

Office of the Commissioner of Insurance: Broadband expansion is critical to health care access in Wisconsin

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The COVID-19 pandemic has shown just how critical Wisconsin's broadband infrastructure is for delivering basic services like education and health care. While students started Zooming into their classrooms, more and more patients utilized virtual services like telehealth for the first time last year. From March 15th to April 14th of 2020, telehealth visits increased 300-fold.^[1] Fifty percent of visits for seniors over the age of 85 were held via telehealth.

Yet, according to the Aging Connected report, people who are enrolled in Medicaid are 2.7 times more likely to be offline.^[2] Black seniors are 2.5 times more likely to be offline, while Latinx seniors are 3.3 times more likely. While telehealth became a necessity during the pandemic for our state's aging population and those with disabilities, they faced the biggest hurdle to accessing it.

Rural Wisconsinites have also experienced difficulties associated with limited broadband access. According to the FCC, more than 430,000 Wisconsinites, who make up 25% of the state's rural population, lack access to high-speed internet.^[3] This impacts small businesses, farmers, students, and others in our state's small communities who are struggling to stay connected. Rural Americans are also more likely to be uninsured.

Of those who are still uninsured but would be eligible for a *free* insurance plan through Healthcare.gov, 19% live in non-metro areas.^[4] These folks could get

covered at no cost, but they are difficult for enrollment advocates to reach. Fourteen percent of that same population does not have internet access at home. According to a recent [UW-Extension report on Broadband and the Wisconsin Economy](#), counties that have more limited access to the internet and broadband tend to have poorer health outcomes.^[5]

Now more than ever, Wisconsinites need access to reliable high-speed internet. The health of our communities depends on it.

Governor Tony Evers' 2019-21 budget made the most significant state investment in broadband in Wisconsin's history, providing \$48 million in funding overall. His 2021-23 budget builds on that success and makes history again, nearly quadrupling the previous investment. This budget includes roughly \$200 million over the biennium for broadband access and affordability.

This needed support for our state's broadband infrastructure is an essential part of ensuring health care access for all and particularly for those that need it most. The Governor's budget proposal would invest \$150 million in broadband expansion grants to provide internet access to unserved, underserved communities primarily in rural Wisconsin. It would also reduce roadblocks for local municipalities in these communities to provide broadband service to residents. Additionally, the budget includes creating an Internet Assistance Program that invests \$40 million in reducing costs and making internet services affordable for tens of thousands of low-income Wisconsin families.

This is a critical investment that will support our state's recovery. Broadband expansion helps bring Wisconsin one step closer towards ensuring that every one of our neighbors can access the high-quality health care coverage and services they need from right at their kitchen table.

^[1] Epic Health Research Network, [Expansion of Telehealth During COVID-19 Pandemic \(ehrn.org\)](#)

² Older Adults Technology Services, [Aging-Connected_Exposing-the-Hidden-Connectivity-Crisis-for-Older-Adults.pdf](#)

³ Forward Analytics, [2020-FA-Report-Broadband-in-Rural-Wisconsin.pdf \(forward-analytics.net\)](#)

⁴ Kaiser Family Foundation, [Marketplace Eligibility Among the Uninsured: Implications for a Broadened Enrollment Period and ACA Outreach | KFF](#)

⁵ UW Extension, [2021-01-07-Broadband-Report.pdf \(wisc.edu\)](#)