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[To Bridge the Digital Divide, Cities Tap Their Own Infrastructure.](#)

The challenges of virtual school have pushed some cities to try new ideas for expanding internet access.

When the pandemic shut down schools in March, it created a new urgency to narrow the digital gap in the U.S. as millions of students struggled to participate in remote learning because they didn't have internet access at home. It also reinforced the reality that the divide doesn't just exist between rural and urban communities, but also within America's largest cities. Some 500,000 households lack reliable connection in New York City, for example; in Chicago, 1 in 5 students don't have broadband, according to data published at the start of the pandemic.

As many local governments have scrambled to secure internet access for children in virtual school, some policies could last past the pandemic. One popular approach in cities like Washington, D.C., and Chicago has been providing low-cost or free service to families who can't afford a broadband subscription, and the tech devices to go with them. Some measures are currently set up to last only a year, while others, like Chicago's, will continue for several years. Recognizing that the digital divide will persist after the pandemic, digital inclusion advocates say there is a need for more permanent solutions.

One approach that's gained traction is for local communities to play a direct role in providing internet service — in many cases by building their own or relying on their own infrastructure.

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