

# NYS FAH

NEW YORK STATE ASSOCIATION FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING

## Policy Brief

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### How Do We Get Universal Broadband in Affordable Housing Developments?

Millions of New Yorkers still have inadequate, or completely lack, access to the internet. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized the importance of digital connection in providing vital public services such as medicine, education, job access, and family connectedness. During the first three months of 2020, reliance on the internet increased by over 47% where not only more people needed internet access, they needed access to high-speed data. At NYSFAH, we are working to ensure families living in low-income homes are adequately served with modern infrastructure that delivers high-speed internet access.

Studies show that areas with poor internet service correlate closely to neighborhoods with high poverty rates. Additionally, research suggests that low-income households would need to spend as much as 10 percent of their monthly budgets to acquire high speed access that meets the needs of their families.

The digital divide in New York has been made starker. A [recent report](#) from New York City Comptroller Stringer found that 29 percent of all households in the five boroughs lack broadband internet access with certain neighborhoods faring significantly worse. The report also found that New Yorkers of color were also less likely to have broadband internet access and the disparity has made pandemic-related issues and recovery more difficult for low- and middle-income families. For example, it is significantly more challenging to schedule a telehealth visit, participate in distance learning at school, or to search for job opportunities without broadband access.

This challenge is not limited to New York City: it is a statewide problem. More than [726,000 school-aged children](#) in New York State lack adequate access to high-speed internet, which further complicated district plans for remote and hybrid learning this past year. Building affordable homes for families that include high-speed internet infrastructure at the time of construction provides New Yorkers the critical opportunity to expand access and close this gap.

NYSFAH and its members are working hard to help close the digital divide. The first step is to ensure new and existing developments have the infrastructure in place to deliver high-quality broadband. And the second is to make sure low-income residents are provided low-cost service plans that include high speed access.

## NYSAFAH and its members believe the following is necessary to ensure affordable housing residents in New York have affordable, high-quality broadband:

### Require Quality Infrastructure at Construction

In March 2021, New York City HPD updated their design guidelines to require all affordable housing developers to include broadband infrastructure plans for individual units and common areas. Subsidy awards will be dependent on these plans which are subject to review and amendment by the administering agency upon award. All high-speed broadband access plans shall be required to provide infrastructure to support a minimum download speed of 100 mbps.

**The Solution:** New York State should undertake a similar process and modernize their design guidelines to require adequate broadband infrastructure for all state subsidized affordable housing. Furthermore, NYSAFAH encourages a similar undertaking at both the City and State levels for affordable housing preservation.

### Include monthly broadband service (both tenant and common access) in monthly utility allowances at underwriting. (Broadband IS an essential utility)

**The Solution:** Depending on the housing program, property tenant rents are based on either: (1) affordability to the income segment(s) specified in the regulatory agreement (e.g., 30%, 40% or 50% of Area Median Income), or (2) a percentage (usually 30%) of each tenant's actual annual household income. In either, the definition of maximum "affordable" rents for tenants includes both housing and reasonable utility costs, which must now include broadband service. Where some or all utilities are tenant-paid, the rent charged to the tenant (the "net rent") is similarly reduced by the utility allowance. **This utility allowance MUST be amended to include service providing high speed broadband whether the tenant uses the service or not.** Unlike other traditional utility allowance rules, unit size and the number of occupants need not play a role in determining the monthly allowance per unit for broadband.

### Create a Broadband Access Task Force to support program goals

**The Solution:** States and localities should establish a task force to **support broadband expansion in affordable housing developments**. Goals of the task force should center around low-cost service provision, high speed connectivity, and access to communal Wi-Fi (lobbies, community spaces, etc.) on all new and rehabbed buildings. The work of the task force should also take into consideration emerging technologies and their infrastructure needs to ensure that affordable housing can keep up with the times.

### Establish building-wide (and perhaps neighborhood-wide) purchasing agreements to drive down pricing

The typical residential broadband connection in the United States costs over \$60 per month. According to Pew Research, half of those who do not have broadband in their home say that is because it is too expensive. COVID-19 dramatically illustrated the nation's vulnerability. Of the approximately 50 million students sent home by school closings, over 9 million lack home internet access, principally because the household cannot afford it. In New York State, 726,000 school-aged children are in homes lacking adequate access to high-speed internet.

**The Solution:** As the trade association for affordable housing across New York, NYSAFAH intends to create low-cost broadband agreements with a variety of providers in neighborhoods across the state. Focused on results rather than providers, NYSAFAH will engage with independent contractors and internet service providers (ISPs) to reach agreements that meet criterion that ensures truly affordable high-speed service.