The Patterson Foundation (TPF) created its Digital Access for All (DA4A) initiative to explore the efforts of multiple sectors working to enhance access to technology that connects people in ways that foster inclusion and well-being.

What I Found While Writing About Digital Access for All in DeSoto County -- Justin Garcia

In rural DeSoto County, Florida, farmworkers, firefighters, teachers, students, business people, and other residents are all affected by a lack of digital access. The problem existed before the COVID-19 pandemic, but over the past year, the importance of reliable broadband has shown itself to be critical.

In a story I wrote about DeSoto missing out on federal rural broadband development funds, Mandy Hines, county administrator for DeSoto County, said, "It is safe to say that broadband infrastructure is just as important as other basic physical infrastructure, such as roads, sewers and water utilities."

While there were admirable measures taken by entities like The School District of DeSoto County to distribute hotspots and devices to students, these measures are only stopgaps and do not take the place of reliable broadband. Grade school students using hotspots to remote learn often drop off of their classes or can’t log in because the connection is unreliable.

Fire department precincts that are outside of Arcadia, DeSoto’s most populated area, also have to use hotspots, which causes problems with everything from training to filing reports. They often have to go to Arcadia’s main DA4A Resource Library

The Patterson Foundation’s Digital Access for All initiative is about connecting and sharing information, ideas, and strategies to help bridge the digital divide, especially as it relates to asset-limited populations and communities in Southwest Florida. DA4A’s new resource library contains materials from leading state, regional, and national organizations on a broad range of topics related to digital access.

Click here to access the DA4A Resource Library.

Click here to learn more about the "Why" and how to get resources included.
College students using unreliable broadband submit projects and watch the loading symbol spin for hours until they miss the deadline. Their grades are affected, and they are forced to ask teachers for leniency.

When DeSoto's South Florida State College campus was closed due to COVID-19 last year, students had to pull into the parking lot to use the college's Wi-Fi to work on assignments. Additionally, teachers and faculty spend extra hours on campus to complete tasks that require a reliable connection because they don't have it at home.

At DeSoto's Chamber of Commerce, which is located in Arcadia where broadband is the strongest, projects that require high bandwidth are often difficult or impossible to upload. Debbie Wertz, CEO of the Chamber says that new residents of DeSoto are shocked when they realize how unreliable their internet connection is.

Yet, for broadband development in DeSoto, there are still roadblocks, from the local to the federal level. Professionals and IT experts that I’ve spoken to say that there has to be incentive for a company like CenturyLink (DeSoto’s main residential broadband provider) to develop their infrastructure or for other companies to come in and expand development. This is often difficult in rural areas because the population is small, thus the potential return for broadband companies is not ideal.

Recently, a federal stimulus package allotted billions of dollars to internet providers and CenturyLink won $262.37 million. While they are planning to develop other rural areas in Florida, DeSoto was left out.

The Center on Rural Innovation (CRI) compiled a list of 11 rural areas that provide download speeds of 1 Gigabyte per second (that's 10 times faster than the speeds that half of DeSoto residents receive). A popular way to achieve this is to establish telecommunication co-ops and municipal broadband.

As an expert at CRI told me, Florida has laws in place that prevent municipal broadband from developing. One of the obstacles is that any municipal broadband project in Florida has to be profitable in four years or less. This is extremely difficult, especially in rural areas with fewer customers. The other issue is that Florida places ad valorem taxes on municipal broadband, but not on private broadband companies.

There are signs of hope. Fiber-optic broadband is available through providers outside of CenturyLink but is not currently accessible to residential customers. South Florida State College is in the process of installing and switching to fiber, which many people in the area see as a step in the right direction.

In my story using Federal Communications Commission maps to highlight DeSoto’s speeds compared to neighboring counties, the Chamber’s Debbie Wertz explained the increasing importance of broadband better than I can now.
"Reliable internet access used to be more of a want more than a need," Wertz said. "But especially after COVID-19, we realize that it is a lifeline. Whether you want to work from home, get an education or take care of your health, it is crucial."

This network is provided at no cost to community residents in the lowest-income, highest-density areas of downtown Wimauma, Florida, a small rural community outside of Tampa in Hillsborough County. It serves as a bright example of what is possible through a collaboration between business, government, nonprofits, and philanthropy.

LEARN MORE

Federal Communication Commission Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel Charts the Path Forward by Kiarra Louis

"We have work to do to ensure that all students have the internet access they need for a fair shot at 21st-century success, no matter who they are or where they live. And we have work to do to ensure open, reliable, and affordable broadband reaches 100% of this country—rural areas, urban areas, and everything in between."

-- Jessica Rosenworcel, FCC

On January 21, 2021, President Biden designated the Federal Communications Commission (FCC)'s Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel as Acting Chairwoman for the agency. In her remarks on January 25, Rosenworcel shared the work ahead to break down communication barriers. FCC's efforts will include establishing a $3.2 billion Emergency Broadband Benefit that gives eligible households a discount on broadband services and specific connected devices. Organizations and stakeholders wanting to help promote the new program to consumers can do so here.

Giving all students internet access and making broadband reliable and affordable is also a focus. Many communities have asked permission to use the E-Rate Program to help students learn remotely. In response to these petitions, the FCC wants...

CONTINUE SCROLLING
asked permission to use the E-Rate Program to help students learn remotely. In response to these petitions, the FCC wants the public to **comment on these petitions** to identify 1.) What support communities need and 2.) Solutions to close the Homework Gap as they look to update the E-Rate program.

Expanding telehealth services to ensure underserved and marginalized communities receive access to vital healthcare services is in the works. Congress provided an additional $249.95 million into the COVID-19 Telehealth program. With additional funding, the FCC plans to expand connected care.

For years, the FCC has lacked data to precisely identify areas in the U.S that do or do not have service. Using $65 million from Congress, the agency will focus on improving its broadband maps.

Learn more about Acting Chairwoman Rosenworcel's remarks [here](#).

---

Do you have a resource or idea to share with the community? Is there a national, regional, or local effort you'd like us to know about or feature in future publications? Contact DA4A at digitalaccess@thepattersonfoundation.org to be considered.

[@ThePattersonFdn](#)  
[#DigitalAccessforAll](#)