



Wisconsin Broadband Plan, 2019

The telecommunications industry in Wisconsin continues to undergo significant change. Throughout the country, telecommunications service providers are currently upgrading the technology that delivers telephone, internet and television service. Existing copper lines are being replaced with fiber or wireless networks that use Internet Protocol technology to transmit digital packetized messages.

Customers' calling habits and choice of telecommunications devices and features are also shifting at a rapid pace. Customers increasingly prefer equipment and services with reliable, high-speed Internet access that support feature-rich environments, such as smartphones, tablet computers and streaming video. Customers have shifted away from devices that are limited to analog voice telephone service and from telecommunications service plans that include toll rates for long distance calls.

As recently as 2005, residential and business subscribers were adding additional telephone access lines to their accounts to support dial-up access to the Internet. Today, the challenge is to extend accessible broadband communications services throughout the state so that residents may use software applications enabled by a high-speed Internet connection.

Wisconsin Broadband Office

The [Wisconsin Broadband Office](#) is a section within the [Public Service Commission of Wisconsin](#) (Commission) that coordinates the state's activities related to the deployment and expansion of advanced telecommunications technologies. The state as a whole (citizens, governments, providers, schools and businesses) has an interest in expanding broadband access and usage. The Commission, through the state Broadband Office, is engaged in a variety of efforts to expand access to these broadband services:

- Administer the [Broadband Expansion Grant](#) program, providing financial assistance to expand broadband service in rural and high-cost areas. In July 2013, the state created the Broadband Expansion Grant program to help meet this demand for improved and upgraded telecommunications service. See Wis. Stat. §§ 20.155(3)(r) and 196.504. Under this authority, the Public Service Commission has awarded approximately \$20.1 million to 138 grant projects in six fiscal years.
- Develop, maintain and update an [interactive statewide map](#) of broadband deployment.
- Administer the [Broadband Forward! Community](#) program, identifying communities in the state that have reviewed local ordinances to remove administrative barriers to broadband expansion.
- Administer the [Telecommuter Forward! Community](#) program, identifying communities in the state that are committed to promoting the availability of telecommuting options.

Wisconsin Broadband Plan

Wisconsin's Broadband Plan (Broadband Plan) builds upon the success of our broadband expansion initiatives and focuses on public-private partnerships to close the digital divide in Wisconsin. The Broadband Plan's overarching goal is for every Wisconsinite to have affordable access to broadband service, if they so choose, by January 1, 2025. The Broadband Plan is based upon Governor Evers' proposed historic investments in broadband as outlined in his 2019-2021 biennial budget.

The Governor understands that reliable access to broadband Internet service is crucial for many aspects of today's society, including connecting businesses and schools to the world, linking job seekers with employment opportunities and for the delivery of modern health care. For too many areas throughout the state, inadequate Internet access limits economic development as well as recreational, educational, and work opportunities.



The Wisconsin Broadband Plan proposes to achieve this goal in the following ways:

1. The Governor has proposed a speed goal of 25 megabits per second download and 3 megabits per second upload (25/3 speed) for all Wisconsin homes and businesses by 2025. For the first time in state history, statewide broadband speed goals will be set in statute under this proposal.
2. The Governor's budget makes an historic investment in the Commission's Broadband Expansion Grant program. For the first time, GPR will be provided in addition to federal E-rate funds and Universal Service Fund funds, increasing total funding to \$78.6 million over the biennium. This program provides grants to profit or non-profit organizations and/or municipalities to help deliver broadband access to those parts of the state that are most in need of assistance.
3. The budget recognizes there may be some communities where it does not make business sense for telecommunications companies to provide broadband service even with federal and state grants and incentives. In these cases, the budget reduces some of the additional requirements that make it difficult for municipalities to directly invest in broadband infrastructure for their communities.
4. The Governor's budget extends the Wisconsin Department of Administration's TEACH infrastructure grant program to the end of the 2019-21 biennium and provides \$3 million per year in funding. The new proposal repurposes TEACH funds that had been used to support grants to help teachers and libraries get up to speed on using technology as well as a small grant that had been used to develop on-line curriculum. The TEACH infrastructure grants will continue to be focused on rural schools and libraries.
5. The Governor commits to making affordable Internet accessible to those who need it most. The Commission has developed a tool called the Internet Discount Finder that is available to everyone in the state. In addition, the Governor's budget creates a new program that is aimed at helping the state's most economically disadvantaged people afford access. The Governor's budget includes \$5.3 million of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds per year to help families in the Wisconsin Works program access affordable Internet, similar to the current Lifeline program at the Commission, which helps low-income individuals afford telephone service. On behalf of these families, the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families will work with W-2 agencies to reimburse the appropriate Internet service providers on a monthly basis. Having access to the Internet is another way to help families find and keep employment and allow children to do their homework and improve their own opportunities for success in the classroom.
6. One of the ways in which the Governor's budget helps Wisconsin's farmers and supports rural communities is by strategically focusing broadband expansion activities in the areas of the state that are unserved and underserved. The Governor's Office, the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, and the Wisconsin Broadband Office are collaborating on issues around rural connectivity and agriculture, including assisting Wisconsin applicants with USDA ReConnect loan and grant applications. The Broadband Office provides mapping products to support applications for both USDA and state broadband grant programs. With coordination and collaborative outreach, the two agencies expect to better leverage the available federal and state funds for broadband service upgrades to reach more of the unserved rural and agricultural locations in Wisconsin.

By investing \$95.2 million during the biennium in the Broadband Expansion Grant Program, the TEACH program and the W-2 Internet access program, the Governor's budget more than doubles the previous biennium's investment of \$41.5 million. Providing reliable access to the Internet, including closing the digital divide for rural communities, farms, businesses and students across the state, is a key focus for the Governor.

