



2005 Market Street, Suite 2800 P 215.575.9050
Philadelphia, PA 19103-7077 F 215.575.4939

901 E Street NW, 10th Floor P 202.552.2000
Washington, DC 20004 F 202.552.2299
pewtrusts.org

**Testimony of Kathryn de Wit
Manager, broadband research initiative
The Pew Charitable Trusts**

Good morning and thank you very much to Chair Phillips-Hill, Minority Chair Steven Santarsiero and members of the committee for this invitation. My name is Kathryn de Wit and I'm the manager of the broadband research initiative at The Pew Charitable Trusts.

As many of you undoubtedly know, The Pew Charitable Trusts is a nonprofit, nonpartisan public charity that works to bring research and data to complex policy issues. One of those policy issues is broadband.

While much of the national conversation about broadband access has focused on federal and local governments, states have also stepped in to solve the broadband gap. Pew's broadband research initiative is examining the role that states play in deploying high-speed, reliable internet. Specifically, our project aims to **identify promising practices** states have taken to expand expanding broadband, **research related issues** such as challenges to broadband mapping, and **convene partners and stakeholders** - including government, research, and industry leaders - for data-driven discussion about improving connectivity.

The need for this research has never been greater. We live in an increasingly digital world. The internet has transformed industries, changed the way we access goods and services, and become an indispensable part of modern American life. And yet, according to the FCC, at least 21 million Americans still lack a reliable, high-speed, internet connection; other estimates suggest that number could be as high as 162 million Americans ([Microsoft](#), 2019). This is mirrored in Pennsylvania, where, as you may know, a recent study for the Center for Rural Pennsylvania concluded that the FCC's maps may vastly overstate coverage. Although there is no one-size-fits-all solution to improving coverage to ensure that all Americans have access to broadband, all efforts can benefit from more research and data-driven policy discussions – and that's what Pew aims to bring to this conversation.

Taking stock of state broadband policies

One of the first major efforts our initiative undertook was reviewing policies, including statutes and executive orders, pertaining to broadband deployment across all 50 states. We knew that



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broadband deployment was an important state issue and had heard that states were trying to find ways to improve connectivity – and we wanted to uncover what states are doing about it.

So we examined state policies pertaining to broadband deployment. We looked at state statutes and executive orders and other governing directives about broadband, combed through state websites, and then submitted information we had collected to state leaders for review and verification.

And what we found is that states are doing a lot to expand connectivity – and those efforts are generally focused in five key areas:

- Establishing broadband programs and task forces
- Defining key terms (like broadband, unserved, and underserved)
- Implementing funding and financing efforts (like special funds or tax incentives)
- Governing infrastructure access, such as dig once and right-of-way policy
- Clarifying who can and cannot provide broadband

There were some surprises in our research: for example, even though there is a lot of discussion about “state broadband offices”, just six states have actually established a state broadband office: Connecticut, Indiana, Minnesota, Maryland, Oregon, and Virginia. Instead, we see more states tasking specific agencies with responsibility over broadband issues. We found that states have a wide range of broadband goals: whether it’s providing universal service, specifically making progress in bringing broadband to rural areas, or addressing underserved communities, states are trying to achieve a wide range of different objectives. And we found that while states have been examining this issue since the mid-1990s, there’s been significant uptick in state legislation about broadband connectivity in the last five years.

But of the things we’ve found, the most interesting discovery was about the role of state policies themselves. State’s aren’t just creating ad hoc programs or setting up funds or passing infrastructure legislation. What states are doing is creating a framework – a structure or an agenda – that other broadband stakeholders, including service providers and community leaders and local governments, can follow. State policies define what broadband is, determine who can and cannot provide broadband, set broadband goals, and create resources to fund broadband projects. State policies set the parameters for broadband deployment. What we learned from our research is that state policy really matters when it comes to expanding access.

We’ve posted all our research into state broadband laws in an online tool. The state broadband policy explorer is an interactive tool on the Pew website that allows users to see and filter all the broadband policies we studied. The tool, which can be found at



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pewtrusts.org/broadbandexplorer allows users to sort broadband policies across all 50-states by the five categories and by state. For example, we found 11 policies related to broadband deployment in Pennsylvania. As a note, the policies in this tool were active as of January 1, 2019. There has been quite a bit of legislative activity this year and we hope to update the tool later this fall.

Promising Practices

The next stage of our research will be to discern which state programs and policies are the most promising in terms of expanding access.

Pew's research team went on site visits to 10 states across the country, held informal conversations, and conducted interviews with state leaders and staff; we also met with other stakeholders, including internet service providers, farm bureaus, chambers of commerce, municipal leagues, among others.

In analyzing the information from these sources, Pew research staff looked for effective practices that a) represented a range of activity from new to well-established programs b) were components of broadband policy or programmatic activity in *multiple* states and c) were active for at least two years.

We have identified five practices that:

- Address stakeholder coordination and engagement
- Set policy
- Guide planning and capacity-building
- Direct funding and operations
- Steer program evaluation and evolution

We aim to write a report of our analysis in the future, but there are some preliminary findings that I'm happy to share with you now.

Stakeholder coordination and engagement: As policymakers, you understand the critical nature of engaging stakeholders when crafting and implementing solutions for their communities. Given the many stakeholders that touch and are affected by broadband—internet service providers, communities, community institutions, regulatory bodies—engagement is crucial for efforts to be successful. A number of states do this to great effect, including Minnesota, which has two groups inside and outside of the government that work with stakeholders: the



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Governor's broadband task force and the Rural Broadband Coalition. The Governor's task force was created by executive order and its 15 members are composed of leaders from local government, businesses, tribes, and more. The Rural Broadband Task Force is an independent group comprised of community, private sector, and nonprofit leaders that plays an important role in elevating rural broadband issues. Both require participation from a broad range of broadband stakeholders, including leaders at both the state and local levels. With a robust network of stakeholders and buy-in from all levels of government, a state broadband deployment plan will likely be more successful.

Set policy: What we found by looking at state laws and promising practices is that state policy matters. Time and time again, interview subjects pointed to specific pieces of legislation that created the framework for them to act within, such as assigning responsibility for broadband to specific agencies, or addressed ambiguities or policy barriers, such as clarifying who can and cannot provide broadband. We also found that broadband is increasingly tied to other state priorities, including smart transportation, distance learning, and telehealth.

Planning and capacity-building: Planning and capacity-building help achieve two goals: identifying the challenge the state is addressing and supporting efforts to try and solve it. North Carolina developed a comprehensive broadband plan that specifically lays out its goal that every North Carolinian will have access to affordable broadband service by June 2021 and an action plan to get there that includes recommendations related to broadband availability, broadband adoption, economic development, telehealth, and the homework gap. The state broadband office also works to build expertise at the local level. The state's local planning teams work with broadband planning committees to understand the local challenges, build relationships with providers, and identify feasible solutions to their connectivity challenges. Our research indicates that state practices that enable proactive planning and capacity-building will help states' make progress toward their broadband goals.

Funding and operations: States fund and operate their programs differently, but the team's research uncovered a few promising approaches. First, sustained funding over time—even small amounts—helps close gaps in access and impact communities. Why? Because it can help providers phase projects over time and come back for additional funding after successfully completing one stage of the work. How activities are funded vary by state: two states are allocating Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds for planning efforts, while others are repurposing high-cost support mechanisms—funds used to support telephone deployment to rural or expensive areas—or establishing standalone state-funded grant programs. When discussing how these funding efforts are managed, research also pointed to the importance of state broadband coordinators. These individuals and their team are often viewed as the



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linchpin to success, specifically because they are viewed as resources for everyone (communities, providers, nonprofits) and not just advocates for specific groups.

Program evaluation and evolution: State broadband offices use goals and metrics to evaluate their success and adjust their efforts to meet emerging needs. For example, in Tennessee, state leaders evaluate their broadband programs to assess their efficacy. The results of this evaluation directly inform their broadband grants and their partnerships with state libraries to deploy broadband. California has expanded its efforts to digital literacy and affordability after deciding that just the presence of a connection was not enough to meet its long-term connectivity-related objectives (e.g., economic development, telehealth, tech-enabled cities) as the presence of a connection and have adjusted how it invests accordingly. According to Pew research, this kind of program evaluation and evolution is can help ensure that the state's broadband efforts yield results.

Conclusion

Here in Pennsylvania, policies address regulatory authority, funding mechanisms, service provision requirements, mapping, and municipal broadband.

Now more than ever, broadband is foundational technology. Broadband underlies some of the major policy efforts that are discussed annually: improving education, enhancing healthcare, bolstering economic development. All these efforts rely on the availability of high-speed reliable internet.

Pew aims to provide policymakers with clear, comprehensive research they need to expand broadband to the millions of Americans still without high-speed, reliable internet.

Thanks so much for your time and I'm happy to answer any questions.