

How to Connect Rural America: Bringing High-Speed Internet Access Across America

Many rural Americans still do not have broadband access, but we can connect everyone with high-quality access without breaking the bank. Learn how we can do it together.

Federal Subsidies

According to the [Federal Communications Commission \(FCC\)](#), 30% of rural people do not have access to broadband at home. Urban areas, however, have near universal coverage - only 2% lack access. Broadband is necessary to participate in modern life in the U.S.

The FCC defines broadband as
25 Mbps (download) / 3 Mbps (upload)

Population without broadband access

Rural: 30.7%
Urban: 2.1%

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The FCC distributes \$1.5 billion a year through the [Connect America Fund](#) to subsidize large private providers, such as CenturyLink and AT&T, to connect rural areas. But the program does not even require them to offer broadband, only connections that were obsolete years ago.

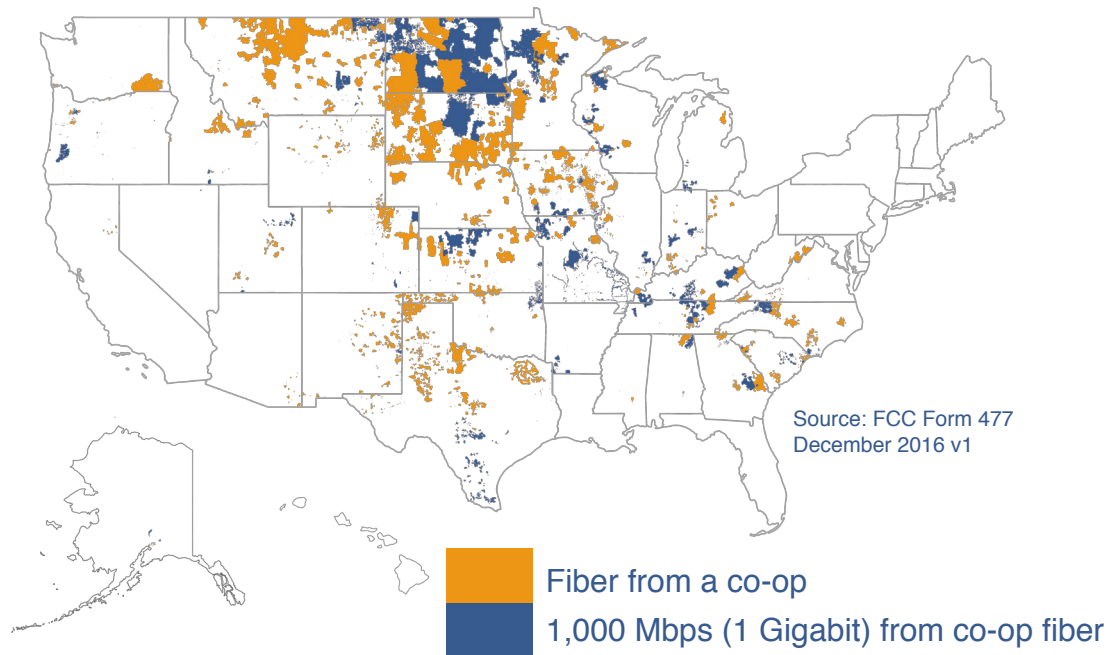
The Department of Agriculture also subsidizes broadband investment and has a much better track record, [having spent \\$7 billion since 2009](#). It has helped local providers build very high-quality networks.

Utility Cooperatives

Farmers formed utility cooperatives to bring electricity and telephone to their communities because the private sector would not invest in rural areas. People who receive services from the co-op are member-owners and can vote in the elections for co-op board members. These are community-run, locally-rooted, democratic institutions with a tradition of providing high-quality services.

Across the U.S., cooperatives have taken the lead in providing high-speed Internet access through Fiber-to-the-Home networks. [More than 60 electric and 200 telephone cooperatives](#) have stepped up to provide needed Fiber-to-the-Home Internet service. Rural fiber networks can be affordable and financially sustainable.

Fiber-to-the-Home: A high capacity fiber-optic line is connected directly to the home. It can support speeds of more than 1,000 Mbps.



Municipal Networks

Municipal networks aren't just for large cities like Chattanooga, Tenn. Small towns and rural counties have also built their own networks.

Sallisaw, Okla. (8,000 people) - The city has a Fiber-to-the-Home network and provides fixed wireless Internet service to the surrounding rural communities.

Windom, Minn. (4,500 people) - In 2004, the community started on a Fiber-to-the-Home project. By 2011, Windom had joined with eight nearby rural towns, and they used federal funding to create Southwest Minnesota Broadband Systems.

Grant County, Wash. (89,000 people) - This rural county has an open access networks on which more than 20 private providers offer Internet service. Residents enjoy better prices and better services than in many rural areas where only one or two ISPs operate.

Look to State Funding Programs

Several states have grant programs for local projects. Minnesota and Colorado have good, replicable programs that distribute funds for next-generation infrastructure. You can reach out to your local legislators to implement an equitable broadband funding program. Other states are adding programs each year, so talk to your elected officials.

Minnesota - [Minnesota's Broadband Grant Program: Getting the Rules Right](#)

Colorado - [Colorado's Broadband Fund](#)

Action Steps

What can you do in your community to make a difference? First find out what your local institutions have already tried. Ask questions such as:

How is access at the library?

Schools and libraries have access to federal E-Rate funds to connect these key institutions.

Is the county government or the city government interested in improving connectivity?

The county government or multiple city governments could fund a project for the entire region.

Is there a utility cooperative or a small, independent telephone company nearby?

They may have access to USDA funds for fiber networks.

Build support in your community for a broadband project. Take actions including:

Have regular meetings to talk about what solutions work best for the people that live and work in your town. Educate yourself at [MuniNetworks.org](#) with solutions from other communities.

Host a screening of the “Do Not Pass Go” video about rural communities, municipal networks, and the lobbying power of large Internet service providers.

Do a feasibility study to look at all the options from municipal networks, to partnerships with local cooperatives.

Resources

As you move forward with your project, look to others around the nation. Learn more at some of the following websites.

Community Networks Initiative; Institute for Local Self-Reliance - [MuniNetworks.org](#)

Next Century Cities - [NextCenturyCities.org](#)

Rural Broadband Policy Group - [RuralAssembly.org/broadband](#)

