The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed a number of shortcomings in modern America: the inadequacy of our healthcare, childcare and eldercare systems, all exacerbated by the endemic inequalities in our society. Also glaringly exposed are the gaps in internet access, which have affected everyone from school children learning remotely, to employees working from home, to elderly or disabled persons trying to cope with the isolation of life during lock downs.

A recent North Country Public Radio story (NCPR) highlighted the situation of a couple who run a lumber business in the rural town of Thurman, in Warren County, NY. Internet providers in that part of the Adirondacks have come and gone several times over the years, and loss of service always causes a problem for their business. But this past year, the Martins’ grandchildren have been living with them part of each week so the lack of broadband access has been especially problematic. The NCPR correspondent describes Wini Martin and her grandson Miles standing in the middle of the road while Miles tries to do his homework on a cell phone because that is the only spot he can get online.

I live in the town of Canton. Last year the Canton Central School District purchased 30 cellular hotspots for students without internet access so they could participate in online classes. Of course, if a student also lived in an area without cell coverage, or without a strong enough signal, they were still out of luck. And Canton is only one of 17 school districts in the county that were grappling with this problem. Some used school buses as mobile hot spots. (WWNY TV March 25, 2020)

As Jim Siplon, the President of the Warren County Economic Development Corp., put it, lack of internet “wasn’t life or death ten or fifteen years ago. Today it is life or death. It’s as important as electricity and water.” (NCPR) Yet, it is estimated that at least one quarter of rural Americans lack internet access. (Albany Times Union, April 21, 2021)

Simply defining the extent and nature of the problem of broadband access was a challenge even before the pandemic. The FCC acknowledges that their estimate of the households without access is too low. If one house in a census block has internet access, the FCC counts the whole block as having it. The widely cited revised estimates produced by the independent research group Broadband Now demonstrate just how low they may be. For example, the FCC concludes that only 250,000 New York households lack broadband access, whereas Broadband Now estimates that the number is closer to 1,258,600.

A few states (GA, NC, ME) have done their own comprehensive surveys that involve physical, street by street examination of exactly where fiber optic cables have been run, where satellite or wifi services are available, and the actual speed and reliability of the service. This last information comes from responses to public surveys and participation in speed tests of internet connections where such exist.
Here is a comparison of two maps from the Georgia 2020 Broadband Report. On the left is the FCC map showing served and unserved areas of the state, on the right is the map produced by the new, much more granular count supported by state and private funding. The light tan color designates the unserved areas.

In the North Country of NY, several counties are working with the non-profit Development Authority of the North Country (DANC) on comprehensive broadband surveys. The cost of the surveys of St. Lawrence and Lewis Counties is around $60,000 each, with the counties paying for about half that amount. (NNY360 April 3, 2021)

The Lewis County survey is the first to have been completed and it has found that 23% of households have no access. When one adds those whose service is too slow or unreliable to meet their needs, the percentage rises to 49%. (NNY360 April 12, 2021) (Fiber optic cable provides the most reliable, highest quality service, but also the most expensive and difficult to install, and satellite dish is the least reliable. North Country winters make dish service notoriously bad.)

It is important to check the speed and reliability of broadband access because internet providers are only required by law to report the speeds they advertise, not their actual speeds. (NCPR) In addition, there is a problem with existing FCC minimum speed standards. The FCC sets the minimum download speed at 25 megabits per second (mbps), but it is widely accepted that 100 mbps is the minimum necessary in today’s world. (NYT May 17, 2021) (NYT) (Astonishingly, the Agriculture Dept. still sets a minimum of only 10 mbps!) A bipartisan group of senators has recently asked the government to revise its minimum to a uniform 100 mbps. (NYT)

The Albany Times Union estimates that for 31% of New Yorkers the only internet provider in their area is one whose service meets only the 25 mbps minimum. Since most rural areas in the state have at most one provider of broadband, it would seem that rural residents who do have access to broadband are more likely to be hampered by slow speeds. The SLC DANC survey has just been completed, and though full results haven’t been released, according to an April update, 34% of respondents to the survey of county residents report that they cannot get the internet speed that they need. (North Country Now April 10)

A recent New York Times article (NYT) about the digital divide in rural areas focused on the impact of slow or unreliable internet service on businesses trying to recruit and retain employees. The story used Marion County, Iowa as an example, but the situation is replicated all over the country. Among the reasons that young people don’t return to the rural areas where they grew up is lack of access to the broadband service they have become used to elsewhere.

Why are rural areas underserved by internet providers? Almost invariably, lack of available internet somewhere means either that there are too few potential customers in the area, or that those who are there are too widely dispersed to serve efficiently. (NYT) If business owners and residents in these areas approach the company supposedly serving it about installing fiber optic cable, they are almost invariably quoted a mind-boggling price.

A recent Adirondack Explorer article on the subject begins with an example from Essex County where the owner of a counterterrorism consulting firm and his neighbors were told by Spectrum that they would have to pay $50,000 for the installation of half a mile of cable. The little
community instead adopted a DIY approach, buying a used trencher and enlisting the services of SLIC Network Solutions, a small North Country communications company based in Nicholville that “specializes in bringing broadband ‘the last mile’ into people’s homes.” This story had a happy ending, but many do not. (ADK Explorer May 31, 2021)

As Adie Tomer, a Brookings Institute Fellow who has studied rural internet issues, concludes: “The private sector’s not going to solve this [problem].” What is needed instead is something on the scale of the rural electrification project undertaken by the Federal Government almost a century ago. (NYT)

To its credit, in 2016 New York did launch a $500 million dollar initiative to connect all unserved households and businesses to broadband service by 2018. Unfortunately, companies have continued to pass over many areas even while bidding for the state’s subsidies.

Other factors besides low population density can drive up the cost to providers. Just this week legislation was passed in NYS to eliminate the exorbitant fees the owners of utility poles have been charging companies to rent space for a cable, and efforts continue to repeal a 2019 State DOT tax on lines that follow a highway right of way. (ADK Explorer, May 31, 2021)

The final barrier to internet access faced by some rural as well as some urban residents, is the cost of service. NYS has recently passed a law that would require internet providers to supply low cost broadband service ($15 per month) to households that qualify for certain federal assistance programs, such as free school lunches or Medicaid. (NNY360 April 10) Industry groups representing ATT and Verizon have announced they will sue the State of New York for overstepping its regulatory authority by requiring them to provide the low cost service. (NNY360 May 2, 2021)

What is the solution to the digital divide?
President Biden’s recently proposed infrastructure plan includes significant investment in expansion of internet service. In addition, calls are growing for states and Federal authorities to regulate broadband as a utility. A bill currently in committee in both the NYS Assembly and Senate (A7412/ S5771) would do just that and it is supported by NYPIRG, AARP and Consumer Reports. (NY State of Politics, May 19, 2021)

In the US House, NY Rep. Jamaal Bowman and MO Rep. Emanuel Cleaver, have proposed the “Broadband Justice Act”, while Senator Amy Klobuchar and Rep. Jim Clyburn have introduced a sweeping broadband package that includes regulation as well as billions for expanding service. (The Verge, March 16, 2021) (The Verge)

In the meantime, rural counties and towns will struggle with how to expand and ensure adequate broadband service for their residents. Canton, population around 6500, is in the process of renegotiating another multi-year contract with our area’s sole internet provider.

What can the NYS League do? First, we can find out if any other State League already has a position on internet access. In the absence of another position with which to concur, we can define what a NYS broadband position might cover and do our own study of how best to guarantee equitable access to the internet as an indispensible part of the infrastructure of modern life. Both rural and urban Leagues might be interested in working on such a study. In the
meantime, we should monitor proposed legislation that would promote increased access and lower costs and get the word out about it.

In Monroe County NY, where one third of rural households and one fifth of urban ones are not connected to the internet, a task force has been formed to study Bridging the Digital Divide. Task force member and County Legislator Rachel Barnhart put it this way: “Everyone has a right to high speed and affordable broadband. If we want people to fully take advantage of the opportunities available in education and the workforce, we’ve got to be able to meet this need.” (wxxinews, March 31, 2021)

Sources (full links):

NCPR April 8, 2021  


New York Times May 17, 2021  


NNY360 April 10, 2021  https://www.nny360.com/top_stories/new-state-program-requires-companies-to-provide-15-a-month-internet-for-low-income-families/article_e01b476a-aa9a-5b0d-ba6b-b893764b2bae.html
Adirondack Explorer reprinted in Albany Times Union, May 31, 2021


HERE’S MORE ON THE PUSH TO PASS LEGISLATION THAT WOULD MAKE EXPANDING SERVICE CHEAPER FOR SMALL BROADBAND PROVIDERS:


EVERY DAY THERE IS MORE ON THE DIGITAL DIVIDE:


This week, the IRS launched an updated version of the online non-filer tool it used last year to help people claim stimulus payments. The tool is now enabled to help non-filers register for the advance child tax credit payments. It was developed in partnership with Intuit and is specifically designed to target families who don’t normally file tax returns.

Instead, the IRS says, the tool was built to provide an easy way for eligible people who earn too little, and thus do not have to file an income-tax return, to give the agency the basic information required to issue the monthly advance child tax credit payments.

Except, the tool is anything but easy, said Jennifer Burdick, supervising attorney with Community Legal Services of Philadelphia, and Melanie Malherbe, a managing attorney at Greater Boston Legal Services.

When setting up an account, people have to provide an email address. But many potential users don’t have one and thus are shut out of using the tool, Burdick and Malherbe pointed out.

“There is a digital divide,” Burdick said. “Many low-income people do not have access to laptops or Wi-Fi. Smartphones are the most pervasive way that people connect to the Internet.
The whole point of this portal is to make filing as accessible as possible, so I’m a little bit baffled that this very large step wasn’t taken.”

https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/06/15/irs-child-tax-credit-tool/