



To: Kansas Office of Broadband Development  
From: David Jordan, President and CEO, United Methodist Health Ministry Fund  
Date: November 2, 2023  
RE: Opportunities to Strengthen Broadband Access in Kansas

**Dear Director Piros de Carvalho:**

According to the Kansas Health Institute, nearly 30% of all Kansans lack adequate internet access. This includes those that do not have high-speed internet in their area and those that do not have access to a proper device. Additionally, University of Kansas researchers found that up to 1 million Kansans live in regions that lack access to high-speed broadband services at adequate speeds. Addressing gaps in high speed internet access and devices is critical to improving health and ensuring more civically engaged communities.

We are in strong support of Governor Kelly's Kansas Digital Equity (DE) Plan for high-speed internet connectivity which will effectively address the gap in broadband accessibility. This plan outlines digital skills training, affordable service plans, and the availability of broadband-ready devices as top priorities. We agree that these areas are the key components of digital equity. We support additional plans from Governor Kelly and the Kansas Office of Broadband Development like the Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment (BEAD) Five-Year Action Plan (FYAP).

The United Methodist Health Ministry Fund is a 37-year-old, \$60-million health philanthropy located in Hutchinson. Our mission is to improve the health of all Kansans. We focus on three strategic areas—access to care, Thriving Children, and Engaged Congregations and Communities, a program aimed at addressing community health by engaging churches throughout Kansas.

The Health Fund continues to support statewide measures to address digital inclusion because finding solutions to this issue means improving social determinants of health. As a health foundation, we work to ensure families can access telehealth services through reliable means when and where they need it. At the Health Fund, we will continue to be an active supporter in fighting for digital equity in Kansas.

As a statewide health philanthropy, we are excited to share our support for Governor Kelly's plan and shine light on a few key elements that are especially important to our mission. Two key components of our work include supporting all Kansans in the opportunity to access healthcare and thrive as engaged members of their communities. As a foundation that supports all Kansans having the opportunity to benefit from accessible and affordable broadband high-speed internet, we appreciate the State's willingness to continually and actively address this issue.

Making digital inclusion and adequate broadband high speed internet access a reality for all Kansans means building upon our strengths and addressing our challenges with solid solutions supported by our communities and our leadership. This includes:

- Ensuring the development of **digital infrastructure** that serves all Kansans and eliminates redlining of communities.
- Creating access to programs that **make the internet affordable** for all Kansas families.
- Supporting **consumer assistance, navigators and community health workers** that help families access programs, address technical concerns and build digital literacy.

#### Telehealth

Meeting the healthcare needs of rural Kansas involves telehealth and making it readily available and reliable. Addressing smart and efficient development of broadband access is vital to successful telehealth implementation. This includes all three key areas: digital infrastructure, affordability and engaging community health workers and navigators.

In 2022, the Health Fund and REACH Healthcare Foundation partnered for a closer look at provider and patient experiences with telehealth during the COVID-19 pandemic. Valuable information applicable beyond the pandemic was gathered as well. Namely, the favorability of this option for patients able to access it - with 86% of those surveyed in favor of supporting expansion of telehealth options.

Telehealth may be utilized for a follow-up appointment in conjunction with in-patient visits, medication consultations, mental health check-ups and regular check-ups. Having access to telehealth services through appropriate broadband services allows patients to stay with the same provider and experience expanded access to mental health services.

### Community Health Worker and Navigators

Community health workers and navigators are a key ingredient to broadband access. Community health workers are trusted members of the communities they serve and are leveraged to assist others in accessing services, applying for programs and utilizing access options. In addition, broadband access also enables CHWs to meet with their patients when appropriate. CHWs are often in the same communities and experiencing the same broadband challenges, which may impact their ability to obtain training. Supporting this element of internet access is just as important as maintaining infrastructure.

Access to high-speed internet means a better connected, better served, healthier Kansas. To effectively address the many dynamics, it takes to bring usable and accessible broadband to all Kansans - including building broadband infrastructure and supporting affordable reliable connections through appropriate devices - requires thoughtful policies and programs such as the KOBD and Governor Kelly are proposing. The policy measures and program initiatives needed to reach this goal should continue to be celebrated priorities that are delivered upon.