

Community Broadband



High speed, reliable internet is essential to staying connected while staying safe. The COVID-19 pandemic and the related stay-at-home orders have forced millions of people to work and learn from home. The disparities in access to service demonstrate the real-world implications of the digital divide, a dynamic which serves to exacerbate race and class inequality. Central to this divide is the dearth of competition in the broadband arena, an issue that has left almost 50 million Americans subject to an [absolute monopoly](#), at the hands of either Comcast or Charter.

Across the nation, local governments are intervening to provide access to their residents. For example, Chattanooga, TN, which has been operating a municipal broadband network for 10 years, has been able to [provide 18,000 school children](#) with free Internet so that they can continue to pursue their education during the pandemic.

Community-controlled infrastructure allows local governments to create and implement broadband policy based on the specific needs of their residents, and to provide a service without being constrained by, or beholden to, the big ISPs. The most promising of these models include municipal development of infrastructure and allow for [open access](#), promoting competition and higher quality service.

Promoting Competition

The lack of competition in the ISP market harms consumers in two ways: First, ISPs are not encouraged to lower prices as there are not viable alternatives available to consumers. Second,

there is a lack of infrastructure in rural areas which ISPs have no incentive to improve as there tends to be a smaller profit margin from rural communities. By investing in infrastructure that is open access, local governments can attract other ISPs, thus creating a competitive environment.

Barriers

Despite the benefits of community controlled broadband, residents in 19 states face barriers when it comes to creating their own infrastructure and running their own network. This is largely due to the vast lobbying capabilities of the incumbent ISP's who have pushed through laws and regulations ranging from outright bans to multi-faceted regulatory frameworks that effectively stymie progress.

What you can do

The following resources can help you on the way to establishing a network in your community

1. Find out if there are [legislative barriers](#) in your state.¹
2. Explore different [finance models](#)²
3. Find a [network near you](#)³
4. Connect with groups that can you organize and [advocate](#)⁴

The Electronic Frontier Foundation is the leading nonprofit defending digital privacy, free speech, and innovation. <https://eff.org>

¹<https://www.supportdemocracy.org/broadband-map>

²<https://nextcenturycities.org/becoming-broadband-ready/#financing>

³<https://muninetworks.org/communitymap>

⁴ <https://muninetworks.org/content/about-us>