

Foreword

By Blair Levin

In 2009, Congress directed the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to develop a National Broadband Plan to ensure every American has “access to broadband capability.” Congress required that this plan include a strategy for achieving affordability and maximizing use of broadband to advance “consumer welfare, civic participation, public safety and homeland security, community development, health care delivery, energy independence and efficiency, education, employee training, private sector investment, entrepreneurial activity, job creation and economic growth, and other national purposes.”

What Congress understood, and what was at the [heart of that Plan](#), was that full participation in the economy and society was impossible for those individuals, families, and communities who did not have access to a robust broadband network.

The chapters in this guide demonstrate, far more than we could in 2010, how important and correct that Congressional insight was.

As they demonstrate, whether discussing health care, education, housing, workforce development, or a plethora of other topics, access to services and opportunities depend on having access to an affordable broadband network and having the knowledge of how to utilize the many ways broadband now delivers essential services.

In this way, the volume provides a compelling portrait of the costs to those on the wrong side of the digital divide. But there is another side of the coin of the problems that this guide demonstrates. The cost is not just shouldered by those disconnected. The cost is borne by all of us.

Digital disconnection imposes a cost on our economy, shrinking economic growth. As the [chapter on workforce development](#) notes, a RAND study of a free digital literacy training program found that within approximately two months of course completion, daily computer use increased from 34% to 62%, and employment nearly tripled, from 14% to 41%. Among employed participants, those earning more than \$20,000 rose from 45% to 68%, and the share earning between \$40,000 and \$60,000 doubled from 15% to 29%. But such courses are not available to all who need them, thus hurting the American economy.

The impact on health care — one of the largest sectors of our economy and largest costs for the federal government — is particularly noteworthy. As the [chapter on health care](#)

[notes](#), “Digital technologies are now central to healthcare delivery. Patient portals, telehealth visits, remote monitoring devices, and electronic messaging increasingly shape how patients access care, communicate with providers, and manage chronic conditions.” The chapter then lays out in extensive detail — details that every member of Congress who claims to be fiscally responsible should understand — how digital care can improve outcomes while also reducing costs.

In short, as this volume conclusively demonstrates, the digital divide results in slower economic growth, increases in the cost of healthcare, education, job training and placement, and other social services, while decreasing the effectiveness of those services.

Moreover, while the cost of digital exclusion is already large and growing, Artificial Intelligence (AI) will magnify the cost. There is no doubt that later this decade we will view the implications of AI as similar to how Covid-19 vividly demonstrated the unacceptability of digital exclusion. Whether the topic involves the skill sets needed, the jobs we need to fill, education or health care, trends in artificial intelligence will exacerbate the negative consequences of any remaining digital divide. And those consequences in turn will make the United States less competitive as AI defines the new parameters of competition.

This volume demonstrates something else that was not clear in 2010. Not only do we need the right government policies, we also need efforts to assure that all can effectively use the tools of modern communications and AI. As the healthcare chapter correctly notes, “The importance of human intermediaries for technology adoption cannot be overstated. Patients value supportive services based on individualized attention, trust, and sustained follow-up.”

The 2010 National Broadband Plan ends by writing that “this plan is in beta and always will be. Like the internet itself, the plan will always be changing — adjusting to new developments in technologies and markets. As such, implementation requires a long-term commitment to measuring progress and adjusting programs and policies to improve performance.”

Connect Humanity has brilliantly clarified how we need to adjust our mindset and how these programs are funded to help all Americans have an opportunity to thrive in the information economy. Moreover, it points to practical and financially rigorous ways that multiple stakeholders can participate in creating those opportunities. It is a huge and welcome contribution to the ongoing, and always in beta, discussion of how we as a country can benefit from the tools of the 21st century.

Blair Levin was the Executive Director of the 2010 US National Broadband Plan. He serves as a senior editor for the Alt Funding Field Guide series.

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The Framework, *Samantha Schartman & Brian Vo*

The case for change and the financial framework the series is built on, including Connect Humanity's approach to structuring co-investment partnerships.

connecthumanity.fund/alt-funding-guide/framework/

Education, *Dr. Jen Vanek & Samantha Schartman*

The link between family digital access and student achievement, and the role of districts and higher ed.

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Healthcare, *Dr. Amy Sheon*

How digital literacy affects outcomes, telehealth utilization, and cost, and how health systems and payers can co-invest.

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Housing, *Catherine Crago Blanton*

How housing authorities and affordable housing providers can build digital access into their core operations.

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The case for municipal co-investment grounded in demonstrated efficiency gains.

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Telecommunications, *Brian Rathbone, Doug Dawson, Jeff Sural & Samantha Schartman*

How providers can structure partnerships that serve both business and community need.

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Workforce development, *Dr. Roberto Gallardo & Samantha Schartman*

Employer and workforce system investment in digital skills as a talent and economic development strategy.

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Get in touch — if you are a practitioner exploring co-investment partnerships, a sector partner thinking about how this framework applies to your organization, or a funder considering supporting pilots, let's talk, info@connecthumanity.fund