



ARConnect

The Arkansas State Broadband Office

A Thought Piece

**After Access: The Next Phase
of Broadband Investment in
Arkansas**

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Disclaimer

This thought leadership piece contains the express written opinion of Glen E. Howie, Jr., Arkansas State Broadband Director, and reflects his current thinking on the future of broadband investment in the State. It is intended to inform policy discussions. Any examples contained in the piece are illustrative in nature and not exhaustive.

For years, the conversation around broadband has focused on access - getting high-speed internet into the places that have gone without it for far too long. That work is finally happening at scale.

Through the federal Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) program, states like Arkansas are making a once-in-a-generation investment to close the digital divide. In Arkansas alone, more than \$1 billion in funding will bring high-speed internet access to more than 79,000 homes and businesses, impacting nearly 200,000 Arkansans.

That is a major step forward. But it raises an important question:

What happens after access?

A National Leader

Arkansas is positioned not just to expand broadband, but to do it the right way.

Under the leadership of Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the state is on track to deliver results at one of the lowest average costs in the country, at just \$3,889 per location. Leveraging a market-driven broadband strategy, Arkansas has awarded a BEAD grant for every single eligible home and business, while also saving more than \$275 million in taxpayer funds compared to the prior version of the program.

We have already seen the results of that approach. Between 2021 and 2024, Arkansas led the nation in broadband connectivity growth, including a nearly 20% increase in rural connectivity over the past two years alone.

That progress did not happen by accident. It reflects a clear strategy, strong partnerships, and a commitment to execution.

Beyond Deployment

Broadband access is essential. But it is not enough.

Broadband only delivers value when it is used, when it helps a small business reach new customers, when it allows a patient to see a doctor without having to drive for hours, when it gives a student the tools to succeed.

Too often, success is measured by miles of fiber or coverage maps. Those metrics matter, but they are not outcomes. The real measure of success is whether connectivity translates into stronger communities, a more competitive workforce, and better economic opportunity.

Maximizing Impact

To realize the full value of this investment, broadband must be integrated into Arkansas' broader economic strategy.

Workforce development is a critical part of that effort. Digital skills can no longer be treated as optional. Arkansans need access to training that goes beyond basic literacy, into areas like data analysis, cybersecurity, and cloud technologies. That requires alignment between education and industry. Universities, community colleges, and workforce programs must work directly with employers to ensure training reflects real-world demand.

It also requires continued partnership. Providers, local governments, chambers of commerce, and private industry all have a role to play in turning connectivity into measurable outcomes.

Supporting Arkansas' Economic Future

Broadband has the potential to strengthen every sector of the economy.

In healthcare, it enables telehealth services that can expand access in rural communities. In finance, it supports digital banking tools that reduce barriers for families. In government, it improves access to services and information. But access alone does not guarantee adoption.

Many Arkansans, particularly older residents and lower-income households, face barriers to using new technology. Addressing those gaps will require targeted outreach, practical training, and a focus on building confidence, not just connectivity.

If we want broadband to deliver on its promise, we have to meet people where they are.

Building a Stronger Tomorrow

The success of BEAD in Arkansas will not be measured by dollars spent or miles of fiber laid. It will be measured by outcomes.

Stronger local economies.
Better jobs.
Improved healthcare.
More resilient communities.

This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity. But it will only deliver lasting value if we move beyond access and focus on impact. That work will take time. It will require coordination, discipline, and continued commitment.

But if we get it right, broadband will not just connect Arkansas. It will help power its future.