A U.S. Army Soldier with the 5th Security Force Assistance Brigade sets up a network communication device during the Vanguard Communications Advisor Course at Joint Base Lewis McChord, Washington, Sept. 1, 2020. (U.S. Army Photo by Spc. Joseph Knoch)

Closing the Digital Divide

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In early 2020, COVID-19 spread rapidly across the U.S. as many schools, businesses, and military institutions closed their doors to traditional practices transitioning to a digital way of life (Auxier & Anderson, 2020). Living rooms became classrooms and medical exam offices as distance education and virtual medical care became commonplace for many Americans. This was a great leap forward in innovation, but only for those with reliable broadband internet. This article examines the strengths and weaknesses of internet capabilities both in the classroom and in the medical field and offers solutions to increase it fairly for everyone.

The Gap

Although computers and handheld devices are common within the American household, millions of rural, urban, and low-income families lack home access to broadband internet due to Federal Communications Commission (FCC) policies and their current model of regulating internet access like a utility telephone service (Spector, 2019). Currently, there are 42 million Americans, including service members and Department of the Army (DA) Civilians, who lack access to broadband internet (Busby & Tanberk, 2021).

Veteran Care

COVID-19 halted numerous government services, to include in-person medical services. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2021), "VA's use of video visits increased by more than 1,700% within fiscal year 2020. Video visits accounted for 160,000 video visits to homes in a single week" (para .15). This influx of virtual care created a need for more providers and online care services that, coupled with the pandemic, forced more veterans to transition to a computer-generated environment many are unfamiliar with, possibly don't have access to, or with increased data usage, might not be able to afford.

While public internet spots are often free, many places, such as libraries, remain closed. These access hubs play a vital role in allowing veterans to receive the care they need, especially the homeless population who are in a constant struggle to receive needed care.

Rural Obstacles

Broadband internet is sparse in many outlying, rural areas. Throughout rural America, 39% of individuals— an estimated 24 million people—lack broadband access (Spector, 2019). In terms of education, this can cause frequent drops in connection and computer program malfunctions, causing schoolwork to be difficult to complete or turn in on time (Wright, 2021). But distance learning in rural areas has benefits for both school districts and students.

For school districts it can save money by reducing transportation costs and slowing the daily strain on crumbling classroom structures (Hannum & Irvin, 2017). And for students it can increase educational opportunities as many rural high schools do not offer Advanced Placement (AP) courses or college-level courses, due to low enrollments or lack of facilities and qualified staff (Onwuameze, 2017).

A U.S. Army Soldier assigned to 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 7th Infantry Division, works on upgrading communication and networking systems at North Fort Lewis, Washington, Feb. 22, 2021. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Dean Johnson)

Urban Obstacles

Even though the affordability of portable devices, especially smartphones, is shortening the digital divide, there are still significant gaps for many students at their homes. While rural citizens have limited access due to their remote geography, urban residents lack access because of low income or a lack of knowledge about the internet.

Beltran et al. (2017) conducted a study with the Federal Reserve and found less than 40% of American households with annual incomes below $20,000 have broadband access at home, while 93% with revenues exceeding $75,000 have high-speed internet (p.12). Ironically, numerous universities and public elementary schools offer laptop computers or tablets to their students, yet many cannot access their homework, digital textbooks, or submit assignments once they leave school grounds.

This lack of internet access forces them to seek other locations like public libraries or coffee shops offering free Wi-Fi. Not only are there COVID-19 safety issues in public settings, but these open Wi-Fi hotspots can also place students in a dangerous position of having their personal data compromised by outside entities (Beltran et al., 2017).

Healing the Gap

Without fast and reliable broadband access, countless modern and life-changing activities, such as online medical visits and educational opportunities, are impossible. Identifying options and affordability for low-income consumers would be a step to help them gain broadband access.

Residential Wi-Fi

Many low-income families live in apartment buildings or government housing, so instead of each family paying for internet service, providers could place wifi devices in locations where large numbers of people could get service. Acting on the same premise as public Wi-Fi, this would provide a safer experience because each family would have its own password and students would not have to travel outside their home to gain internet access.

Stop Discriminatory Access

Another solution would be for providers to stop digital redlining (systematically denying or making services difficult to attain in certain areas)—creating inequalities between already marginalized groups through technology, content, and the internet, (Falcon, 2021). For example, studies have shown that AT&T, one of the largest national telecommunications providers, digitally redlined public housing areas when laying out new fiber nodes throughout the city of Dallas (Callahan, 2019). These restrictions left lower-income neighborhoods with severely limited and uneven internet access.

Veteran Services

The VA, along with other veterans' advocacy groups and major companies, are working to provide services to those in need. For example, the VA has partnered with carriers such as Verizon, T-Mobile, and Sprint, to waive data charges for VA telehealth services (Department of

Veterans Affairs, 2020). Obviously, medical providers cannot meet all patient needs virtually, but they are now able to routinely conduct numerous services once thought impossible to complete online, like behavioral health and annual physicals (Najarro, 2020). Additionally, veterans and current service members alike can now save valuable time by receiving these services from their homes, keeping virus exposure to a minimum.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has forced institutions and government agencies to change daily operations but at a cost many Americans struggle to afford. Today's digital footprint is spreading but leaving millions of people behind due to their geography or financial situations. It's time to level the playing field and offer high speed internet, and the opportunities and benefits that come with it, to everyone. ■

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