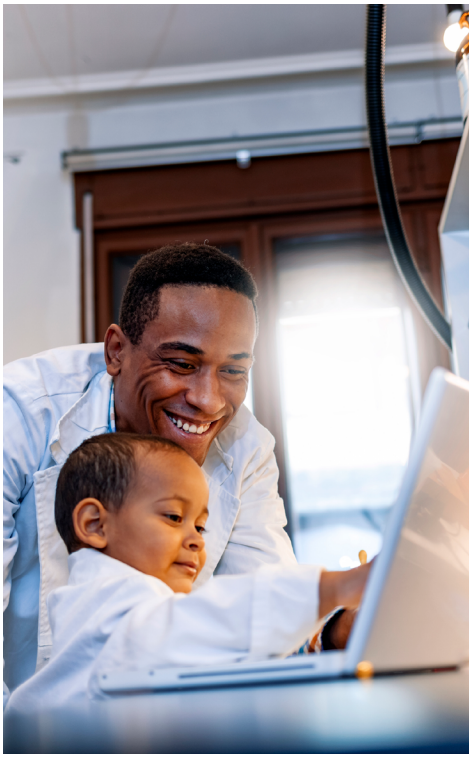
Bridging the Gap

How State and Local Governments Can Create More Equitable Digital Services





Americans are increasingly leveraging technology for everything from telehealth services to remote work. But a growing digital divide has made it difficult for many citizens to access these critical services. Here, Cisco's Sielen Namdar weighs in on how state and local governments can help change that.

When the COVID-19 pandemic first swept the U.S. a year ago, it brought with it a number of challenges. In addition to the obvious health concerns of a global pandemic, COVID-19 has had a profound impact on just about every aspect of daily life, from childcare to education.

But the pandemic also revealed a grave and systemic digital divide between America's wealthiest and most vulnerable communities. According to the Federal Communications Commission, roughly 30 million Americans lack access to high-speed internet, while 40% of people on Native American reservations do not have basic wireless services. This inequity isn't new, but it has taken center stage today as people increasingly rely on digital devices and broadband connectivity for everything from telehealth to distance learning to accessing essential government services.

The idea that access to technology is a privilege as opposed to an essential utility is one that Sielen Namdar, Cisco's industry solutions executive for Cities and Communities, is hoping to change. As a member on Cisco's government industry team leading the development of use cases for digital infrastructure and mass scale networking for government, Namdar works with state and local governments to implement network connectivity solutions aimed at driving digital inclusion and economic development. Here, she offers insight into how state and local governments can work toward narrowing the digital divide in the communities they serve.

What are the most difficult challenges state and local agencies face as they look to provide critical services to citizens?

Namdar: There are a number of key challenges that state and local agencies face in providing essential services to citizens in the aftermath of the pandemic. As their budgets have been severely impacted by falling tax revenues, these challenges have compounded and made it more critical than ever to do more with less. One example of these challenges is the ongoing COVID-19 vaccine administration effort, a monumental public health and citizen services task that needs to be funded and delivered through government means. Meanwhile, shifting to digital government and providing remote, digital services to citizens is also top-of-mind, requiring a major modernization effort on behalf of legacy IT systems. Expanding equitable access to affordable broadband connectivity to citizens as a utility is another key focal point, as the need for remote work, distance learning and telehealth has skyrocketed. And finally, cybersecurity is a significant area of focus and, frankly, the risk associated with hyperconnectivity, as digital technologies are further rolled out to provide better citizen services, which is driving states and local governments to adopt Zero Trust security protocols.

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>
> Sielen Namdar, industry solutions executive for Cities and Communities, Cisco

How does the digital divide impact citizens and their ability to access critical information and services?

Namdar: The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the digital divide as “the economic, educational and social inequalities between those who have computers and online access and those who do not.” There’s been a growing gap between the underprivileged members of society and the rest of the country as it pertains to access to computers, the internet or broadband. This gap is especially prominent for people of color, the elderly, and handicapped populations, as well as in lower socio-economic, rural, and Native American communities.This has had a large impact on these communities, especially during the pandemic, where many of the jobs and essential services – such as education and healthcare – have been transformed into virtual environments, further leaving them behind. So, it’s especially important for state and local governments to invest in mass scale digital infrastructure to bring connectivity and access to everyone.

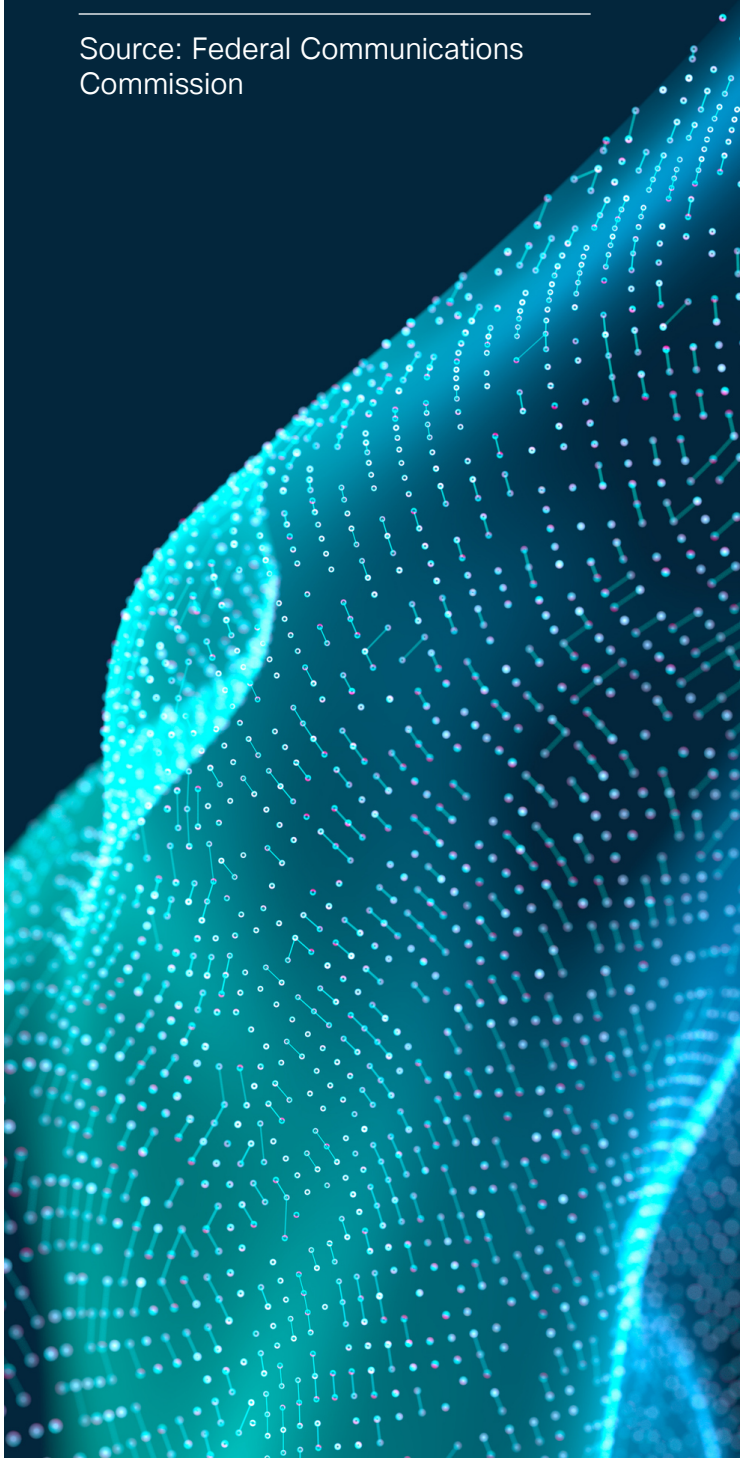
How has the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges? How can cities better ensure access to critical healthcare and connectivity services – while also prioritizing economic development post-pandemic?

Namdar: COVID-19 has pushed the need for secure, reliable connectivity into high gear and the challenge of the digital divide, which existed before the pandemic, has become further exacerbated. Remote work, telehealth, distance learning and digitally delivered social services have now become the norm in most communities. And because of this, access to broadband has become as essential as utilities like water, power, and gas. So it’s absolutely critical to address the challenge of digital connectivity head on to make sure all communities have fair and equitable access to broadband to ensure that a whole generation of adults and children, particularly in underserved communities, are not left behind.

Post-pandemic, we foresee state and local agencies further investing in developing resilience, including robust digital connectivity, in order to enable evolving needs surrounding remote or hybrid work, education, healthcare and government services. Building robust, multi-use digital infrastructure will not only benefit communities and government services such as transportation, water and public safety, but it will also serve as a foundation for economic growth and development. developing a mass scale multi-use digital infrastructure roadmap addresses various needs of the community, while saving costs is important. Collaboration among state and local agency stakeholders is especially key to make sure efforts for a given community or region are coordinated and the implemented digital infrastructure serves as many use cases as possible.

Roughly 30 million Americans lack access to high-speed internet, while 40% of people on Native American reservations do not have basic wireless services.

Source: Federal Communications Commission





Investing in robust broadband infrastructure that serves the needs of the entire community, government, and businesses is the foundation of a vibrant and equitable future. For example, Cisco has worked with the City of Dallas to install IT infrastructure in public areas and provide internet and Wi-Fi hotspots to underserved communities. In the long-term, it is very important to consider broadband as a utility, the same way state and local governments provide water or electric utility to communities. It will no longer be a 'nice to have' asset but rather a necessity for everyone.

What are your recommendations for how state and local agencies can more effectively bridge the digital divide in 2021? What about in the long term?

Namdar: Developing public-private partnership, especially when it comes to assembling creative funding packages is critical. Also various needs of the community, while saving costs is important. Collaboration among state and local agency stakeholders is especially key to make sure efforts for a given community or region are coordinated and the implemented digital infrastructures serves as many use cases as possible.

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How is Cisco uniquely positioned to help states and cities provide critical services and address the digital divide?

Namdar: Cisco is a leader in digital connectivity. We have been connecting the unconnected for more than three decades, and we are now helping our state and local government customers build mass-scale multi-use digital infrastructure that can close the digital divide, and support the business of running the government, address the community needs, and meet the economic development goals.

Closing the digital divide is at the heart of Cisco's mission, and we are well-positioned to help communities build resiliency through high quality and affordable digital access. Cisco believes in an inclusive future for all where everyone has access to high-speed internet. We are working with numerous state and local agencies across the U.S. and globally to build the inclusive digital infrastructure of the future.

Click here to learn more about how Cisco can help you address the digital divide in your community.

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