Ed: Hello and welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast from the National Conference of State Legislatures. This podcast is all about legislatures, the people in them, the policies, process, and politics that shape them. I am your host, Ed Smith.

AS: Trust is a really big factor. Because technology keeps changing, we don’t always trust what’s happening to us.

Ed: That was Angela Siefer, the executive director of the National Digital Inclusion Alliance. She is one of my guests on the program along with Erlinda Doherty in NCSL’s Washington office. Erlinda is senior legislative director with the Communications, Financial Services and Interstate Commerce Committee. Our focus is the $65 billion for high-speed internet, or broadband, in the $1.2 trillion Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act that was signed into law in November 2021. That bill includes nearly $45 billion to serve parts of the country that are not well served with broadband, and also provide other services so people can both connect and make use of the service.

Erlinda breaks down the financing, explains how the federal government will administer the program and the actions states need to take to participate.
Angela discusses what communities are most in need of broadband service, the importance of providing not just service, but also devices and the critical role of teaching digital skills and literacy.

This is the fifth and final installment of our podcast series on the IIJA and the massive infusion of infrastructure money to the states. Our earlier episodes broke down the overall financing, the water projects covered under the bill, the highways, bridges and transportation programs and the impact the legislation will have on the nation’s energy system.

Here is our discussion starting with Erlinda Doherty.

Erlinda, welcome to the podcast.

ED: Thank you so much Ed. You know I’m honored to be a part of this podcast series because I know that it provides valuable inside information for elected state leaders and staff. So thanks for giving me a little stage here today.

Ed: Well this is the fifth of the podcasts that we’ve done about the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. But let’s talk about the broadband aspect of it. How much money are we talking about here and what’s the goal from the federal perspective?

ED: Yeah Ed. That’s a great question. I mean we are talking here about an unprecedented amount of funding. And I feel like we’ve been saying that phrase a lot you know since COVID, the COVID pandemic. We’ve used the phrase unprecedented amounts of funding like on a daily basis. But in all seriousness, President Biden’s bipartisan Infrastructure Law provides $65 billion in funding to expand high speed internet access. And these grant programs aim to make high speed internet affordable for all. They fund planning, infrastructure and adoption efforts that promote digital equity and inclusion. So obviously these funds are a huge, huge important piece of resources that has been lacking since the pandemic. And the Biden
administration really, really wants to connect everyone in America to affordable, reliable high-speed internet. We all realized during the pandemic when much of our life went online, the absolute necessity of having reliable and accessible internet. So the bipartisan Infrastructure Law again provides 65 billion dollars again unprecedented in helping to achieve that goal. And these funds also add to and support existing programs that expand internet access for all.

Ed: After doing this series of podcasts, I’ve started to appreciate how much a trillion dollars is and how potentially transformative that is for so many aspects of our society and $65 billion applied to this sounds like it may be transformative as well. How does this all work? How do states get this money? This has got to be a pretty complicated challenge for the federal government in administering this.

ED: As you can imagine Ed, you know just like previous programs that we had for Covid relief and recovery. Funding of this magnitude requires a whole of government approach. A true across the board of federal/state partnership. So currently four federal agencies are leading this historic effort. The National Telecommunications Information Administration or the NTIA. The Federal Communications Commission, the FCC. The Department of Treasury and the U.S. Department of Agriculture or USDA. And as I mentioned earlier, these programs support high speed internet planning, infrastructure and adoption.

Let’s just spend a moment describing what these ideas actually mean. So planning includes data collection, mapping and feasibility studies to develop internet expansion projects. And infrastructure of course sounds just like what it is. It refers to the actual physical needs that states and localities and citizens need for high-speed internet deployment. And finally adoption. Adoption activities are those that ensure users can access and meaningful use high speed internet. This would include initiatives such as subsidies, equipment, public access, digital literacy, skills training, workforce development. Even telehealth and remote learning. So again the goal of these programs is to achieve digital equity through improved access
and intentional inclusive planning hence the state/federal partnership because we know everyone in our Country should have access to reliable and affordable high-speed internet. So, to backtrack for a moment, the NTIA is administering the bulk of this program $48 billion to be exact, through the $42.5 billion broadband, equity, access and deployment program or as we like to call it the BEAD program. Also, the $2.75 billion digital equity program or the DEA. The $2 billion tribal connectivity technical amendments program and finally the $1 billion enabling middle mile broadband infrastructure program. So, all of these programs are of particular interest to states. But for sure we cannot talk about the $42.5 billion BEAD program which is truly charged with getting all Americans online by funding partnerships between states, communities and stakeholders to build infrastructure where it is needed and increase adoption of high-speed internet. All 50 states and territories are eligible to apply. Examples of eligible uses of these funds include planning and deployment of internet, deploying or upgrading internet, installing of internet in multi-tenant buildings, implementing adoption and digital equity programs and of course workforce and job training. The funding pool in the DEA or the digital equity act is also important. The $2.7 billion here contains $60 million in formula funding for states to develop digital equity plans, and $1.44 billion in formula funding to implement plans to promote digital inclusion. And 1 and a quarter billion dollars in competitive funding to implement digital equity and inclusion programs. Finally, also critical is the middle mile ramp program, which provides $1 billion dollars to invest in the construction, improvement or acquisition of middle mile infrastructure, which is defined as that midsection of the infrastructure that carries large amounts of data at high speed over long distances and connects the backbone of the internet infrastructure to the last mile or the end users.

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Ed: That is a good summary of a very complicated program. It’s amazing you know all the elements that are involved in a $65 billion effort like this. So, back to the money. How do states get that money? As I understand it, all
the states have to submit a plan to say this is what they this is how they will achieve these things that are laid out in the legislation.

ED: Exactly. And as I mentioned you know it is this sort of federal/state partnership the federal government is giving the resources to the states. But of course, the states need to be ready and have this strategy in place to implement them fully and execute them properly. States such as Ohio, Idaho and Nebraska have most recently received their funds under the BEAD and DEA programs and they are good examples of state’s efforts to gain access to the funds. So yes states need to work together internally to formulate plans to receive the funds. They must coordinate and engage with localities and other stakeholder groups and communities. And this is encouraged to be done through the execution of state broadband offices which can help create the internal infrastructure to manage and track all of the historical resources involved in these programs.

Ed: I had a news alert on my phone just the other day about the new FCC broadband map and I’m not sure I would have been familiar with them if you and I hadn’t talked about it briefly a few days ago. Why are these so important?

ED: Yes and we were all waiting with bated breath for sure for these maps to come out. Well one of the most important pieces of information that we need to know is actually where the broadband gaps are so that the funding can be deployed properly and meet the mission and critical needs of this program. So just recently on November 18th the FCC unveiled the long awaited what they are calling pre-production drafts of these new broadband maps and these maps provide the best picture available to date of where broadband is and is not available across the country. And to help policymakers more accurately target investments to expand broadband to underserved and unserved areas and close that digital divide. The problem is that the FCC’s maps before then had previously relied on information that failed to paint the whole picture of who did and didn’t have access to the internet. The FCC’s older maps collected data at the census block level being that if a single home was served in a census block, the whole block
would show up as served on our maps. The net result was of course inaccurate and glossed over actual gaps. With these new maps, the FCC has integrated the information from broadband providers with hundreds of locations, specific data sources giving us a far more detailed and accurate picture of fixed broadband availability. But just to be sure or just to make sure we are clear on this; these maps are also not perfect and states and other stakeholders have an opportunity to further improve these maps through a challenge process whereby further information can be submitted to the FCC to further incorporate revisions and make refinements to these maps. And just an FYI, state municipalities need to submit these challenges by January 13, 2023, so that the corrections can be incorporated into the final version of the map that will be used to allocate the BEAD funding in June 2023.

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Ed: Well I think that is a fascinating if nerdy detail about how they did the original maps. I find that sort of thing really a kind of incredible and exactly why we need experts like you to explain this to us because who would have thought that the census maps were going to so overrepresent how many people have broadband access. So, that is really very interesting. I wonder when people will actually in the states actually see this money and what kind of timeline is there? When do we, when are we going to see a significant expansion of broadband? I’m sure this won’t solve all of our digital divide problems in this country, but when will we actually see results on the ground?

ED: Yeah so actually you know as I mentioned above, some states have already started to receive funds from the BEAD program for planning and implementation purposes. And these five-year plans should actually be on every state’s priority list right now. And in fact there are a lot of states that are working on that. And then of course submitting the challenges to the just released FCC maps by January 13, 2023. So we see a lot of activity happening right now. But according to the implementation guidelines or milestones that the NTIA has put out, these funds are technically supposed
to start for actual implementation by June of next year so June of 2023. But states have also begun to receive funds from the 2.75 billion DEA program for planning purposes with state applications and awards starting mid-2024. And finally, the $1 billion middle mile program is also underway. Applications were due by this past fall and rolling awards will begin by March 2023 for a five-year deployment timeframe. All of this information, I know it sounds complicated because some of these programs have sort of started and we’ve got the planning happening and then of course allocations happening later on. But all this information is pretty well laid out on the websites for all these agencies and TIA of course and FCC for people to look at, but now is the time really to start ahm if you haven’t already now is clearly the time for states to be really planning and working together on their strategic plans for not just the plans, but also the longer five-year multiyear implementation processes.

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Ed: I know that one thing legislators and legislative staff can always do is contact NCSL staff and ask questions and get more detail, but I wonder just as we wrap up and a general summing up is there anything else you would want to share with staff and legislators about this program?

ED: Yeah Ed. Thank you so much. I mean you know this is a historic opportunity for states to address an important problem in our country that really came to light during the Covid pandemic. I mean it was always there, but it really came into the spotlight when we were all having to shutdown and live basically our life online. So we at NCSL of course excited about the resources being given to states for them to guide and manage the implementation of these funds for their own citizens needs and we are encouraged by the federal government’s acknowledge of the state’s critical role in all of this. So we look forward to continuing to be a big resource for our members and be vigilant and you know we need to ask our members to continue to tune into NCSL outlets for updated information as well as the NTIA, FCC and treasury websites as I mentioned earlier. Let’s all work together to get everyone connected.
Ed: Absolutely. Well Erlinda thanks so much for walking through this big picture for us and this is a great one to conclude our series on the IIJA. Thanks so much. Take care.

ED: Thank you Ed.

Ed: I’ll be right back with Angela Siefer from the National Digital Inclusion Alliance.

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Ed: Angela, welcome to the podcast.

AS: Thanks for having me Ed.

Ed: First of all, thanks so much for coming on the show. I think this is a very interesting topic. I wonder if we could start with you just telling us a little bit about your organization and what its mission is.

AS: Sure. I’m the executive director of the National Digital Inclusion Alliance. We got started about eight years ago because there wasn’t an entity representing on the ground digital inclusion practitioners. These are community-based organizations, libraries, housing authorities, local governments and others who are helping individuals get access to affordable technology, the internet devices. But then also teaching digital skills, providing tech support and that type of thing. Policymakers who are making decisions and these local folks were not engaged in those decisions. We’ve changed that. They are now engaged in that decision making. But also it’s now a place for those who do that digital inclusion work to talk to each other, share best practices, share lessons learned, share mistakes so that we can all move forward.

Ed: Before we did this podcast and I was reading up on what I thought I knew about the digital divide; I realized that I didn’t really know very much about
it and that it is a great deal more complex I think than maybe a lot of people in the audience would understand. So I wonder if you could break that down for our listeners. Who is coming up short in our society when it comes both to access and the capacity to use broadband?

AS: The population most folks are aware are those in rural areas because there are places that just physically don’t have that infrastructure deployed to them or they have a really old infrastructure and it’s not providing the speeds and the reliability that they need. But the other barriers are affordability. Sometimes there may be that infrastructure there, but folks can’t afford it. This is probably the most common barrier. But then connected to that is also the appropriate device. Just because someone has a mobile phone doesn’t mean that they have the actual device that they need to accomplish their tasks and to can we even say strive in life. And then there’s the digital skills. The digital skills are a kind of piece of this. It’s always going to keep changing and we are never fully going to have solved the digital divide because the technology will keep changing so what we don’t have yet and we need to have are those systems that will provide that tech support and that help for all of us to grow and figure out how to use the next thing.

Ed: Thanks for giving us that overview. We wanted to talk today about the significant federal funding and the Infrastructure Investment Jobs Act to deploy broadband to connect more communities to increase online access. One of the things we were just talking about was the affordability issues so is there federal funding to help consumers who might have difficulty affording this?

AS: There is. During the pandemic when all of the awareness was raised around these additional barriers beyond the availability, one of the things Congress did was to create a fund for that service itself. So it’s now called the Affordable Connectivity Program. It’s run out of the Federal Communications Commission and it’s a $30 a month subsidy so it’s a significant amount for your bill. It doesn’t always cover it because internet service is expensive. In fact, a report just came out today by Consumer
Reports telling us that the average cost of broadband service in the home is $75 a month. So $30 may not always cut it, but some of the providers do have low cost offers. So for some folks, it can fully cover the bill. This funding though has a time limit, not a time limit. It has a dollar limit and so when we hit that limit, we will no longer have funding. So we are going to need to explain to Congress that we are going to need more money because this problem isn’t going away.

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Ed: So as you were just saying, getting the infrastructure there, making sure people can connect is one part of it. But what kind of programs are there that can help people make those next steps you were just talking about? Actually getting a usable device. Being able to have the training to use it.

AS: Many of the programs around this are local. There are a few that are statewide, but they tend to be local programs. And even those that are statewide have partners who are local. And the reason for this is because trust is a really big factor. Because technology keeps changing, we don’t always trust what’s happening to us right cuz we fear what we don’t understand. And there is in fact we all know, a lot to fear about the internet. So having a trusted individual and an organization or institution that you already have a relationship with can really help an individual move forward in being able to learn how to use these tools.

Ed: So as you were saying the money is limited and I’m wondering once this federal infrastructure funding expires, what do you think states will do in terms of broadband deployment? Will they continue to try to roll that out? I’m sure it varies from state to state as does almost everything. I dare ask will the digital divide be eliminated. I kind of think I know the answer to that already, but maybe you could qualify that a little bit.

AS: Yeah I am really, really sure we are not going to eliminate the digital divide in the broad kind of sense, but that doesn’t mean we can’t make amazing gains in particular aspects of the digital divide. So, for example, making sure
that everyone has access to that internet service. That is something we can get to. We can make sure the service is available. Getting folks to actually subscribe is another issue right. That’s making sure that they have that digital those digital skills, that they have access to the training, that they have the device and that it’s affordable. So I do expect states to keep working on this after this federal funding is gone because kind of like the genie is out of the bottle kind of thing right. There is now an increased understanding of the necessity of having access to the internet and understanding how to use it. I can’t imagine a space or a time where we go back and be like well it’s actually fine if we don’t.

Ed: Let me ask you about the digital skills and literacy piece of this. I think we all know from almost any line of work that there’s a constant learning curve whether it’s learning how to edit video or we’re learning some new proprietary system in a company. It’s an ongoing, really kind of a lifelong process. And I wonder if you’ve seen programs in states that you think might be something for maybe our listeners to take a look at if they have an interest in doing something of that sort in their state.

AS: Yeah absolutely. First place is to look is your state library. So what is the state library doing to support digital skill building around the state. Many of those state libraries have programs where they support the libraries on this. Sometimes there is actual money coming in either from the state or from another grant source that the state library has tapped into to be able to help the libraries provide that digital skills training. There is also a newly developing model called digital navigators. And this is the idea that there is an individual either at the library or at another location. Maryland is doing theirs at a variety of locations. They help individuals in their community not only with the digital skills, but with choosing that internet service provider, getting signed up for that affordable connectivity program, determining if there is a device available. The device part of this is really a challenging piece of it. Right now we have supply chain issues. But in addition to the device being expensive, you may not actually be able to get one. So the idea of refurbishing devices is something that’s really taking off. A lot of communities are figuring out how they can work with corporate partners.
So instead of those corporate partners having leases where they turn over devices and then it goes to who knows where, the devices that they turn over then stay in the community. Get refurbished to be a really solid and valuable device; not just a leftover that a family can make full use of.

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Ed: Looking down the road here, we are just talking about the federal infrastructure money will expire and what would you share with states about the best things they can do to increase both the broadband adoption part of this and the digital literacy part?

AS: That trust piece is really essential. So states shouldn’t just be like well we will have a bunch of state agencies take care of this and it will be fine because state agencies aren’t always trusted by communities who are at risk for a variety of issues right. So we need to make sure that that trust is there. We also need to look at what is learned, what we’ve learned over the past. During the pandemic, we learned a lot because a lot of folks were trying things, which was awesome. One of those things is that hotspots are not the answer. Hotspots are one answer to this whole problem, but we can’t just be like well buy a thousand hotspots. We will give it to whomever doesn’t have service because it’s a short-term expensive solution and they often have data caps. These hotspots do. So making sure that our families have access to reliable affordable internet like for the long term; not just for the short term is really important.

Ed: Well Angela thank you so much for walking us through this. I know this is an area that a lot of us are aware of, but probably don’t have nearly the level of detail in terms of information that would probably help us make better decisions about this topic going forward. Thanks so much.

AS: Thanks for having me again.

Ed: I’ve been talking with Erlinda Doherty of NCSL and Angela Siefer from the National Digital Inclusion Alliance about how money for broadband in the
IIJA will affect digital access in the nation’s unserved and underserved communities. Thanks for listening.

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