

## Why GAO Did This Study

While broadband is available to a majority of Americans, barriers have kept some from subscribing and enjoying its benefits. In 2010, FCC published the National Broadband Plan, which noted that some demographic groups lagged behind others in adopting broadband and called on FCC and NTIA to take action to address these barriers.

GAO was asked to examine progress in addressing broadband adoption barriers. This report examines (1) benefits of home broadband adoption, (2) barriers to adoption and approaches to address them, and (3) the extent to which FCC and NTIA have assessed efforts and set goals to address barriers. GAO reviewed literature on benefits and barriers, documentation on the performance of efforts to address adoption barriers, and interviewed FCC and NTIA officials, 14 of the 42 BTOP grantees, and 21 public and private stakeholders selected based on GAO's prior work and recommendations from other stakeholders.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that NTIA include an outcome-based goal and measure for its broadband adoption work in its performance plan. NTIA stated that such metrics are not appropriate for its efforts because these efforts are advisory. GAO believes measuring outcomes is key to demonstrating results. GAO also recommends that FCC revise its strategic plan to more clearly state if broadband adoption is a priority, and if so, what outcomes FCC intends to achieve. FCC noted that to the extent its plan is unclear, it will take steps to address the recommendation.

View [GAO-15-473](#). For more information, contact Mark Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or [goldsteinm@gao.gov](mailto:goldsteinm@gao.gov).

## BROADBAND

### Intended Outcomes and Effectiveness of Efforts to Address Adoption Barriers Are Unclear

## What GAO Found

Home broadband adoption can provide a number of social and economic benefits, according to literature from academic, government, and other research sources and interviews GAO held with researchers, consumer and industry organizations, and government officials. For example, broadband provides access to employment opportunities by providing the means to search and apply for jobs and participate in online job training. It also provides access to a number of government benefits, serves as a conduit for civic participation, and provides a means to connect family members, among other benefits.

Affordability, lack of perceived relevance, and lack of computer skills are the principal barriers to broadband adoption identified by literature and stakeholders GAO interviewed. Efforts to address these barriers include projects to increase broadband adoption that were funded by grants from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration's (NTIA) Broadband Technologies Opportunities Program (BTOP) and outreach and other efforts by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and NTIA. GAO identified three key approaches used to address adoption barriers:

- **Discounts** on computer equipment and broadband subscriptions.
- **Outreach** efforts to promote broadband availability and benefits.
- **Training** to help people develop skills in using computers and broadband.

NTIA and FCC have limited information about the performance of their broadband adoption efforts and have not established goals articulating the outcomes these efforts should achieve. For example, NTIA compiled and published self-reported information from its BTOP grantees about best practices, but has not assessed the effectiveness of these approaches in addressing adoption barriers. Because BTOP has concluded, NTIA missed an opportunity to evaluate which grantees' approaches were the most effective. NTIA's strategic plan includes a goal to increase broadband use, but the agency's performance plan does not include an outcome-based goal and performance indicator for its ongoing broadband adoption efforts, making it unclear how the agency will show progress toward its strategic goal. NTIA had reported new broadband subscribers as a result of its BTOP efforts, but no longer uses this as a performance metric because BTOP has largely concluded. Although FCC's previous strategic plan included a goal to support broadband adoption, the commission issued a revised plan in 2015 with fewer broader goals, replacing the goal that mentioned broadband adoption with a goal that instead discusses broadband availability. Although lack of availability is a potential barrier, GAO's literature review and stakeholder interviews more frequently mentioned the three barriers cited above and FCC's broadband adoption efforts are aligned with those barriers. Thus, the strategic plan does not clearly reflect FCC's actions and whether broadband adoption is a priority for the commission. FCC officials said that the new plan's broadband goal is meant to encompass adoption efforts, but without including outcome-oriented goals for broadband adoption, it is unclear what, if any, related outcomes may be expected from FCC's broadband adoption efforts.