

Support Middle Mile Funding for Broadband

Key Findings

- Middle mile broadband networks are critical to connecting rural America to high-speed internet, but many rural providers lack access to these networks altogether or face significant fees to connect.
- Many rural providers lack access to a robust middle mile connection. Those with limited access often face significant interconnection and monthly service fees. Limited middle mile access also negatively impacts the speed and reliability that rural internet service providers can offer their customers.
- The 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) provided \$1 billion in funding for NTIA's Middle Mile Grant Program, however the agency received significantly more requests for funding than what was made available. Given the strong need for assistance in building middle mile networks, we urge Congress to provide additional funding for NTIA's Middle Mile Grant Program.

Background

Middle mile broadband infrastructure is critical to connecting rural America to quality, high-speed internet. These networks do not connect directly to the customer, but are an important link between an internet service provider's local network and the broader internet ecosystem.

Access to robust middle mile infrastructure can make a big difference in reducing the cost to deploy last mile networks in rural areas and improve the broadband network quality and speeds available in rural communities. However, access to this infrastructure is not a guarantee. Many rural providers lack access to a robust middle mile connection unless their network runs along interstate corridors or near major city populations. In addition, those that have limited access often face significant fees to interconnect as well as on an ongoing monthly basis. Limited access to middle mile can also negatively impact the speed, reliability, and access that rural internet service providers can offer to their customers.

Nowadays, many electric utilities are deploying fiber as part of their internal communications networks. This enables real time monitoring of utility systems, improves response times to outages, and better management of utility resources. But some utilities are also deploying more fiber than is needed, allowing for flexibility for that unused, "dark" fiber to be leased or repurposed for retail broadband. In doing so, it has the dual benefit of increasing the resiliency and reliability of the electric grid while also enabling middle mile access for last mile providers, shortening the distance for network builds and reducing cost.

Some electric cooperatives are also constructing or partnering on new middle mile networks outside their electric footprint. These middle mile networks offer high-capacity, redundant networks across a state, or multiple states, which reduces costs to last mile providers and increases the amount of bandwidth available to consumers, bolstering connectivity in rural areas.

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) included \$1 billion for the Enabling Middle Mile Broadband Infrastructure Program at NTIA. The agency received more than \$5.5 billion in funding requests from providers, including cooperatives.

Proposed Solution

Access to robust middle mile networks is critical to lowering deployment costs in rural areas, and incorporating fiber in electric builds can serve the dual purpose of shortening the distance that last mile internet providers have to build while enhancing the efficiency and resiliency of the electric grid. Strong demand for middle mile funding from NTIA's Enabling Middle Mile Broadband Infrastructure program highlighted the need for more assistance in constructing middle mile networks, especially in rural and remote areas where access is limited or extremely costly.

Expanding access to middle mile can increase the resiliency of internet infrastructure and reduce the costs of connecting unserved and underserved areas across the country. Given the strong need for assistance in building these networks, we urge Congress to provide additional funding for NTIA's Enabling Middle Mile Broadband Infrastructure Program.

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