

# POLICY SOLUTIONS FOR THE PANDEMIC

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## POLICY MEMO: EXPANDING BROADBAND TO UNDERSERVED AREAS MAY 4, 2020

### The Buckeye Institute's Recommendation

Ohio should quickly offer targeted state grants to deploy high-speed broadband service in underserved areas to ensure adequate internet access for online distance learning, telehealth, and remote telework. Government entities, however, should not construct their own broadband networks.

### Background

As the COVID-19 pandemic compels millions of Ohioans to study, work, and remain at home, The Buckeye Institute has suggested several **policy solutions** for dealing with the current crisis and preparing for the next one. We have recommended expanding Ohio's telehealth services for routine medical care and bolstering **education savings accounts** to help families afford the unanticipated costs of distance learning online for their now "home schooled" children. Both recommendations require high-speed broadband internet access. Many Ohioans have multiple broadband providers offering such service, but many across the state still do not and, in the COVID-19 era, they face even greater risk of being left behind.

Expanding broadband access correctly and with the right mechanism has been and remains critical.

First, state and local governments should not develop their own government-owned networks or GONs. As we explained in **Broadband "GON" Wrong: Remembering Why Government-Owned Broadband Networks Are Bad for Taxpayers**, GONs generally provide poor quality service and pass along opaque and high costs to taxpayers—costs that Ohio and its taxpayers can ill-afford as tax revenues sharply decline in the wake of the pandemic. Now is no time for GONs.

Fortunately, there are better ways to expand broadband and Ohio has already taken smart steps in the right direction. At the end of 2019, Governor DeWine's Administration unveiled a **broadband strategy** for the state to partner in coordinating new or existing high-speed internet expansion efforts. To be successful, Ohio should deploy targeted grants that close the gap between what commercial service providers can cost-effectively spend to develop a network and the full cost of providing the "last mile" to underserved communities. The grants should be offset by spending reductions elsewhere in the state budget and focus exclusively on helping communities that have not already received other government assistance to build broadband networks.

### Conclusion

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the essential need to "stay connected." Ohio should develop a limited, strategic grant program to help non-serviced communities access effective high-speed broadband to support online education-, health-, and work-related services.