

Supporting Digital Literacy, Broadband Affordability, and Digital Adoption to Advance Workforce Readiness, Educational Attainment, Telehealth Access, and Technological Confidence

Issue: The increasing reliance on digital tools for employment, education, healthcare, government services, and economic participation has amplified the urgency of ensuring all residents have access to affordable broadband service and digital literacy programming.

Proposed Policy: The National Association of Counties (NACo) urges Congress and relevant federal agencies to expand funding and support for county-led and community-based digital literacy and broadband adoption initiatives. These efforts should include digital skills training for workforce development, education, telehealth access, and technology confidence-building, as well as policies that encourage affordable broadband service offerings for low-income households and residents experiencing financial barriers to internet access.

NACo further supports federal policy and funding efforts that strengthen digital inclusion ecosystems, improve equitable access to devices and connectivity, and encourage Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to offer transparent, reliable, and affordable broadband plans that reduce barriers to broadband adoption and support long-term digital connectivity for underserved communities.

Background: Digital skills and affordable internet access are foundational requirements for participation in modern society. Whether applying for jobs, accessing virtual learning, participating in telehealth appointments, or engaging with government services, residents must have both reliable internet access and the skills to use technology effectively.

Counties nationwide are investing in digital literacy programming, broadband adoption initiatives, and community partnerships that help residents overcome barriers to digital access. However, broadband availability alone does not ensure meaningful connectivity. Affordability, digital literacy, trusted technical support, and access to appropriate devices remain essential components of long-term digital inclusion.

Despite substantial growth in internet adoption, disparities remain significant. According to the Pew Research Center, approximately 96% of U.S. adults use the internet, yet only 80% subscribe to high-speed broadband service at home. Pew also reports that approximately 25% of adults age 65 and older have never used the internet. Additionally, the National Digital Inclusion Alliance reports that 43% of low-income households struggle with internet affordability.

Programs that provide digital navigator services, skills training, affordable connectivity outreach, and targeted support for older adults, low-income households, veterans, rural residents, individuals with disabilities, and other underserved populations have demonstrated measurable success in bridging the digital divide.

Sustained investment in digital literacy and broadband affordability initiatives is essential to ensuring all residents can participate fully in the digital economy, access healthcare and education, and remain informed and engaged in their communities.

Fiscal/Urban/Rural Impact: Expanded federal and state support for digital literacy and broadband affordability initiatives would enable counties to strengthen partnerships, expand digital navigator services, support broadband adoption efforts, and implement inclusive strategies tailored to rural, suburban, urban, and underserved communities alike.

Sponsor: Jennifer Clark, Board Member, Lake County Board, Lake County, IL