

# Logged in or left out? Why expanding internet access is essential



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For many people, being online is part of daily life. Bringing internet connectivity to more people and more communities is still a challenge, as the FCC estimates more than eight million Americans lack access to broadband internet. There is a risk the disparity could grow as new technologies, like AI, infuse our lives. The lack of fast, reliable connectivity could prevent more Americans from participating in the digital economy—a collective term for all the activities that happen online.

Expanding fiber networks to more communities is a challenge and an opportunity today's broadband providers believe in. Efforts are underway to successfully seize that opportunity by building and expanding public-private partnerships.

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## **New connections coming to California**

Most people who don't have internet access at home live in areas without the network

infrastructure that provides internet connectivity. The term 'digital inclusion' refers to the collective efforts of federal, state, and local governments, along with industry partners, to deliver broadband to unserved and underserved areas and digitally connect as many folks as possible.

In California, the Department of Technology is trying to close the digital divide and tackle digital inclusion head-on by making a multi-billion-dollar investment to bring equitable, high-speed fiber broadband to more Californians. The state's investment will bring open-access, middle-mile network infrastructure to hundreds of California communities by the end of 2026, paving the way for last-mile readiness and connectivity.

### **Mind the gap: Why the middle mile matters**

With more than 350,000 route miles of fiber nationwide, Lumen Technologies recently won a \$400 million contract to provide middle-mile network infrastructure as part of California's Broadband for All initiative. The effort is a great example of how bringing broadband to unserved and underserved areas requires coordination between the public and private sectors as well as between last-mile providers and the middle-mile networks that support them. What's the difference between last mile and middle mile connections? The last mile directly connects to a person's home or a business. Investing in fast, reliable middle-mile network infrastructure, which connects homes and businesses to the information superhighway, is essential for successful last-mile activities.

"We are in a unique position. Partnering with federal, state, and local governments means helping achieve not only digital inclusion but also their larger policy goals of these investments," said Jason Yoho, Lumen SVP, Product and Technology for the company's Public Sector division. "We own extensive middle-mile network infrastructure across the country and are all about developing public-private partnerships that can help create safer, healthier and more connected communities in locations that have been typically underserved or excluded."

### **Moving faster together**

Government agencies are prioritizing the expansion of broadband connectivity to address digital inclusion and ultimately, enable greater participation in today's digital economy. But they don't need to do it alone. Public-private partnerships can deliver fiber to communities with two big benefits: lower costs and faster speeds.

"These joint efforts highlight the importance of the public sector in governing the coordinated use of public fiber assets, maintaining connections between communities, and planning technology use across municipal boundaries," said Bill Simmons, a consultant to [The Broadband Consortium of the Pacific Coast](#), an independent organization that looks at the role of the

public sector in improving broadband deployment, access and adoption across the tri-county area of Ventura, Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo in California.

“It’s an approach that fosters opportunities for public-private partnerships in developing community networks,” said Simmons. “These networks aim to provide redundancy, or backup, connecting public places and key institutions, ensuring open access, and setting up infrastructure for traffic, public safety, and future smart city initiatives.”

In addition to being able to put fiber in the ground quicker, partnerships can help save time by efficiently navigating things like permitting, right-of-way issues, railroad crossings and pole attachments. “While partnerships may take longer to negotiate, this approach can trim years off connecting communities,” said Yoho.

Providing access to excess fiber capacity on existing networks or activating “dark fiber” to take advantage of unused fiber, effectively delivers connectivity to anchor institutions, like hospitals, universities, and libraries, and other key locations.

### **Expanding access now**

Internet access has gone from a nice-to-have to a necessity.

“As a leading middle-mile infrastructure provider, we have an opportunity to help close the digital divide,” said Yoho. Expanding broadband access to more areas will improve many aspects of peoples’ daily lives—access to healthcare, education, and employment—and help ensure the United States maintains its position of global leadership as an economic and innovation powerhouse.

“It’s why we’ve prioritized working with state and local governments to extend the power of our network and reach more communities,” Yoho continued.

[\*\*Click here for more details about Lumen’s work in California\*\*](#) or [\*\*for more information on how Lumen is leveraging a vast fiber network\*\*](#) to increase digital accessibility and opportunity in underserved communities.

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