**DIGITAL DIVIDE**

**ACTION NEEDED:**
Urge Congress to **SUPPORT** increasing public funding for construction of broadband infrastructure;

Urge Congress to **SUPPORT** improving service mapping accurately by requiring more granular data from service providers, allowing crowd sourced data to be used to inform the map, and creating an appeal process to challenge demonstrable inaccuracies.

**BACKGROUND:**
For years, rural residents have argued that actual coverage is much lower than the FCC's data reflects and have questioned the accuracy of the date. In Florida, the barriers to internet ubiquity appear to be two-fold: (1) the lack of last-mile service due to the cost to construct and operate a network; and (2) refusal of prospective end-users to subscribe to available service, typically due to cost. The overreporting of connectivity in Florida, may have led Florida's State and Congressional officials to underestimate the extent of the problem. Florida counties are not alone in questioning the data provided by the FCC.  The FCC's 2019 Broadband Deployment report counted 21.3 million Americans as lacking internet, while a 2019 Microsoft study found that 162 million Americans do not have access to an internet connection meeting the definition of broadband.

One of the primary factors creating this overreporting is the current requirement that providers information on coverage via the "Form 477" which allows an entire census tract to be considered "covered" if one person within that tract has access to broadband service.  This creates a barrier to identifying those areas that actually lack service and to hold service providers accountable for providing services that they may have promised in consideration for public subsidies for broadband expansion.  The poor quality of the FCC maps has been recognized both by Congress and the FCC with some movement toward improving the quality of the maps.

**ANALYSIS:**
While no State-level programs have successfully supported broadband infrastructure construction, several Federal programs have been created to fund expansion of broadband infrastructure.  Two programs of note:

<u>United States Department of Agriculture – Rural Utilities Services</u>
The March 2018 Federal omnibus spending plan created a new broadband pilot program within the USDA.  The $600 million authorization charged the USDA to "conduct a new broadband loan and grant pilot program under the Rural Electrification Act of 1936..." and requiring that at least 90% of the households to be served by a project be in rural areas with insufficient access to broadband.  The newly authorized pilot program is supplemental to

the USDA's Rural Utilities Service existing telecommunications programs aimed at expanding broadband access to rural areas, including the Rural Broadband Access Loans and Loan Guarantees Program.

Federal Communications Commission—Rural Digital Opportunity Fund
The FCC approved a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking for the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF), which would provide $20.4 billion over 10 years to help companies expand broadband in unserved remote areas. RDOF will assign funding in two phases: Phase I will target areas with no broadband service and Phase II will target areas that are partially served. The program will leverage repurposed revenue from the Connect America Fund, which is set to expire in 2021.

Activity to Improve Mapping: NACo's TestIT App:
To address the FCC's broadband data disparities, NACo partnered with the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), the Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP), the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) and Farm Credit, to develop "TestIT" – a mobile app designed to crowdsource connectivity data in areas with little or no connectivity. Through TestIT, users can report their broadband speeds from anywhere with the push of a button. The data collected through this app will help identify areas where broadband service is overstated and underfunded by comparing the data to the FCC's National Broadband Map.

Congressional Action:
Broadband Deployment Accuracy and Technological Availability (DATA) Act (H.R 4229 116th Congress)
Requires the FCC to collect data more granularly and would establish process to challenge map data.

FCC Action:
Perhaps in an effort to preempt legislative action, on August the FCC proposed the Digital Opportunity Data Collection (DODC), a new process for collecting broadband data to better pinpoint where broadband service is lacking. The proposal would continue to rely on provider-supplied data, but it opens the door for crowdsourcing data collection – a method supported by counties.

According to the FCC, the proposed order includes three significant changes to the process:
- Collects geospatial broadband coverage maps from broadband Internet service providers. This geospatial data will facilitate development of granular, high-quality fixed broadband deployment maps, which should improve the FCC's ability to target support for broadband expansion through the agency's Universal Service Fund programs.
- Adopts a process to collect public input on the accuracy of service providers' broadband maps, facilitated by a crowd-sourcing portal that will gather input from consumers as well as from state, local and tribal governments.

- Makes targeted changes to the existing Form 477 data collection to reduce reporting burdens for all filers and incorporate new technologies.

Stakeholders will be allowed to provide comments to the FCC regarding the proposed rulemaking 30 days after the notice is published in the Federal Register, August 1, 2019.