

Electric Co-op COVID-19 Broadband Challenges

Key Facts:

- Congress should provide dedicated funding to help ensure small broadband providers can keep families and small businesses connected during the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - Include bipartisan legislation (S. 3569/ H.R. 6394) in a COVID-19 relief package to provide needed revenue to broadband providers, avoiding the need for broadband disconnects and enabling more homes to be connected.
- Congress should provide additional funding for the USDA RUS ReConnect Broadband Loan and Grant Program with slight programmatic adjustments around eligibility of applicants and available areas.

COVID-19 Pandemic Highlights Our Nation's Digital Divide

The pandemic has brought America's digital divide into heightened focus, particularly as schools close, people work remotely and the need for telehealth grows. More than 100 electric cooperatives are involved in diverse solutions to help connect rural communities with broadband access, but they face challenges as they work to meet the growing demand for robust connectivity.

Electric Cooperatives Have Taken Steps to Maintain Connectivity During COVID-19

Many electric cooperatives have taken steps to maintain and increase access to broadband connectivity for their consumer-members during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of these actions include:

- Signing the FCC's "Keep America Connected" pledge and agreeing:
 - Not to terminate service to residential or small business customers who can't pay their bills due to coronavirus disruptions.
 - To waive late fees that residential or small business customers incur.
 - To open their Wi-Fi hotspots to anyone who needs them.
- Increasing bandwidth for free to meet increased need due to homeschooling and teleworking.
- Constructing new broadband connectivity to healthcare facilities to strengthen the community's ability to provide care during the pandemic.
- Installing free, public wi-fi hotspots in school parking lots or other areas that are accessible from the safety of a vehicle.

Electric Cooperatives Face Challenges in Maintaining Connectivity During COVID-19

Not-for-profit electric co-ops have no corporate shareholders and routinely return excess revenues to their members. Because of this structure and the desire to keep energy costs as low as possible, some co-ops have

limited reserve margins to sustain high rates of nonpayment. As such, cooperatives may be unable to sustain electric and broadband services if customers are unable to pay for a prolonged period of time - potentially jeopardizing their ability to ensure their communities can work from home or access distance learning and telehealth services. Additionally, many electric cooperative service areas lack access to existing robust broadband service which makes sustained investment in broadband deployment programs critically important.

NRECA's broadband recommendations put consumer and community needs first to ensure cooperatives can weather this pandemic. We support efforts to:

- Include bipartisan legislation (S. 3569/ H.R. 6394) in a future relief package would provide needed revenue to broadband providers, avoid the need for broadband service nonpayment disconnects and enable more homes to be connected. Relief is needed for consumers and small businesses unable to pay their internet service provider. Congress should provide dedicated funding to help ensure small broadband providers can keep families and small businesses connected during the pandemic.
- Sustain federal broadband investment in areas lacking access to 25/3 Mbps fixed terrestrial service. Accelerated broadband deployment has both short-and long-term benefits, but it requires sustained federal investment. Congress should provide additional funding for the ReConnect Broadband Loan and Grant Program with programmatic adjustments for eligibility of applicants and available areas.

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