

Agencies Should Take Steps to Better Target Underserved Areas and Consider Sustainability

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What GAO Found

Since 2020, four federal agencies administered the bulk of federal funding for broadband deployment through the nine programs GAO reviewed. These were the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), and Departments of Agriculture and the Treasury. For example, NTIA oversees the over \$42-billion Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) program, which provides grants to states and territories that select providers to deploy broadband networks to underserved areas. As of February 2026, all nine programs had begun distributing funding.

Expected Completion Date for Selected Programs' Broadband Deployment

Program (agency)	Date
State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (Treasury)	2026
Broadband Infrastructure Program (NTIA); Capital Projects Fund (Treasury)	2027
Selected High Cost subprograms (FCC)	2028
Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program rounds one and two (NTIA)	2029
Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program round three (NTIA); selected High Cost subprograms (FCC); Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment Program (NTIA)	2030 and beyond

Source: Documentation and officials from National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), Federal Communications Commission (FCC), and Department of the Treasury. | GAO-26-107725

Note: Table excludes the U.S. Department of Agriculture programs that GAO reviewed because expected completion dates vary by funding round.

Federal agencies target funding to underserved areas using FCC mapping data showing which locations do and do not have broadband access, as reported by providers. To improve data accuracy, FCC accepts challenges from the public and makes updates if needed. Some program participants and stakeholders said this challenge process was burdensome and unclear. For example, challenging a large number of locations in an area could be difficult for smaller communities and providers with limited resources. Without targeted outreach to smaller communities and providers to address such difficulties, FCC may not be able to obtain the most accurate information about broadband availability and therefore may not be able to effectively identify and target funding to underserved areas.

As one of the largest programs focused on broadband deployment GAO reviewed, BEAD holds great potential to make broadband available to areas that have been underserved. GAO has previously reported on issues providers face in high-cost areas, including financial sustainability. In October 2025, NTIA announced a requirement that BEAD providers certify that they will not accept federal funding from other sources for broadband deployment and operations costs for locations funded by BEAD for at least 10 years. This provision is intended to ensure that BEAD projects are financially self-sustainable without additional federal funding. NTIA's BEAD documentation for states and territories states that there may be a basis for them to request certain data from providers. However, NTIA did not detail the circumstances that could warrant such a request. By providing more details, NTIA would help states anticipate potential problems and prevent service lapses to underserved areas when providers cannot continue providing services due to financial issues.

Why GAO Did This Study

Federal programs have received billions of dollars in recent years, including over \$50 billion from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, to deploy broadband networks to areas that lack service. These areas are typically remote and harder or more expensive to serve than other areas. This effort involves multiple federal agencies, states, territories, Tribes, and broadband providers.

House Report 118-124 includes a provision for GAO to review the efficacy of recent federal broadband deployment programs. This report examines selected agencies' progress in deploying broadband, their approaches to targeting underserved areas, and NTIA's efforts to encourage sustainability in its BEAD program, among other things.

GAO analyzed broadband program data, reviewed documents, and interviewed officials from the four selected broadband funding agencies. GAO selected seven programs administered by these agencies with broadband deployment as a main purpose and two Treasury programs due to the significant amount of funding used for broadband deployment. GAO compared FCC's efforts to improve data in its maps and NTIA's efforts to encourage sustainability to relevant federal internal control standards.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FCC work with smaller communities and providers to identify and address difficulties in completing the challenge process. GAO also recommends that NTIA provide information to states and territories on monitoring BEAD projects to support financial sustainability. FCC and NTIA agreed with these recommendations.