Trump Called Digital Equity Act ‘Racist.’ Now Internet Money for Rural Americans Is Gone.

Access to high-speed internet is among a host of social factors, like food and safe housing, that help people lead healthier lives.

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Megan Waiters can recite the stories of dozens of people she has helped connect to the internet in western Alabama. A 7-year-old who couldn’t do classwork online without a tablet, and the 91-year-old she taught to check health care portals on a smartphone.

“They have health care needs, but they don’t have the digital skills,” said Waiters, who is a digital navigator for an Alabama nonprofit. Her work has involved giving away computers and tablets while also teaching classes on how to use the internet for work and personal needs, like banking and health. “It’s like a foreign space.”

Those stories are now bittersweet.

Waiters is part of a network of digital navigators across the country whose work to bring others into the digital world was, at least in part, propped up by a $2.75 billion federal program that abruptly canceled funding this spring. The halt came after President Donald Trump posted on his Truth Social platform that the Digital Equity Act was unconstitutional and pledged “no more woke handouts based on race!”

The act lists exactly whom the money should benefit, including low-income households, older residents, some incarcerated people, rural Americans, veterans, and members of racial or ethnic minority groups. Politicians, researchers, librarians, and advocates said defunding the program, along with other changes in federal broadband initiatives, jeopardizes efforts to help rural and underserved residents participate in the modern economy and lead healthier lives.

“You could see lives change,” said Sam Helmick, president of the American Library Association, recalling how they helped grandpas in Iowa check prescriptions online or laid-off factory workers fill out job applications.

The Digital Equity Act is part of the sweeping 2021 infrastructure law, which included $65 billion to

build high-speed internet infrastructure and connect millions without access to the internet.

This year, Congress once again pushed for a modern approach to help Americans, mandating that state leaders prioritize new and emerging technologies through its $50 billion Rural Health Transformation Program.

A KFF Health News analysis found that nearly 3 million people in America live in areas with shortages of medical professionals and where modern telehealth services are often inaccessible because of poor internet connections. The analysis found that in about 200 mostly rural counties where dead zones persist, residents live sicker and die earlier on average than people in the rest of the country. Access to high-speed internet is among a host of social factors, like food and safe housing, that help people lead healthier lives.

“The internet provides this extra layer of resilience,” said Christina Filipovic, who leads the research for an initiative of the Institute for Business in the Global Context at Tufts University. The research group found in 2022 that access to high-speed internet correlated with fewer COVID deaths, particularly in metro areas.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, federal lawmakers launched a subsidy program paid for by the infrastructure law. That aid, called the Affordable Connectivity Program, aimed to connect more people to their jobs, schools, and doctors. In 2024, Congress did not renew funding for the subsidy program, which had enrolled about 23 million low-income households.

This year, U.S. Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick revamped and delayed the infrastructure law’s construction initiative — known as the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment Program, or BEAD — after announcing plans to reduce regulatory burdens. More than 40 states and territories have submitted final proposals to extend high-speed internet to underserved areas under the administration’s new guidelines, according to a Commerce Department dashboard.

In May, the Digital Equity Act’s funding was terminated within days of Trump’s Truth Social post. While many states in 2022 had received money to plan their programs, the next round of funding, designated for states and agencies to implement the plans, had largely been awarded but not distributed.

Instead, federal regulators — including the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, the federal agency overseeing implementation of the Digital Equity Act — notified recipients that the grants would be terminated. The grants were created and administered with “unconstitutional racial preferences,” according to the letter.

In Phoenix, officials learned in January that the city was slated to get $11.8 million to increase internet access and teach digital literacy, but they received an email May 20 stating that all grants, “except for grants to Native Entities,” had been terminated. “It’s a shame,” said Phoenix Mayor Kate Gallego, a Democrat. The money, she said, would have helped 37,000 residents get internet access.

Georgia's Democratic leaders in July sent a letter to Lutnick and NTIA's then-acting administrator, Adam Cassady, urging reinstatement of the money, noting that the federal cut ignores congressional intent and violates public trust.

The act's creator, Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.), said during an online press conference in May that Republican governors in 2024 supported the law and its funding when each state touted completing its required digital equity plans and asked for resources.

"I cannot believe there aren't Republican governors out there that are going to join with us to fight back on this," Murray said, adding "the other way is through courts."

All 50 states developed digital equity plans after months of focus groups, surveys, and public comment periods. NTIA Digital Equity Director Angela Thi Bennett, during an August 2024 interview with KFF Health News, said the "intentional community engagement" by federal and state leaders to deliver broadband to unserved communities was "the greatest demonstration of participatory democracy our country has ever seen."

Thi Bennett could not be reached for comment on this article. NTIA spokesperson Stephen Yusko said the agency "will not be able to accommodate" a request for an interview with Thi Bennett and did not respond to questions for this article.

Caroline Stratton, a research director at the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, said the act's funding allowed states to staff offices; identify existing high-speed internet programs, including those operating within other state agencies; and create plans to fill the gaps.

"This sent folks out looking," Stratton said, to see whether agencies in the state were already working on health improvement plans and to ask whether the broadband work could contribute and "actively help move the needle."

State grant applications included goals to promote health care access. In Mississippi, the plan consists of the state university and another agency's health improvement plan, Stratton said.

While states were required to create programs that would help specific covered populations, some states modified the language or added subcategories to include other populations. Colorado's plan included immigrants and "individuals experiencing homelessness."

"In every state, there's a loss," said Angela Siefer, executive director of the National Digital Inclusion Alliance. The nonprofit, which was awarded nearly $26 million to work with organizations nationwide but did not receive any funds, filed a lawsuit Oct. 7 seeking to force Trump and the administration to distribute the money.

"The digital divide is not over," Siefer said.

The nonprofit's grant had been planned to support digital navigators in 11 states and territories, including Waiters. Her employer, the nonprofit Community Service Programs of West Alabama,

expected to receive a $1.4 million grant.

In the past two years, Waiters spent hours driving the roads of rural Alabama to reach residents. She has distributed 648 devices — laptops, tablets, and SIM cards — and helped hundreds of clients through 117 two-hour digital skills classes at libraries, senior centers, and workplace development programs in and around Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

People of “all races, of all ages, of all financial backgrounds” who did not “fit into our typical minority category” were helped through her work, Waiters said. Trump and his administration should know, she said, “what it actually looks like for the people I serve.”

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