

GAO calls for unified broadband strategy

Article

The news: The Government Accountability Office (GAO) interviewed 50 broadband providers and 17 federal agencies and determined that over 100 existing federal broadband programs are “fragmented and overlapping,” [per](#) Light Reading.

How we got here: Various broadband initiatives have been approved for funding at a time when a pandemic has amplified the gaps in broadband connectivity.

- In January, the **Federal Communications Commission (FCC)** announced it is [funding](#) as much as **\$1.2 billion** through the **Rural Digital Opportunity Fund** to expand broadband access in 32

states.

- In March, **President Biden** released a proposed **\$5.23 trillion budget for 2023**, including **\$600 million** earmarked for additional rural broadband funding.
- These budgets are independent of the **\$1.2 trillion infrastructure bill** passed late last year. That bill budgeted **\$65 billion** for investing in access to reliable, high-speed broadband access and is the largest funding round so far, per The Verge.
- Reliable internet may add **\$160 billion per year to the US economy**, according to a study conducted by the Aspen Economic Strategy Group (AESG).

Merging a patchwork of programs into a national plan: States and territories are preparing to submit grant requests, and the GAO has interviewed various stakeholders and determined the federal approach is largely ineffective and confusing.

- “Most of the agency officials and more than half of the nonfederal stakeholders we interviewed said a new national strategy would be helpful,” the GAO’s report said.
- The GAO identified “at least 133 funding programs that could support increased broadband access—creating a fragmented, overlapping patchwork of funding. **This patchwork of programs could lead to wasteful duplication of funding and effort.**”

Plans for improvement: The organization issued three recommendations for the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), identifying limitations to program alignment.

- A national broadband strategy needs to have “clear roles, goals, objectives, and performance measures.”
- The NTIA should incorporate public feedback when updating federal funding guides.
- The executive office of the president should “develop and implement a national broadband strategy.”

What’s next? Sifting through a hundred grant requests that overlap could add months or even years to disbursement of broadband funds.

- Creating a unified national strategy could similarly take a long time, but could better address an urgent need to accelerate broadband access.

- **Centralized, need-based national broadband grants make it possible to target specific areas** while ensuring there is less redundancy and wasteful expense.
- It remains to be seen whether the executive branch will heed the GAO's recommendations or leave it to the federal government to untangle the funding.

