

The State of Broadband in FL-3

- According to the FCC, an estimated 800,000 Floridians are without access to minimal broadband service (speeds $\geq 25/3$ Mbps.). Of this number, an estimated half a million are individuals residing in rural areas.
- **In FL-3**, there are constituents in every county who struggle for access to broadband service.
 - According to the FCC:
 - 92,135 constituents across the district are without access to fixed broadband at speeds of at least 25/3 (25 upload, 3 download) Mbps.
 - 115,890 constituents across the district are without access to fixed broadband at speeds of at least 100/10
 - 167,118 constituents across the district are without access to fixed broadband at speeds of at least 250/25
- **In Putnam County:**
 - 12,691 lack broadband access at speeds of at least 25/3
 - 16,305 lack broadband access at speeds of at least 100/10
 - 23,854 lack broadband access at speeds of at least 250/25
- **In Marion County:**
 - 29,137 lack broadband access at speeds of at least 25/3
 - 43,138 lack broadband access at speeds of at least 100/10
 - 85,070 lack broadband access at speeds of at least 250/25
- **In Alachua County:**
 - 36,617 lack broadband access at speeds of at least 25/3
 - 41,029 lack broadband access at speeds of at least 100/10
 - 51,414 lack broadband access at speeds of at least 250/25

The disparity is particularly felt in rural areas, where 68% (62,911) of those without access to broadband at speeds of at least 25/3 are located in rural communities.

- While the FCC officially considers 25/3 Mbps as the minimum acceptable speed for broadband, changing needs and technology mean that acceptable broadband speeds should be much faster. NTCA (Rural Broadband Association) for example mentioned that broadband deployment moving forward should focus more on speeds of at least 100/50 Mbps.
- According to the FCC, three of the district's five counties lack any broadband service at 1 GIG speeds – Bradford, Putnam, and Union.
- The Town of McIntosh in Marion Co. [has been rated by BroadbandNow](#) (considered the “Kayak for Internet Service”) as one of the worst-connected cities in Florida.

Recent Federal Support for Broadband in FL-3

Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF)

- Under the results of the FCC's **RDOF Phase I Auction**, Windstream and SpaceX won a combined total of nearly \$1.2 million in support to deploy broadband service to eligible areas 5 of the district's six counties (Alachua, Union, Bradford, Clay, Putnam). No eligible areas of Marion County were included in this phase of the RDOF Auction.
- Under the terms of the Phase I Auction, 99.7 % of the locations to receive broadband will receive service at speeds of at least 100/20 Mbps with an estimated 85% expected to receive gigabit-speed broadband from the auction winners.
 - In Florida's Third, [Windstream has stated that it intends to use its share of RDOF dollars to deploy a fiber network that will bring speeds to communities at anywhere from 100/20 to 1 GIG.](#)
- SpaceX plans to deploy service in eligible areas won under the auction through its new satellite internet provider, Starlink. SpaceX expects it will be able to offer speeds comparable to other providers via 12,000 satellites launched into space. At this time, only 1,000 satellites have been launched and we are hearing that recipients of Starlink service may not see the promised gigabit speeds for years to come.
- Looking ahead, the **RDOF The Phase II Auction** will make available \$4.4 billion to target partially served areas – census blocks where some locations lack access to 25/3 Mbps broadband.
 - This will be one of the first efforts by the FCC to use more granular broadband mapping data to fund broadband deployment. To date, the Commission has used the less precise maps based on census blocks. Using geo-spatial data, the FCC hopes these maps will allow it to more accurately identify eligible areas to receive funding.
 - [The FCC has not yet announced timing and further details about the The Phase II Auction.](#)

COVID-19 Telehealth Program

- The FCC's COVID-19 Telehealth Program was established under the CARES Act to help health care providers offer connected care services (telehealth) to patients at their homes or mobile locations in response to the pandemic. The program fully funds telecommunications services, information services, and devices necessary for telehealth for eligible providers.
 - An additional \$250 million has since been appropriated to the program.
- In FL-3 two providers have received a combined \$1 million in funding to support telehealth under the program:
 - University of Florida Dept. of Pediatrics - \$967,957
 - Clay Behavioral Health Center, Inc. - \$51,460

Rural Utilities Service (RUS)

- The RUS administers five broadband and telecommunications programs that provide low-interest loans and grants to increase access to broadband service in eligible rural areas.
- Eligibility criteria vary, with some programs targeting unserved areas with negligible access to broadband and other programs available to underserved areas where only a small segment of the population has access to broadband service.
- Windstream provides broadband to 16,723 rural households throughout the district with support from the RUS.

Key Takeaways

- Despite Florida's relative success with broadband connectivity, issues with access to broadband service persist in Florida's Third Congressional District. The latest FCC data shows that there are constituents in every county who lack access to viable broadband service.
- The recent Rural Digital Opportunity Fund auction is an encouraging sign, however Space X's need for thousands of additional satellites could cause excessive delays for areas already in need of service.
- There are numerous federal programs offering loans and grants to providers, companies, entities, and Tribes to deploy or improve broadband service. Under CARES Act, funding was boosted to many of these programs, including those offering support for Telehealth services. Two providers in the district have already taken advantage of the federal assistance offered for Telehealth.
- Under the USDA, numerous programs administered by the RUS provide support for broadband deployment specifically to rural areas. In the district, Windstream utilizes RUS support to provide service to nearly 17,000 households. As we look toward the next Farm Bill, there will be opportunities to reassess the USDA's programs for broadband deployment and make changes that will more effectively help rural areas cross the digital divide.