas with relatively high levels of competition, federal and state subsidy programs such as [Lifeline](#) and [E-Rate](#) are a critical means for low income populations to obtain minimum access to broadband.

While barriers to entry impose natural limits on the marketplace (even more so when broadband providers continue to consolidate), NCC helps to illuminate local governments' role in encouraging competition. Our work explains how municipalities can create policies that encourage new entrants and accelerate deployment.

NCC members have also demonstrated the ways in which municipal networks drive prices and improve service options. Community broadband providers and electric coops are often willing to expand into rural areas that large providers find too expensive to serve. Additionally, NCC helps to educate policymakers on the local impact from mergers that reduce competition and consolidate market power.

# Increasing Broadband Adoption

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Enjoying the benefits of internet access is directly related to training, equipment and networks. While robust broadband network connections require speed, quality, and capacity that allow for users to accomplish common tasks, . However, the completion of these tasks also demands affordable access to equipment and basic levels of digital literacy. As a result, broadband adoption strategies, designed almost exclusively by local officials, are critical for residents to overcome their respective hurdles and benefit from digital citizenship.

Federal policy operates on the assumption that states and municipalities have the resources to launch and maintain broadband adoption programs wherever infrastructure is available. During the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, communities, educational institutions, philanthropic partners, and private sector allies were forced to challenge this assumption. Community-level partnerships were subsequently created to provide service and devices for residents in need. Still, local governments must work with local organizations to help support digital literacy programs. Making technical support and digital literacy resources accessible to populations in need, including seniors and people with disabilities, is the only way to ensure equal access to the internet.

Like water and electric systems, access to high-speed connectivity affects the quality of life for residents. Recognizing the breadth of its impact, from education to employment to healthcare, NCC advocates for local officials to be able to use broadband funding for access and adoption instead of one or the other. Our work illuminates the many reasons why some communities have been left offline in addition to what programs and policy proposals can help accelerate access to high-speed connectivity.

# Centering Digital Equity in Access and Adoption

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# NEXT CENTURY CITIES

[www.nextcenturycities.org](http://www.nextcenturycities.org)

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Fairhope, Alabama