SPECIAL FEATURE
RURAL CALIFORNIA COUNTIES HAVE A DIGITAL EQUITY PROBLEM

Due to diverse topology, large lots, low density neighborhoods, and tall trees, our rural California counties struggle with getting the physical broadband connections into our homes. Additionally, as with our unserved urban counterparts, rural areas also struggle with digital equity and the legacy of digital redlining. The current federal minimum standard for broadband service at 25 Mbps download and 3 Mbps upload has been in place since 2015, with the state finally aligning with that standard in 2021 (for the purposes of state broadband infrastructure grant funding). Yet, there are indications of a long-awaited speed threshold change at the federal level, with the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) defining a location with less than 100Mbps/20Mbps as broadband underserved. Accurate internet service provider (ISP) information on broadband access continues to make it difficult to estimate an exact figure for how many rural Californians households lack highspeed broadband, but it could be ballparked in the 40% - 50% + range, especially when using a more realistic definition of 100Mbps symmetrical.

The Rural Digital Equality Problem

Digital Equity comprises the three main elements of availability, affordability, and adoption. Rural counties struggle with all three of these aspects when we think about our resident's ability to obtain highspeed broadband services. First is availability which is the actual physical broadband connection and speed level to the home and business. Second is affordability with our local families' and residents' capacity to pay for the broadband service. Adoption focuses on our individual resident's desire and ability to have an adequate device and the technical skills to use that device.

Our rural challenge can be summed up by a 2021 USA TODAY article that stated: "In about half of California's counties — 30 of 58 — measured by a Federal Communications Commission study, broadband access is available to at least 94% of residents. Yet in about half of the state measured by Microsoft — 30 of 58 counties — no more than 46% of households actually have high-speed access." Further analysis shows. In Monterey County, 99% of households could get broadband but 42% actually had it." In Shasta County, 75% of households could get broadband but 48% actually had it. In Tehama County, 49% of households could get broadband but 17% actually had it." Disclaimer: We all know the

struggle with State and Federal broadband maps and data accuracy, but the general point here is made clear.

AARP's *Aging Connected Initiative* states that nearly 42% of American seniors lack wireline broadband access at home. Seniors in rural areas are 1.6 times more likely than others their age to lack such access. Medicaid enrollees are 2.7 times more likely to be offline. Older adults with less than a high school degree or an annual income below $25,000 are ten times more likely than the general population to be offline. Black and Latino seniors are more than 2.5 and 3.3 times more likely, respectively, to be offline.

A statewide survey conducted by the University of Southern California, in partnership with the California Emerging Technology Fund, shows that 29% of households earning less than $40,000 a year have no internet connection or only have access through a smartphone. This is a damning statistic for rural residents as data from the University of California shows that the median annual income in rural California counties is $36,582.

This clearly illustrates that a purely "build it and they will come" focus and strategy for our rural county broadband initiatives is not a winning strategy to fully meet our communities' needs. We must include the other two elements of affordability and adoption into our broadband strategies, plans, and county initiatives.

Federal Programs to Address Digital Equity

The Digital Equity Act of 2021 (Act) was established by the IIJA (23 USC Sections 60301 et. seq.) with the goal of promoting meaningful adoption and use of broadband services across the "covered populations" in the Act, including low-income households, aging populations, incarcerated individuals, veterans, individuals with disabilities, individuals with a language barrier, racial and ethnic minorities and rural inhabitants.

The Act creates an annual $125 million competitive grant program to support digital inclusion projects undertaken by individual groups, coalitions, and/or communities of interest.

California Digital Equity Programs

California has developed a Broadband for All action plan that stresses broadband access, affordability, adoption, and digital literacy as essential components of digital equity and inclusion. This Plan focuses on achieving three long-term goals:

- All Californians have high-performance broadband available at home, schools, libraries, and businesses.
- All Californians have access to affordable broadband and necessary devices.
- All Californians can access training and support to enable digital inclusion.

The California Public Utility Commission (CPUC) and California Department of Technology (CDT) have numerous funding programs to assist local governments and nonprofits in addressing the components of digital equity. Find more information at https://broadbandforall.cdt.ca.gov/

Internet for All - Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP)

The Federal government in partnership with states have launched the Affordable Connectivity Program to "…ensure all eligible households have access to high-quality Home Internet at a low monthly cost."

- Federal Program - https://www.internet4all.gov
- California's Program https://www.internetforallnow.org/

This program will provide qualifying families and residents with a $30 per month discount on home Internet services, $75 for homes on tribal lands, and a $100 one-time discount for a computer or tablet. Eligible households are those with an annual income of $55,500 or less for a family of four (each additional member add $9,000), or, a household member is enrolled in at least ONE (1) of the following Federal Assistance Programs:

- Lifeline
- Free or Reduced School Lunch Program, CEP Schools
- CalFresh or SNAP
- Medi-Cal or Supplemental Security Income (SSI)
- Pell Grant
- WIC (Women, Infants & Children)
- Federal Public Housing Assistance (FPHA)
- Veterans Pension and Survivors Benefit

Our rural counites are struggling with ACP signups. Current data from CSU, Chico on the ACP participation shows that RCRC member counties represent 903,520 eligible households, 47% of total rural households, yet only **184,522 of the eligible households are enrolled**. Look at your specific county's enrollment data at CSU, Chico's site here:

https://nspdc.maps.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/8c0249a9de8d404a9b49966fb824b728

Your county could struggle with signups from several factors. First, you don't have the broadband connections to homes. Second, your local ISPs are not signed up to offer the ACP program. Third, you need to do more collaboration, marketing and outreach in the community to drive signups.

Strategies to Improve Your County's ACP Enrolment Numbers

- Make Digital Equity part of your county's larger broadband strategy, plan, and initiatives.
- Bring together key local Digital Equity stakeholders to help promote ACP.
  - Social Services, Public Library, County Superintendent of Schools, School District Superintendents, 211, County Public Information Officer/team, etc.
  - Use marketing materials from the ACP toolkit https://www.internetforallnow.org/acp-toolkit/
  - Participant in the national signup days and hold signup event in libraries and schools.
  - Integrate information with Social Service intake and case worker materials.
  - Have informational displays and handouts in libraries.
  - Send informational mailers to CALFresh and School Lunch program recipients.
  - Encourage all your local ISPs to register in the program so they can offer the discount.

There are three legs to the rural digital equity problem – availability, affordability, and adoption. California's rural counties continue to struggle with all three of these challenges. There are a growing number of digital equity focused organizations, grant programs and resources available from the Federal and State governments to help counties meet these challenges. Make sure your county's broadband program includes a digital equity component.

AUTHOR

Steve Monaghan is Nevada County's Chief Information Officer (CIO) responsible for planning, organizing, and directing the county's overall information technology and broadband efforts and investments. His efforts have resulted in significant recognitions and awards for his leadership in the IT industry and, during his tenure, Nevada County has received numerous awards for technology leadership and excellence. In addition, Steve created the CSAC/CCISDA County Technology Executive Credential program, serves on the Advisory Board for the California State University, Chico Cybersecurity for Executives program, and serves as a member of RCRC's Broadband Advisory Committee. Find additional information about Steve here and connect with him directly at steve.monaghan@NevadaCountyCA.gov