

## Who is in charge of broadband programs?

Nearly three quarters of states have created a dedicated broadband office within an agency or designated an existing agency—such as departments of economic development or information technology—with authority for expanding broadband. Others have formed broadband task forces or councils. In some cases, these entities are tasked with overseeing broadband efforts, while in other states, they serve as a first step toward establishing a broadband program.

### Offices and agencies

The choice of where to locate a broadband program reflects many considerations, including the agency or department's relationship with policymakers and other stakeholders and experience with program priorities, such as geographic information systems or grant management.<sup>1</sup> Minnesota and California are among the states that have created dedicated offices, housing them in the Department of Employment and Economic Development and Department of Technology, respectively.<sup>2</sup>

About one third of states have tasked an agency or agencies with achieving broadband goals and other states have structured their efforts across multiple agencies.

### Broadband task forces and councils

Many states have set up broadband task forces and councils, which can complement their broadband program's efforts or serve as an important part of those efforts. These entities are charged with facilitating coordination, identifying opportunities for expanding broadband deployment and adoption, and making policy recommendations to the governor and legislature. The composition of task forces and councils varies depending on their goals and mandates, and may include representatives of state agencies, internet service providers, local officials, nonprofit organizations, and state legislators.

## What do broadband programs do?

Although state broadband programs may have different administrative structures, all are engaged in these activities to connect more homes and businesses

- **Stakeholder engagement.** State broadband programs play an important role engaging with stakeholders at both the state and local levels. Washington's authorizing statute for its broadband office addresses coordination and engagement with entities involved in broadband, including local and tribal governments, nonprofit organizations, and utilities.<sup>10</sup>
- **Data management.** Policymakers need reliable data on broadband deployment to effectively target funding and evaluate the impacts of grants and other activities. Many state broadband programs are tasked with collecting and analyzing data to better understand where broadband service exists. Maine authorizes the ConnectME authority

to collect data on deployment, revenues, and subscription rates from broadband providers.<sup>11</sup>

- **Planning.** Broadband programs are engaged in planning at both the state and local levels. At the state level, programs are responsible for drafting plans to expand broadband availability in areas across the state that lack it. For example, North Carolina requires its chief information officer to develop a deployment plan that includes recommendations for achieving universal broadband access, such as connecting reliable, high-speed internet to economic development and closing the gap in students who are able to use broadband to complete assignments.<sup>12</sup> And in Georgia, the Department of Community Affairs mandates that local governments outline efforts to support broadband as part of their comprehensive plans, which document goals related to issues such as land use, transportation, and housing.<sup>13</sup>
- **Administering a grant program.** At least 27 states have established funds to expand broadband access, although not all of these are active or funded. Tennessee's Department of Economic and Community Development, for example, administers grants that support "last mile" connections to unserved homes and businesses.

Beyond these four functions, some state programs are engaged in additional activities to advance their broadband goal. For example, Georgia has a Broadband Ready Site designation to certify industrial and commercial sites offering service at speeds that can support business, education, health care, and government applications.<sup>14</sup> And in Nevada, the office that coordinates the state's broadband policy has worked with the Department of Transportation to put policies in place requiring that conduit—the empty pipe that internet cables run through—be installed when the state builds or upgrades transportation infrastructure.<sup>15</sup> It also helps the Telecommunications Advisory Council evaluate applications from telecommunications providers to access this conduit in exchange for expanding fiber infrastructure in other areas of the state.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

State broadband programs take a variety of forms. But regardless of how they are structured, the programs reflect policymakers' recognition of the critical importance of reliable, high-speed internet access in the modern economy and the need for effective coordination among agencies to bridge the digital divide. By engaging stakeholders, collecting and analyzing data, planning for local and statewide buildouts, and supporting deployment efforts through grants, states are making progress toward closing the digital divide.