Touring New England
Broadband Across the Region

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April 30, 2021
Nestled in the northeastern corner of the country, Maine is home to picturesque lighthouses and vibrant communities. Maine also faces a unique challenge to closing the digital divide and battling the COVID-19 pandemic: it is the least densely populated state in New England. From Portland to Islesboro, residents have worked together to find ways to adapt during the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing reliance on virtual platforms.

In March of 2020, communities across Maine began processes to switch work and school to distance learning and work-from-home formats, but many districts and the Governor’s office resisted due to logistical constraints. In urban and suburban districts, adequate high-speed broadband connectivity was available. Stakeholders were able to activate technology for students and employees to take home. Yet, in rural districts, residents faced entirely different challenges.

Read more from local officials in Maine here.
Vermont is well known for its rich mountains and lush forests, but its landscape and century-old bridges might not suggest an innovative and unique approach to expanding broadband access.

Unlike many municipal broadband models displayed across the country, which often begin with a single city or county developing a network that later expands outward, Vermont towns take a collaborative approach through organizations known as Communications Union Districts (CUD).

Continue reading about community partnerships in Vermont here.
The lack of broadband Internet access caused residents across the nation to struggle with telework, distance learning, and community development long before the COVID-19 pandemic forced our lives online. The residents in Leverett, Massachusetts, are all too familiar with those challenges.

As Robert Brooks, one of three members of the Leverett MLP Board, explained "we are adjacent to the town of Amherst, Massachusetts where the flagship university and Amherst College are located. We have a fair amount of professors that live in the area, and they couldn’t work from home."

Before LeverettNet the best offerings the town had were dial-up. LeverettNet is a Fiber-optic-To-The-Home (FTTH) broadband network owned by the Town of Leverett. This network provides a symmetrical gigabit speed option for every home in Leverett.

Learn more about a town that wrote its own broadband story here.
Taking its place as the southern boundary of New England, Connecticut is home to Yale University, beautiful towns, and the Connecticut River, the state’s namesake. Originally from the Mohegan-Pequot word “Quononoquett” meaning “long tidal river,” the Algonquian people who originally inhabited Connecticut knew the river’s power and importance, something that remains true today.

Nutmeggers, as residents are known in the Nutmeg State, are proud of their state’s history. In December of 2020, they had another triumph to celebrate. In a socially distanced gymnasium due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Governor Ned Lamont announced that Connecticut had closed the digital divide for every public student in the state.

Continue reading about a central Connecticut city that is devoted to closing its digital divide [here].
In March 2021, an anonymous Newport resident with a stable internet connection described Rhode Island’s digital divide as a major issue. In the author’s words,

"I see the effects of Newport’s digital divide every day in my work since the inequity especially affects low-income, Black, Indigenous, people of color, and seniors in Newport. Those in the North End are still living with poor Internet and cell service."

Rhode Island residents in eight of the state’s 39 cities and towns (in Bristol and Newport Counties) have only one Internet service provider. 25% of Rhode Islanders are without Internet service. The Ocean State has 48 strands of fiber-optic running statewide. Yet fewer than ten strands are used for hospitals, universities, colleges, schools, and libraries.

Read more about connectivity in Rhode Island [here](#).
When people think of New Hampshire, they often think of the first state in the presidential primary cycle. What they don’t think about is how the state is the 23rd most connected state in the country. For some communities, this means that access to a robust broadband connection is well within reach. Others, however, may not have the broadband access necessary to meaningfully participate in the services that have moved online since the start of the pandemic.

In May 2020, five Next Century Cities members met with then Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel, now acting Chair of the Federal Communications Commission. Rebecca Landry, IT Director and Assistant City Manager for Keene, New Hampshire, participated in the discussion and highlighted how the low population density of her community made it difficult to attract broadband service providers.

Keep reading insights from the City of Keene here.
About Half the Public Thinks Local Governments Should Be Able to Pursue Their Own Broadband Network Build-Outs. The White House, in its infrastructure proposal released earlier this month, has thrown its support behind allowing municipalities to explore such options. A new Morning Consult poll suggests many adults agree with that stance. 53% of U.S. adults said local governments should be able to explore having their own Internet services — but they tend to trust local governments less than private Internet companies to carry out the job on their own. Morning Consult.

Broadband stratified by demographics and income in California, survey finds. In an annual statewide broadband report published on Tuesday, researchers found that more than a quarter of the state’s low-income residents lack any access to the Internet or are only connected via a smartphone, while higher-income households enjoy “near universal adoption.” State Scoop.
Mills Backs Bill To Expand Broadband Access In Rural Maine. Maine Governor Janet Mills is backing a bipartisan bill that would expand broadband access in a state plagued by slow or nonexistent service. The proposal would overhaul an obscure state agency created nearly 15 years ago and create a new one with the power to own and invest in rural broadband infrastructure projects that private providers have sworn off as unprofitable. The new agency would also be charged with making sure that broadband access is affordable for residents. Maine Public.

Parks Associates: More Than 40% of US Broadband Households with Wi-Fi Home Networks Report Problems, Including Coverage Gaps, Slow Speeds, and Connectivity Issues. "Since the pandemic, the need for reliable standards in the home is greater than ever. Telco operators report an increase of 50% in landline calls; in many places, the broadband infrastructure is at its limits." El Paso Inc.

Land O’Lakes Broadens Its Rural Broadband Efforts. Beth Ford, president and CEO of the agricultural cooperative, has spearheaded the national coalition’s efforts to close the digital divide, which places many farm communities at a disadvantage to their urban counterparts for delivering education and health care services and growing their local economies. Later this year, 50 young adults will be selected as fellows for the American Connection Corps. The fellows will focus on improving broadband connectivity and work on community capacity-building projects. TCB Magazine.
THE INTERNET OF THINGS IS HELPING COMMUNITIES COMBAT CLIMATE CHANGE. SUCCESS DEPENDS ON UBQUITOUS BROADBAND CONNECTIVITY.

Broadband impacts every facet of our lives. We use it to telework, distance learn, stay connected to friends and family, and receive critical information from across the globe. It also plays an important role in how we combat climate change. Local officials are using high-speed connectivity to implement programs that help reduce waste and energy usage. Read more about how local officials are using broadband to promote conservation.

NCC SUBMITS COMMENTS EMPHASIZING THAT AS LONG AS MILLIONS OF AMERICANS DO NOT HAVE RELIABLE BROADBAND, LIFELINE VOICE SERVICES ARE INDISPENSABLE.

In 2016, the Federal Communications Commission (“FCC”) directed the Wireline Competition Bureau to submit a State of the Lifeline Marketplace Report by June 30, 2021. This report is intended to provide meaningful insight on how the FCC should continue to administer the Lifeline program. NCC filed comments reiterating that, for those who do not have reliable access to broadband, voice service may be the only means for some low-income households to stay connected.

NCC PARTNERS WITH LIBRARIES WITHOUT BORDERS TO DISCUSS CONNECTIVITY & RESILIENCE IN PUERTO RICO WITH ONE OF ITS MOST PROMINENT BROADBAND ADVOCATES.

Francella Ochillo, Executive Director of Next Century Cities, and Katherine Trujillo, Deputy Director of Libraries Without Borders Local leaders in Puerto Rico, discussed local efforts to address reliable service, affordability, digital literacy, and access to devices with Alexandra Fernandez Navarro, Associate Member of the Puerto Rico Public Service Regulatory Board. Commissioner Fernandez Navarro explained why broadband is not only recognized as a necessity, “for the first time, broadband is being treated as an economic motor.”
The White House Releases a Fact Sheet on the American Jobs Plan, Recognizing Broadband as Essential Infrastructure

On March 31, 2021, the White House released a fact sheet on the American Jobs Plan which introduces the goals President Biden seeks to achieve with a new infrastructure bill. The Plan prioritizes support for broadband networks owned, operated, or affiliated with municipalities and highlights the need for price transparency. Johnston argues that “prioritizing municipal and other nontraditional broadband models ensures that local governments working to address connectivity gaps are able to pursue community-based solutions whenever necessary.”

NCC Discusses Affordability, Broadband Data, Grant Funding, and Digital Equity with Local Officials to Working to Address Persistent Connectivity Gaps

The Council on Foreign Relations is a nonpartisan membership organization, think tank, and publisher that provides resources for government officials, executives, journalists, educators, and community leaders. On April 8, 2021, it hosted a webinar to address a pressing global policy issue – the digital divide. Francelia Ochillo, Next Century Cities Executive Director, and Kathryn de Wit, Pew Charitable Trusts’ Broadband Access Initiative Project Director, described the broadband policy landscape and how to elevate community-level perspectives at all three levels of government.

Next Century Cities Joins Public Interest Allies in Asking the FCC to Protect Lifeline for TracFone Subscribers

Next Century Cities joined with other public interest organizations in an April 6th letter that urged the FCC to impose conditions on the proposed Verizon-TracFone merger. Ensuring that current Lifeline subscribers maintain the quality or availability of the service currently received from TracFone is a central concern.
NEXT CENTURY CITIES JOINS THE CITY OF DETROIT & CONNECT 313 ADVOCATES FOR A COMMUNITY UPDATE ON THE EMERGENCY BROADBAND BENEFIT PROGRAM
In March, Next Century Cities’ Ryan Johnston joined the City of Detroit, National Digital Inclusion Alliance, and Connect 313 advocates for a community update on the EBB. The discussion focused on why the program is critically important to help close the digital divide among low-income populations, and how municipalities can help maximize the enrollment for providers and consumers.

NEXT CENTURY CITIES URGES THE FCC TO DEVELOP EMERGENCY CONNECTIVITY FUNDS RULES THAT ALLOW EACH COMMUNITY TO RESPOND TO UNIQUE CHALLENGES
In EARLY APRIL, NCC filed comments before the FCC on how the Emergency Connectivity Fund, created by the American Rescue Plan Act, should be used. In Ryan Johnston’s words, “Community leaders have done yeoman’s work in keeping students and patrons connected throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Rules on how they can use funding should be aimed at providing vulnerable populations with critical connectivity options through community anchors.”

NEXT CENTURY CITIES ENCOURAGES FCC TO DREAM BIG, USE AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN FUNDING TO ADDRESS THE DIGITAL DIVIDE
On April 5, 2021, NCC commented on the FCC’s proposal for the American Rescue Plan, encouraging the FCC to adopt rules that accommodate the innovative methods that schools and libraries developed when faced with COVID-19 closures. A broad definition of eligible devices, service areas, and functions will ensure that communities have the flexibility to connect all residents with the devices and services they need throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

NEXT CENTURY CITIES HOSTS MARCH MEMBER BRIEFING ON THE EMERGENCY BROADBAND BENEFIT AND UPCOMING NTIA GRANT PROGRAMS
NCC hosted a member briefing to discuss the Emergency Broadband Benefit and upcoming NTIA grant funding opportunities. Visit our website highlights and resources shared during the March 31st briefing.
Local and State Governments Are Promoting the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program

Next Century Cities has created a resource page for members to learn more about the Emergency Broadband Benefit, the FCC’s newest broadband assistance program aimed at connecting low-income households. It features resources created by the NCC team, our allies, and member municipalities. **If your community would like to submit information to be hosted on the site, please contact Lukas Pietrzak at Lukas@nextcenturycities.org**

We are working to ensure that everyone who qualifies for the program can access the information necessary to enroll. Local leaders should sign-up to become an outreach partner through the FCC’s website. The agency is planning to release an outreach toolkit that includes fliers in multiple languages, as well as social media posts, newsletter text, and slideshow presentations.

Visit this page to explore resources, Frequently Asked Questions, and receive the most up-to-date information on the program.

The following communities have already shared resources:
On April 16, 2021, Governor Andrew Cuomo signed legislation establishing a first-in-the-nation requirement for Internet Service Providers (“ISPs”) in New York to offer affordable Internet options for qualifying low-income families. While many ISPs have voluntarily developed their own discounted service programs, some created in direct response to the pandemic, this legislation makes it mandatory for ISPs that service more than 20,000 households in New York.

The Governor stated that new norms that have been shaped by the pandemic necessitate every household having access to affordable Internet. Approximately 2.7 million households statewide could qualify for a $15/month low-income broadband service option at 25/3 Mbps benchmark speeds, $20/month in areas where high-speed broadband over 200 Mbps is available. The State has also launched the Affordable Broadband Portal to help New York residents find the affordable broadband programs in their area.

Read more here.
Upcoming Events

Emergency Broadband Benefit Day of Action
MAY 14, 2021

The FCC announced that enrollment for the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program will begin on May 12th. At that time, participating providers can begin to enroll eligible households. Next Century Cities encourages local and state officials to join our Day of Action on May 14th. What can your community do to show support for the #EBBDayOfAction? Become a community partner, take advantage of promotional materials from the FCC and USAC, identify participating providers in your area, share the potential impact, etc.

Check NCC’s EBB website for ideas. We will also co-host a webinar on May 14th at 1:00 pm ET for community leaders to share successful outreach strategies.

Next Century Cities Virtual Conference
JULY 21-22, 2021

Conference topics will explore lessons learned from the pandemic, making universal broadband a reality, the importance of accurate broadband data, and developing broadband policy that supports local solutions.

Next Century Cities is committed to creating opportunities for local officials to share their community’s stories in their own words. To nominate local official speakers, email info@nextcenturycities.org.
REPORT | PLANNING FOR DIGITAL INCLUSION IN TEXAS
The Texas Black Caucus Foundation and University of Texas Law School Civil Rights Clinic released their joint report that provides recommendations for the Texas Legislature to remove barriers to broadband access. It also emphasizes the need for the state broadband office, currently in development, to prioritize digital equity. The report reiterates why “State support and local innovations based on local needs and resources are both necessary to close the [digital] divide.”

REPORT | THE STATE OF BROADBAND IN AMERICA
Access to low-priced broadband internet has increased significantly over the last year. For the first time, more than 3 of 4 Americans (77%) have access to low-priced wired broadband plans compared to 50% in our 2020 Q1 report. A low-priced broadband plan costs $60 per month or less (excluding promotional pricing) and has minimum speeds of 25 Mbps download / 3 Mbps upload.

CASE STUDY | CONNECTING TO SOVEREIGNTY WITH THE WAIMANALO COMMUNITY NETWORK
"It’s rare a story about the Internet that goes all the way back to the 1800s. But in the case of The Independent & Sovereign Nation State of Hawai‘i, it does."

CONGRESSIONAL HEARING | E&C ANNOUNCES HEARING ON DISPARITIES IN BROADBAND ACCESS AND AFFORDABILITY
Subcommittee on Communications and Technology has announced a hearing on May 6th, at 11:30 a.m. ET called “Broadband Equity: Addressing Disparities in Access and Affordability.” Chairman Pallone highlighted that the hearing will explore the ways that a lack of affordable, high-speed Internet service marginalizes racial and ethnic minorities and undermines access to economic, educational, and social opportunities. The hearing will also cover ways to make broadband more accessible and affordable for all Americans.
Job Announcement | Washington State
Washington State is currently seeking applications for a **State Broadband Office of Equity Manager**.

Job Announcement | human-I-T
human-I-T is currently seeking applications for a Government Affairs Manager. The position is based in Bell Gardens, CA and more information can be found [here](#).

Award Opportunity | Public Knowledge’s 20/20 Visionaries
The Public Knowledge 20/20 Visionaries Awards recognizes 20 future leaders in technology policy advocacy. In 2021, PK celebrates its 20th anniversary and its accomplishments over the past 20 years. The 20/20 Visionaries Awards acknowledge the importance of the future leaders who will drive tech policy in the public interest for the next 20 years. Nominate a leader [here](#).

Design Challenge | Design Core Detroit
In partnership with Connect313 and College for Creative Studies, Design Core’s City of Design Challenge invites participants to develop community tech hubs to improve access and opportunity in Detroit neighborhoods. Submissions will be accepted through May 16, 2021. Learn more about the program and [how to get involved](#).
Grant Opportunity | USDA Distance Learning & Telemedicine Program
The Distance Learning and Telemedicine program helps rural communities use the unique capabilities of telecommunications to connect to each other and to the world, overcoming the effects of remoteness and low population density. For example, this program can link teachers and medical service providers in one area to students and patients in another. Applications are due on June 4, 2021. For more information about past projects, upcoming events, and application processes, visit the USDA website.

Grant Opportunity | The Office of Academic Integration at Cornell University
Applications for 2021 Multi-Investigator Seed Grants are being accepted through July 14, 2021. For 2021 deadlines and application links, view the Multi-Investigator Seed Grant RFA. Get the details here.

Grant Opportunity | Moonshot Community Grant Fund
The Michigan Moonshot Announced the launch of a program that will make grants available to municipalities for data collection, feasibility studies, and grant consultations. Successful applicants must have “a Michigan-based project scope, formally prioritized broadband development efforts, and possess a full Merit Membership.” Full details are available here. For more information contact moonshot@merit.edu.