

Over the last several years, access to reliable internet has become not only a desire for many households, but a need in today's society. The U.S. Census Bureau predicted more than 735,000 Washingtonians do not have internet connection in their homes. Commonly referred to as the digital divide, this lack of broadband access results in stifling communities' economic and educational opportunities and the ability to interact with the rest of the world. The most affected by this tend to be more rural communities, which have historically been underserved due to the low return on investment for private companies. In 2021, Washington State passed the Washington Statewide Broadband Act that aims to close the digital divide by providing synchronous 150 Megabits per second to all residents and businesses by 2028. This substantial goal seems economically implausible unless achieved through public and private sector collaboration that will both drive the public's costs down and reduce the time it takes to deploy.

Small telecommunications companies have historically been the last mile provider for many communities with a strong focus on rural residents. Through public-private partnerships, existing infrastructure can be leveraged to reduce the overall cost and time to deploy broadband access to more rural and remote communities. It is ineffectual to award funding to public companies that will require extensive overbuilding of existing telecommunications networks i.e., building broadband infrastructure where it already exists.

It is essential that the State seek more opportunities for public-private partnerships in its goal to close the digital divide. While private companies do have a bottom-line, proper oversight and appropriate use of funds through public-private partnerships can be a great way of reaching Washington's goal. The goal is the same: broadband for all, but the cost to the public and its effectiveness has the potential to be significantly different.