



New state investment paves way for broadband connectivity in rural areas

Indiana law from 2018 is providing mix of grants, technical assistance

by Indiana Sen. Erin Houchin (Senator.Houchin@iga.in.gov)

Shortly after being elected to the Indiana State Senate in 2014, I was invited to speak with a group of students at a local school. When I mentioned that one of my top priorities was expanding broadband access in unserved areas of Indiana, I asked the group if they knew where broadband access was lacking most in our state. One student raised his hand and said, “My backyard?”

He wasn’t wrong.

Over the past two decades, access to the internet has become a necessity for people across the country.

Many companies, organizations and schools have gone paperless or are well on their way. Without reliable access to high-speed internet, our friends and neighbors in rural America are being left behind.

While terrestrial broadband infrastructure has increased in Indiana in recent years, some areas are still completely unserved, affecting hundreds of thousands of Indiana residents — many of whom live in southern Indiana, which I represent.

It is nearly impossible to participate in today’s technology-driven society and economy without high-speed internet, and lack of access denies many people of what are now considered basic functions. For example, children don’t have the ability to enjoy an equal education, and the elderly and those experiencing health care issues are denied the ability to connect to home health care technology.

This lack of access is also a major threat to small businesses and farm operations, both of which are crucial to my home state’s economy.

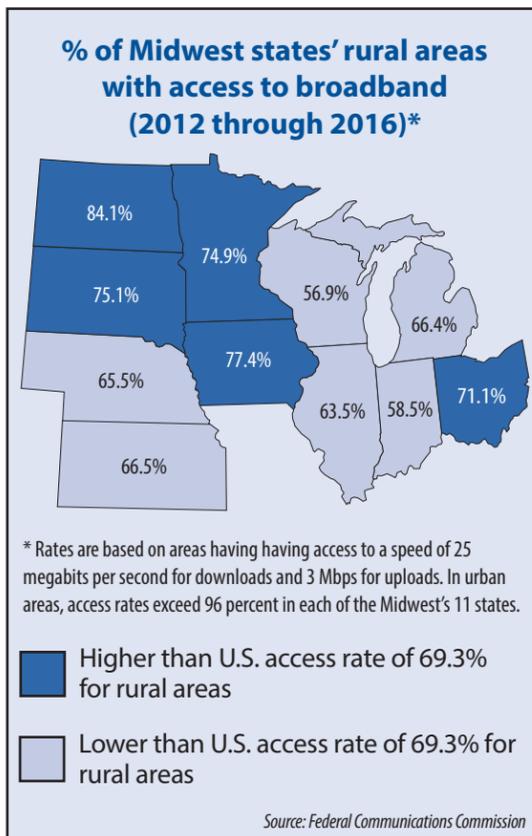
According to the Federal Communications Commission, as of 2016, more than 40 percent of rural Hoosiers lacked access to broadband with speeds at 25 megabytes per second. In contrast, less than 3 percent of urban residents in Indiana lack access to those same speeds. This puts our rural communities at a disadvantage, keeping them from succeeding in the realms of business, education, health care, agriculture and more.

Getting a broadband bill to finish line

Expanding broadband access seems like common-sense, but there is little incentive for providers to spend their time, money and capital investing in rural communities — even though the residents in these areas are in clear need of internet access. In many conversations with stakeholders, I was told the return on investment simply was not there for broadband expansion in rural areas, yet no one at that time was interested in supporting public dollars being used for broadband projects.

To bring various parties to the negotiating table, I authored SB 356, which ultimately passed as HEA 1065 during the 2018 legislative session.

Under this new law, we created a matching



grant program for qualifying broadband deployment projects in unserved areas of the state. The enacted measure also defines upload and download speeds for “qualified broadband service” as specified by the FCC.

I was pleased that many stakeholders — including those who had opposed previous efforts — ultimately helped craft and support the final bill.

Although only a handful of other states had programs similar to this before our legislation, I knew this innovative idea would improve Indiana by helping to fund and incentivize rural broadband deployment.

Unfortunately, the process of coming to an agreement on this legislation in the Indiana General Assembly proved difficult and time-consuming.

While high-speed internet is not a problem for all areas of our state, it certainly is for southern Indiana and other regions. It may not be a priority for all legislators, but it is for my constituents, and that is why I have worked to author broadband legislation each year I have served in the General Assembly.

SB 356 passed out of committee in the Senate, but did not receive a hearing in the House. HB 1065, which was written by the chairman of the House Committee on Utilities, Energy and Telecommunications, was subsequently stripped, with the language from SB 356 being amended into HB 1065.

Once amended, the bill was sent to a conference committee, where we continued negotiations on several different versions well into the night on the last day of the 2018 legislative session.

After an enormous amount of negotiation with

stakeholders and legislators, an acceptable committee report for HB 1065 was passed by both chambers less than two hours from midnight, at which point the bill would have died if a consensus had not been reached.

Delivering grants to rural communities

Following the passage of HB 1065, Indiana’s Office of Community and Rural Affairs awarded the first Broadband Readiness Pilot Grant to five communities in September.

These communities (one of which is located in the Senate district that I represent) will receive grants of \$50,000 and be provided with technical assistance from the Purdue Center for Regional Development.

These measures are a critical step toward Indiana reaching our goal of having broadband internet access available to all Hoosier communities, no matter how rural they may be. With reliable access, families, students, farmers, entrepreneurs and businesses alike will be able to utilize the internet and take advantage of the real-life connections and opportunities it provides.

Before HEA 1065, we had no way of ensuring federal broadband funding would be prioritized for unserved communities, thus leaving the possibility that communities that already have terrestrial broadband would get the money instead. This legislation provides the needed framework to prioritize federal funding for unserved areas as well as matching grants and technical assistance to help deploy high-speed broadband internet.

In 2019, high-speed internet is critical for all Americans, and this technology is often taken for granted in urban areas where access is easily available. This legislation brought my vision to life: a public-private partnership where communities, providers and the state all contribute to bringing access to unserved communities. It remains a priority of mine to ensure Hoosiers have access to this vital service, and I will continue working with my colleagues around the state to bridge the digital divide between urban and rural Indiana.

Indiana Sen. Erin Houchin was first elected to the Indiana Senate in 2014. She is a 2018 graduate of CSG Midwest’s Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development (BILLD).

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