

[Home](#) >> [Opinion](#)

# NEVADA VIEWS: The urgent need to bridge America's digital divide



(Getty Images)

By Rick Benbow Special to the Review-Journal

November 14, 2020 - 9:00 pm



Don't miss the big stories. Like us on Facebook. [Like 277K](#)

Although the topics of education and expanded access to broadband were largely absent in political discourse leading up the election, it's important to address one of the most critical disparities in America: the digital divide. It's not political, nor is it receiving the attention it so desperately requires.

For most Americans there's an assumption that easy access to the internet is simply a given. Sadly, that's not the case for many residents in both rural and urban areas. There is an all-too-real digital divide between those with and without ready access to high-speed broadband. At a time when education has taken a back seat in political discussions, we must bring focus back to this issue for the sake of our future world.

The statistics dramatically illustrate the current digital divide. It's estimated that more than 21 million Americans do not have ready access to broadband internet, with lower-income households among the hardest hit. Approximately 44 percent of households with income under \$30,000 per year are among those currently without internet access. In rural America, it's estimated that the digital divide affects more than half the population. And though 58 percent of rural Americans believe the lack of high-speed internet constitutes a significant problem, it's a difficult one to overcome because rural areas are less likely to have the infrastructure required for

overcome because rural areas are less likely to have the infrastructure required for broadband services.

Internet access is no longer a luxury but rather an absolute necessity in ensuring economic prosperity for all. Between 1980 and 2015, occupations requiring a higher level of job preparation grew by 68 percent, and it's estimated that between 2016 and 2026 the number of jobs requiring a bachelor's degree will increase by an additional 10 percent. The catch is that these days it's nearly impossible to imagine obtaining a postsecondary degree without easy, affordable access to the internet.

In response to this ongoing crisis, Western Governors University is providing high-speed internet access and laptops to students who need them through its Online Access Scholarship program. WGU understands that improving the quality of, and access to, education increases opportunity for those pursuing higher education degrees.

Of course, the pandemic has only exacerbated this pre-existing problem. It is essential for both the public and private sectors to eradicate the digital divide that is harming the most vulnerable Americans.

Prior to the arrival of the pandemic, an increasing number of employees were working from a remote home office. In accordance with recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines, many businesses now require employees to work from home. It's estimated that well more than half of employees are now working remotely.

Additionally, millions of people who have experienced layoffs are now exploring online educational opportunities as a means to beginning a new career or enhancing their current level of skill.

Millions of people are seeking to maintain or restart their careers and explore new areas of study. As a result, access to reliable high-speed internet is crucial to our nation's economic stability.

While the digital divide has long been a challenge for students and job seekers, the pandemic has proven that we can no longer ignore this harsh reality. Private- and public-sector leaders must add their energetic voices to the movement ensuring that all Americans have reliable, affordable internet access.

The first step to bridging the divide is to support organizations that promote low-cost internet access and affordable computers, such as Everyoneon. Our collective economic health, educational advancement and the recovery from this year's challenges all depend upon the decision to take small, measurable steps toward expanding critical internet infrastructure and making internet access affordable to all.

By taking action now, government and business leaders can work together to construct the foundation upon which our nation's educational and economic success will be rebuilt, inclusive of access to broadband technology and equitable pathways to opportunity.