

Building digital inclusion with strategic partners

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High speed internet can help constituents find work, receive government services, bridge the homework gap and even be healthy. A Tufts University study found that increased digital access reduced coronavirus mortality, which is backed by previous findings of correlated health benefits.

Access, though, is uneven, causing a disturbing digital divide in America.

Core challenges

The challenges to bridging this divide are many, starting with identifying those in need.

The Federal Communications Commission, which defines high speed as at least 25 megabits per second down (Mbps)/3Mbps up, says 14.5 million Americans lack a quality high speed connection. This assumes that if one household in a census block has access, everyone in the block does. Communications service providers volunteer these numbers to the FCC semi-annually.

Constituents without broadband at home often are found in rural locations, have lower incomes or are unfamiliar with digital capabilities. Digital illiteracy can quickly compound if there's no device on which to learn. According to a Pew survey, 24% of low income households don't own a smartphone, 41% don't own a laptop or desktop computer, and most don't have a tablet.

“Digital inclusion has parallels to first generation college student programs in leveling the playing field,” said Tony A Dolezal, Public Sector 5G and MEC Specialist at Verizon. “If one’s parents did not go to college, it is much less likely the individual will, and if your family is digitally inexperienced, chances are you will be, as well.”

Often, there is a correlation with service affordability. In poorly served areas – and even well served ones, an internet connection may be prohibitively expensive. If it's a choice between having a connection or paying for food and shelter, the latter two will trump the first.

Other factors creating the divide include a lack of broadband-supporting infrastructure and a weak business case. Deploying internet infrastructure in a sparsely populated area is expensive on a per customer basis, which means that providers must charge more to recover costs. That can lead to smaller uptake, compounding the problem. The same is true for densely populated urban areas in which there aren't enough customers who will buy the service.

Sourcing strategic partners

Because the problem is complex, so is the solution. The efforts of many stakeholders are needed, from both private and public sectors.

Beginning with the technology, service providers can supply the required infrastructure. Deployment outlay can be minimized by using fixed wireless access, which enables fixed



Technology in low income households

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broadband access using radio frequencies instead of cables or wiring.

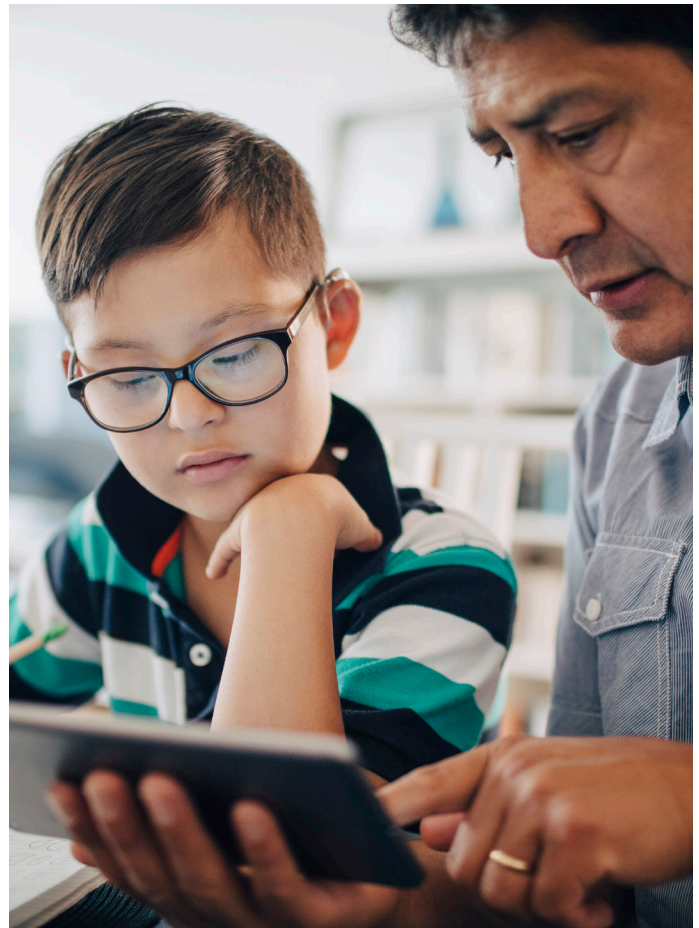
Realizing, however, that funding is often a rudimentary problem, the government has a role to play. Short-term federal funding is available through programs such as the Affordable Connectivity Program and the \$65 billion investment into broadband found in the 2021 Investment and Infrastructure Jobs Act.

Many proposed ways to close the digital divide benefit from partnerships. Government agencies and nonprofits are learning how to increase inclusion among at-risk audiences by partnering with technology and communications service providers such as Verizon.

Inclusion in action

Verizon has launched digital equity programs customized for K-12 schools, state and local government agencies, higher education students and select nonprofits in need. Its turnkey connectivity solution for at-risk constituents includes mobile device management, mobile hotspots, smart phones, laptops and other selected equipment. Consider that:

- By 2030, a corporate-led initiative with Verizon aims to provide 10 million youths with digital skills training.
- About 1.5 million students across the country have received technology, connectivity and new ways of learning through the Verizon Innovative Learning program.
- Since 2012, the Verizon Innovative Learning (VIL) program has provided more than \$1 billion in contributions to support digital equity and inclusion. That includes offering its VIL HQ, a free online portal where teachers can access lessons, training tools and innovative apps to help bring next-gen tech into the classroom.



Because identifying and reaching constituents at risk of falling into the digital divide can be challenging, Verizon often turns to organizations with strong community knowledge and access.

To better reach rural audiences, Verizon partnered with the National 4-H Council and nine historically Black colleges and universities, who offer credentials to community teens. The students then teach basic digital skills to local adults – an estimated 15,000 of them in 2021. Among nationwide service providers, Verizon has the largest rural network.

Digital literacy is often key to combating poverty. An estimated 82% of at-risk constituents require digital literacy to win middle income jobs. To help prepare Texans, Verizon partnered with the non-profit BakerRipley. Verizon provided the technology, while BakerRipley taught new skills in afterschool programs and summer camps.

For those seeking better employment via a higher education, broadband connectivity is vital. Verizon helps less affluent students overcome this hurdle with discounted subscriptions. The technology and communications service provider identifies this market with the help of strategic partners such as higher education organizations and the federal program providing Pell Grants.

Community pillars such as shelters, public libraries and unemployment offices also can be excellent partners for reaching at-risk constituents, including those who may be homeless. According to a survey by University of Southern





California Annenberg in Los Angeles County, 84% of respondents experiencing homelessness used internet skills to find work.

Maintaining momentum

Verizon's digital inclusion strategy is multi-prong and continually evolving.

"Our mission is to help narrow the connectivity gap by providing the easiest way for students, states and non-profits to get families online. We realize that a significant digital divide exists for students and for lower-income families," said Susan Kelemen, State, Local Communities and Education Segment Marketing Manager at Verizon.

What won't change is that connectivity has become a societal necessity, similar to access to electricity. Broadband connectivity makes remote work and education possible, as well as enabling access to public and private sector services on which constituents increasingly must rely.

The definition of access, however, is fluid. Driven by evolving economics and technologies, the line dividing digital haves from have-nots will fluctuate. Consider that the percentage of lower income Americans who rely on smartphones to go online doubled from 2013 to 2021. The highest income population group, in contrast, saw little change over that same span. Even the definition of broadband has evolved,

with the Investment and Infrastructure Jobs Act putting it at 100 Mbps down/20 Mbps up, which is much faster than the FCC's 25/3 standard.

Consequently, what defines digital inclusion will continue to advance, with new means of access and standards likely to be joined by new applications. Eventually, immersion technology could become a hallmark of digital inclusion, for example. Regardless of how digital access and requirements change, providing inclusion may be easier and more successful when efforts are coordinated with an internet service provider with nationwide reach and digital inclusion experience.

Meanwhile, Verizon's digital inclusion programs will continue to build adoption and listen to the marketplace to help constituents achieve their best digital lives.

"There isn't a one-size-fits-all solution," Kelemen said. "Closing the digital divide is a team effort and we have to reach out and partner widely. Verizon believes in broadening our partnerships to focus on digital equity, student innovation and bringing diverse voices into the next generation of innovators."

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