Broadband in California:

Understanding the Digital Divide

California **Telehealth** Policy Coalition

Telehealth is not possible if patients are unable to access high-speed internet. As the California Telehealth Policy Coalition supports access and adoption of quality telehealth for all patients, we understand the importance of ensuring broadband for all.

Understanding Broadband

Broadband is the transmission of wide bandwidth data over a high-speed internet connection. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) defines broadband as internet with download speeds of 25 megabits per second (Mbps) and upload speeds of 3 Mbps. To illustrate, 15-25 Mbps download speeds would allow one person to stream high-definition video[1] while a 1-6 Mbps upload speed is required to transmit quality live video[2] (e.g., a live video telehealth visit). It is worth noting however, that these speeds only accommodate one person. If multiple family members are using the internet at the same time, they will likely need higher speeds to accommodate their usage.

In California, the broadband speed standards are lower than those set by the FCC. California's broadband subsidy program, the California Advanced Services Fund (CASF), classifies 6 Mbps upload speed and 1 Mbps download speed as high-speed internet and funds build-out of broadband infrastructure for speeds of 10/1 Mbps or higher.

Core Considerations for Broadband Adoption

Broadband is not only necessary for telehealth but is critical for other scenarios like work, education, and civic engagement. While many Californians have daily access to some form of internet, many others are unable to use broadband because of various structural reasons.

This digital divide is caused by four main challenges:

- **Availability:** Is reliable, secure, high-speed internet offered in my area?
- **Affordability:** Can I afford to pay for the high-speed internet offered in my area?
- **Devices:** Do I have a device I can use to access the internet?
- **Digital Literacy:** Do I understand how to use the internet and internet-enabled devices?

State of Broadband in California

Studies estimate that around 98% (38.818 million) of Californians live in an area where broadband (25/3 Mbps) is available, meaning 2.3 million Californians live in areas that do not meet the FCC standard for home high speed internet service.[3] However, this number does not capture the many Californians who may live in an area serviced by high-speed internet but cannot afford it. Additional data suggests that 84% of Californians had high-speed internet at home in 2019, up from 74% in 2017, but still leaving out 16% of the state's residents.[4] Rates of high-speed connectivity at home are lower than average for Latino and African-American households, and for those in rural areas of the state.[5]

Price may be one factor affecting access: while 70% of California households are located in an area where wired "low-price plans" are available (<$60/month), for many people with lower incomes, these plans are still too expensive. Access to hardware may also be a barrier, as over 10% of Californians report that they lack a desktop, laptop or other computing device at home.[6] This digital divide does not impact all populations evenly: race, income, education, age and ability all impact an individual's likeliness to use and have access to broadband.

California Broadband Adoption Rates

Income >$100K a year	With a high school degree	English-speaking Latinos	People ages 18–29	Non-Disabled
97%	**71%**	**86%**	**84%**	**83%**
Income <$20K a year	Without a high school degree	Spanish-speaking Latinos	People 75 and older	Disabled
52%	**53%**	**57%**	**62%**	**64%**

Source: California Emerging Technology Fund, Poll conducted by the Institute for Governmental Studies – January 2019. Statistics are cited for adoption at home with a computer or tablet.

The California Telehealth Policy Coalition Broadband Committee

The Telehealth Policy Coalition Broadband Committee is committed to broadband for all and advancing state policy. We have developed the following principles to guide our approach to broadband policy:

- **Broadband should be treated as a utility:** policies should treat broadband as a utility necessary for Californians to access health care and other services and needs in the 21st century
- **Robust infrastructure should be in place to serve all Californians:** policies expand the physical infrastructure needed to bring internet access to underserved populations and geographies
- **Californians should have equitable access to broadband:** policies ensure increased access to broadband for underserved communities, both urban and rural
- **Broadband should be affordable:** policies should support making high-quality internet access affordable for all Californians, including the use of subsidies and/or price setting
- **Government should fund broadband projects that rely on best-in-class, high-speed standards:** policies ensure that infrastructure, accessibility and affordability reinforce the need for high-speed, best in class technologies

Where to Find More Information on Broadband in California

California Broadband Council State Action Plan: Created in response to Govern Newsom's executive order N-73-20, this action plan was created by the California Broadband Council with input from stakeholders and the public. It describes the current state of broadband in California, the challenges facing widespread broadband adoption, and the steps the council plans on taking to achieve broadband for all.

Litter Hoover Commission Issue Brief on California's Digital Divide: This report provides critical background information on broadband basics, infrastructure and the digital divide in California. In addition, it also provides case studies on different broadband infrastructure and ownership models in order to explore the best way to expand broadband accessibility.

California Emerging Technology Fund Annual Survey: The California Emerging Technology Fund (CETF) has been working since 2007 to close the digital divide. The CETF publishes various reports every year including their Annual Survey which tracks the progress of broadband deployment and adoption throughout California and has been conducted since 2008.

Endnotes

[1] Broadband Now, How much internet speed to I need? (2021), https://broadbandnow.com/guides/how-much-internet-speed-do-i-need.

[2] FCC, Broadband Speed Guide (2021), https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/broadband-speed-guide.

[3] FCC, Broadband Deployment Report (2019), https://www.fcc.gov/reports-research/reports/broadband-progress-reports.

[4] Public Policy Institute of California, Fact Sheet: California's Digital Divide (2021), https://www.ppic.org/publication/californias-digital-divide/.

[5] Id.

[6] California Emerging Technology Fund, Statewide Survey 2019 (2019), https://www.cetfund.org/action-and-results/statewide-surveys/2019-statewide-surveys/.