

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Technology Plan

Caldwell County, Texas

November 2021



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OVERVIEW *01*

Today, technology plays a pivotal role in how businesses operate, how institutions provide services, and where consumers choose to live, work, and play. The success of a community has become dependent on how broadly and deeply it adopts technology resources, which includes access to reliable, high-speed networks; the digital literacy of residents; and the local usage of online resources for business, government, and leisure.

The Connected Nation Texas (CN Texas) Connected Program partnered with the Caldwell County Broadband Team to conduct a study designed to determine the availability of broadband infrastructure; how its residents are adopting and using broadband services; and what steps would have the greatest impact toward improving broadband access, adoption, and usage across every sector locally.

Pursuant of this goal, between March and July 2021, Caldwell County conducted a comprehensive survey of broadband technology access and adoption across the community. Caldwell County collected responses from 432 households. CN Texas staff also met with community officials to determine community needs and to gather qualitative data for consideration in the study. Overall, the assessment was designed to identify issues and opportunities to close the local Digital Divide. Concurrent to the survey data collection, CN Texas completed a limited field validation of the county to further investigate and verify service coverage in targeted areas.

The following provides a summary of that assessment, as well as recommendations for improving broadband and technology access, adoption, and usage.

CALDWELL COUNTY, TEXAS	
QUICK FACTS	
Population	45,883
Households	13,460
Median Household Income	\$54,152
Poverty Rate	18.9%
Adults with a Bachelor's Degree or Higher	14.6%
Homeownership Rate	67.4%
Hispanic or Latino	55.5%
Households with Broadband Access ¹	100%

Source:

<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/profile?q=05000000US48055>

¹The current FCC definition of broadband is a minimum of 25 Mbps download and 3 Mbps upload. These data are derived from Connected Nation Texas, July 2021. <https://connectednation.org/texas/planning/>



100% of households in
Caldwell County have
access to broadband

*For households that said they do not subscribe to home internet service, the top barrier is the **lack of available service**, followed by the **cost of internet service**.*

*More than 2 out of 3 households in Caldwell County (**68.35%**) have access to internet service at speeds needed to run many modern applications (100 Mbps downstream and 10 Mbps upstream). Statewide, **92.05%** of households have internet access at this speed.*

*Caldwell County households **pay more** on average for access to the internet (**\$86.73**) than other Connected communities (\$71.59).*

*About **63% of residents and 67% of businesses** reported that they were dissatisfied with their current internet service. The top reasons for dissatisfaction were slow speeds and unreliable connections.*

*Nineteen out of 20 responding households (**95%**) said they would like to have improved or additional options for home internet service.*

Broadband maps show that 100% of Caldwell County households have broadband coverage. Field validation conducted in late May 2021 shows that this coverage is overstated in certain areas and at certain speeds.



INFRASTRUCTURE
RESULTS
02

According to CN Texas broadband data initially released in July 2021 — followed by additional public feedback, field validation, and provider input — all households in Caldwell County have access to broadband of at least 25/3 Mbps, the current definition of broadband set forth by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Broadband service in Caldwell County covers much of the geography of the county.

Below are providers listed by the FCC as operating in Caldwell County as of July 31, 2021. However, some providers could not be verified during Connected Nation’s limited field audit, and other service providers that were identified are not listed here. This verified list can be found in Recommended Actions under Goal 3, Action 1.

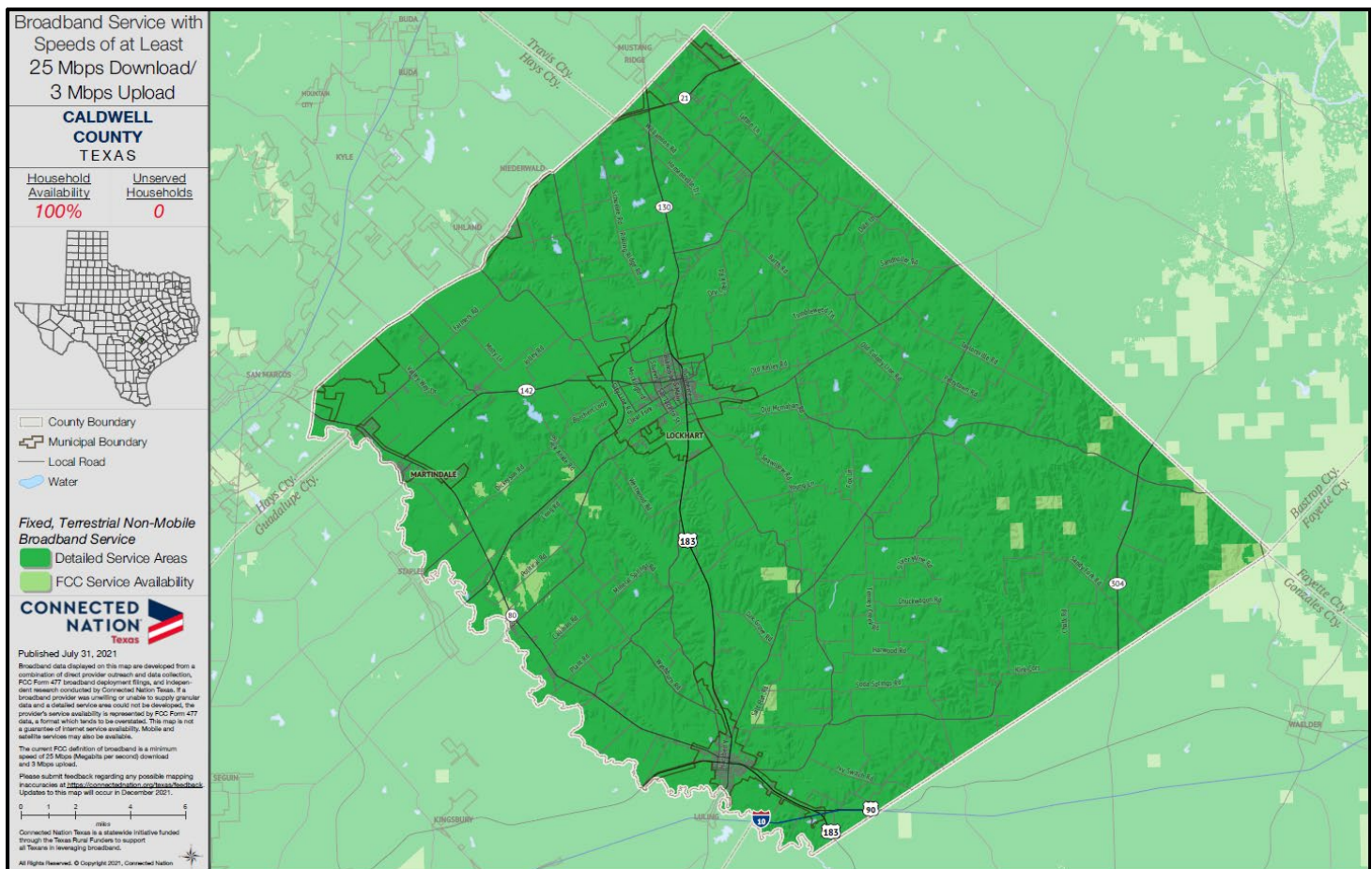
BROADBAND INFRASTRUCTURE QUICK FACTS	
Unserved Households (25/3 Mbps)	0
Households Served (10/1 Mbps)	100%
Households Served (25/3 Mbps)	100%
Households Served (50/5 Mbps)	76.12%
Households Served (100/10 Mbps)	68.35%

*Broadband data released by CN Texas in July 2021:
<https://connectednation.org/texas/mapping-analysis/>*

PROVIDER	TECHNOLOGY	MAXIMUM DOWNLOAD SPEED (Mbps)	MAXIMUM UPLOAD SPEED (Mbps)
AT&T Southwest	DSL	18	1
	Fixed Wireless	10	1
CenturyLink	DSL	60	5
Charter Communications Inc	Cable	940	35
GHz Wireless	Fixed Wireless	50	5
GVEC.net	Fixed Wireless	25	8
GVTC	DSL	12	1.5
Particle Communications	Fixed Wireless	25	10
Rise Broadband	Fixed Wireless	25	3
Spry Wireless Inc.	Fixed Wireless	30	10
VTXC	Fixed Wireless	25	4

INFRASTRUCTURE: Caldwell County

Below is Caldwell County's (25/3 Mbps) map. To access the full map, go to <https://connectednation.org/texas/county-maps/> and select Caldwell County from the list. Please note other portions of the county are served by internet service providers (ISPs) offering slower advertised speeds and are not shown on this map.



Broadband data collected by CN Texas in 2021:
<https://connectednation.org/texas/mapping-analysis/>

The first step in understanding the status of broadband infrastructure in Caldwell County and Texas as a whole is having accurate maps. Accordingly, CN Texas works with providers to develop a variety of broadband maps at a state and county level. Data shown on this map are derived from a combination of direct provider outreach and data collection, FCC Form 477 broadband deployment filings, and independent research conducted by CN Texas. If a provider was unable or unwilling to supply granular data and a detailed service area could not be developed, the provider's service is represented by Form 477 data, a format that tends to overstate the service territory.

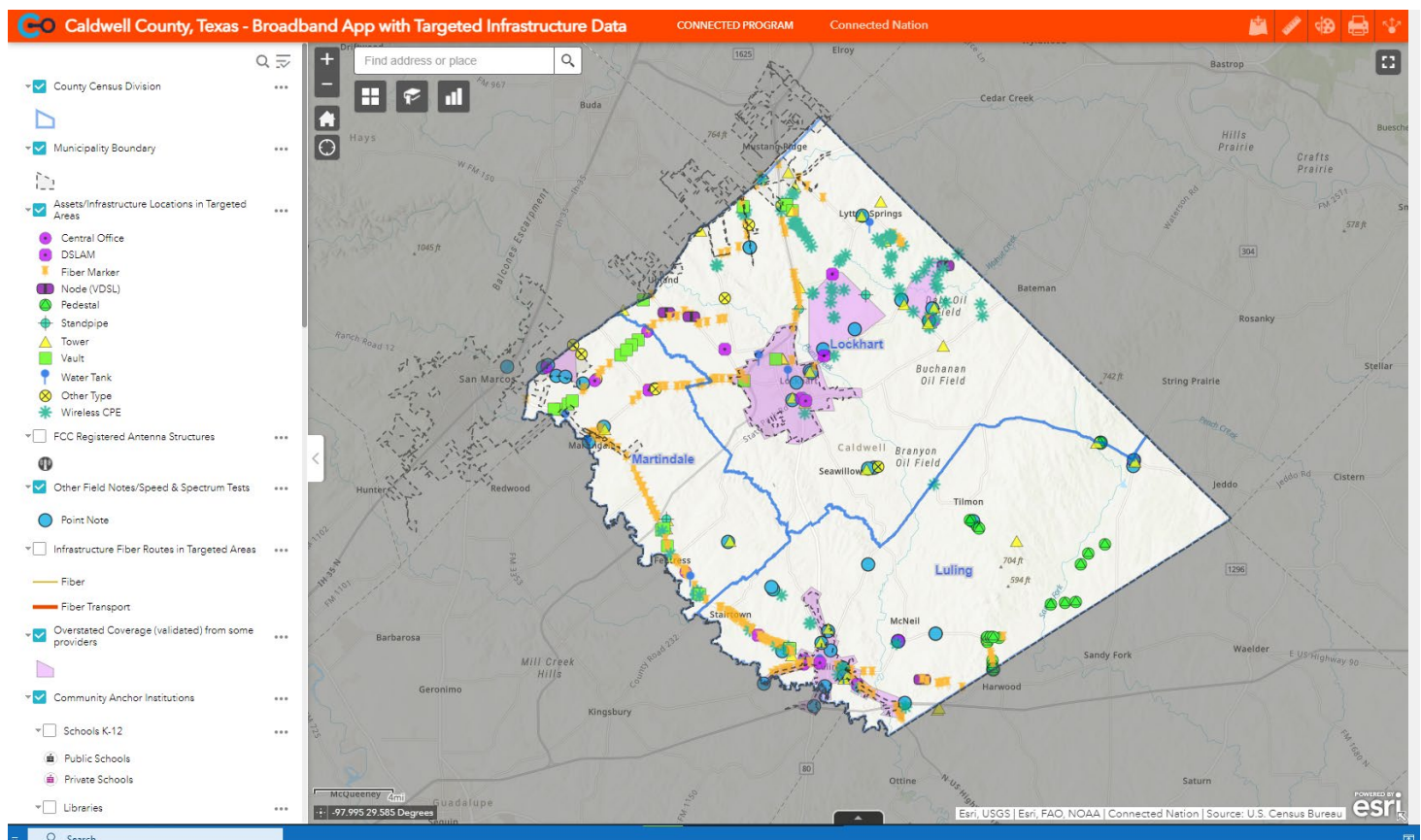
In late May 2021, Connected Nation Texas field staff conducted a limited field validation exercise focusing on areas with probable coverage overstatement. The field validation exercise involved

deploying CN Texas engineering and technical services staff to targeted areas within the county to identify whether the necessary infrastructure to support certain broadband coverage existed. As a part of this work, the team identified assets or infrastructure that either supports or could support broadband deployment.

As a result of this work and additional outreach to providers in these areas, six distinct areas were identified where certain levels of service do not appear to exist based on the field staff’s observations and investigations. The following link provides an interactive map of Caldwell County and the findings from the field validation exercise: <https://connectednation.org/texas/caldwell/interactivemap>.

It is CN’s opinion that, while the previously referenced map shows 100% coverage at 25/3 Mbps, it is likely that 100% of the households may not be serviceable by broadband due to the uncertainty surrounding fixed wireless coverage in the area.

The map below also includes some of the findings from the field validation audit.





HOUSEHOLD
SURVEY RESULTS
03

**HOUSEHOLD
QUICK FACTS**

Fixed Home Broadband Adoption
55.1%

Average Monthly Internet Cost
\$86.73

Average Download Speed
25.22 Mbps

Households Satisfied with Service
37%

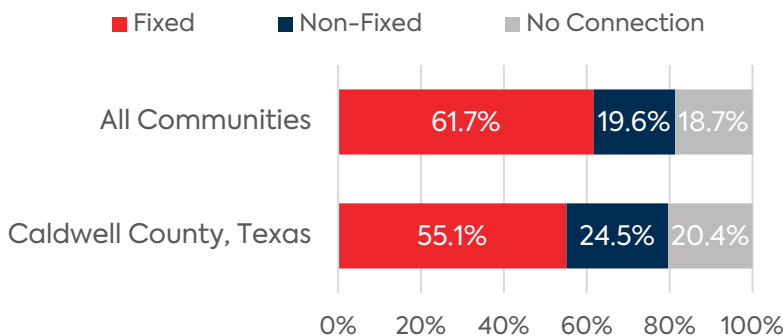
The following provides an overview of results from a broadband survey conducted in Caldwell County between March and July 2021. Altogether, CN Texas received 432 completed surveys from households across the county. Respondents provided insights into their internet connectivity, or lack thereof. Data from Caldwell County are compared to data from across hundreds of other rural, participating Connected communities across Michigan, Ohio, Texas, and Pennsylvania to benchmark and identify areas for improvement.

ADOPTION

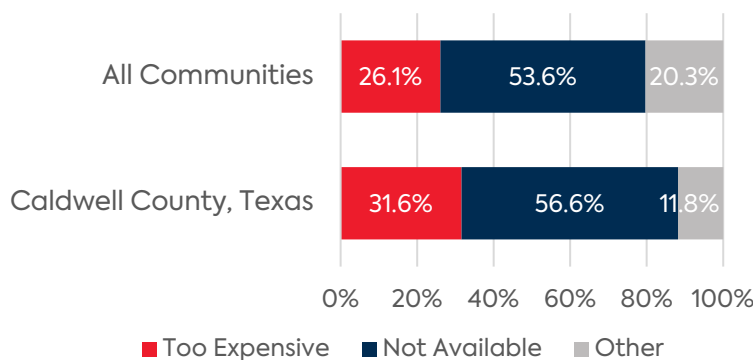
In Caldwell County, 55.1% of surveyed households subscribe to fixed broadband service delivered via a cable, DSL, fiber, or fixed wireless technology. Almost one-quarter of respondents (24.5%) indicate they have internet service delivered via dial-up, satellite, or a mobile wireless service. This leaves a little more than 1 in 5 (20.4%) survey respondents without internet access at home.

Among those without a home internet connection, 56.6% said they did not have broadband because it was not available to them, while 31.6% indicate that it was too expensive. Like in many communities, cost and availability are the two primary barriers to home broadband adoption.

Home Broadband Adoption



Primary Barrier



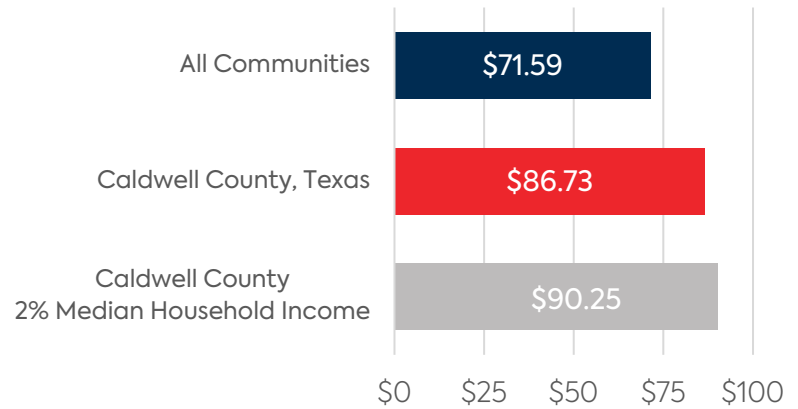
HOUSEHOLD SURVEY RESULTS: Caldwell County



CONNECTION DETAILS

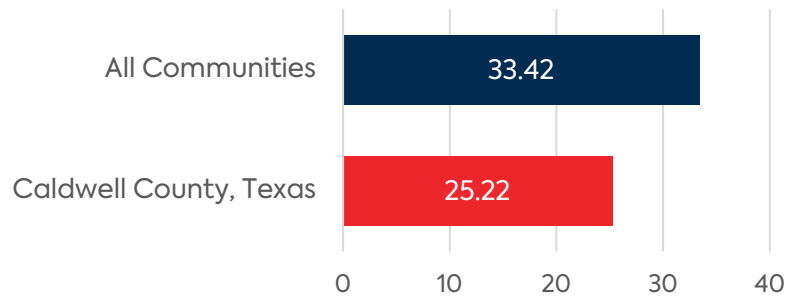
Two percent of monthly income is a recognized standard for measuring the affordability of a home internet connection. Respondents indicate that, on average, their internet connection costs about \$86.73 per month. This is higher than the monthly cost in other communities (\$71.59). Two percent of the median household income in Caldwell County is \$90.25 per month.

Average Monthly Cost

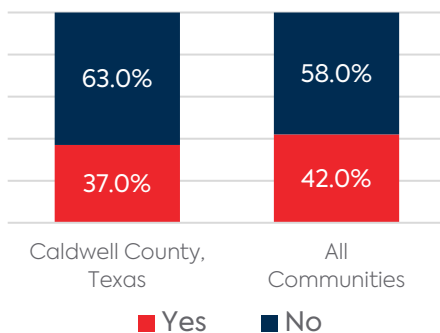


The FCC currently defines broadband as an internet connection with a download speed of at least 25 Mbps and upload speed of at least 3 Mbps. On average, respondents indicate that their connection's download speed is 25.22 Mbps, which is on par with the minimum defined speed.

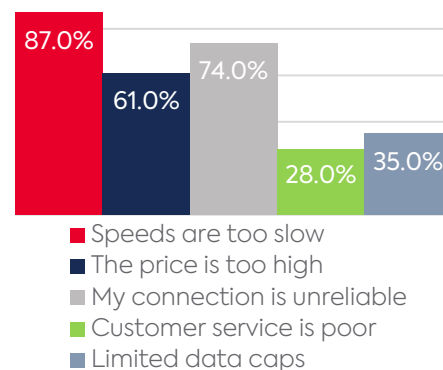
Average Speeds (Mbps)



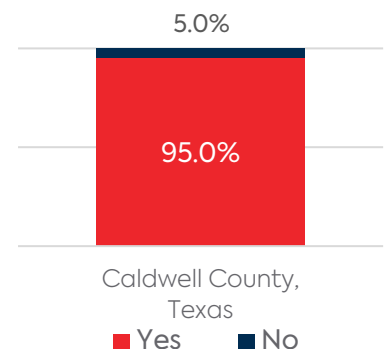
Does Your Internet Meet Your Needs?



Why Doesn't Your Internet Meet Your Needs?



Are You Interested in More Choices at Home?



HOUSEHOLD SURVEY RESULTS: Caldwell County

Competition provides residents with choices for service, allowing households the ability to switch providers if their current service does not meet their needs. Almost two-thirds (63%) indicate that their internet connection does not meet their needs. This is a higher rate of dissatisfaction than among households in other communities (58.3%).

When asked why their connection does not meet their needs, 87% of dissatisfied households indicate that their speed is too slow, 61% say the price is too high, and almost 3 out of 4 (74%) indicate that the connection is unreliable. Respondents could choose more than one reason for dissatisfaction.

Finally, 95% of all respondents indicate that they are interested in additional internet choices for their home.

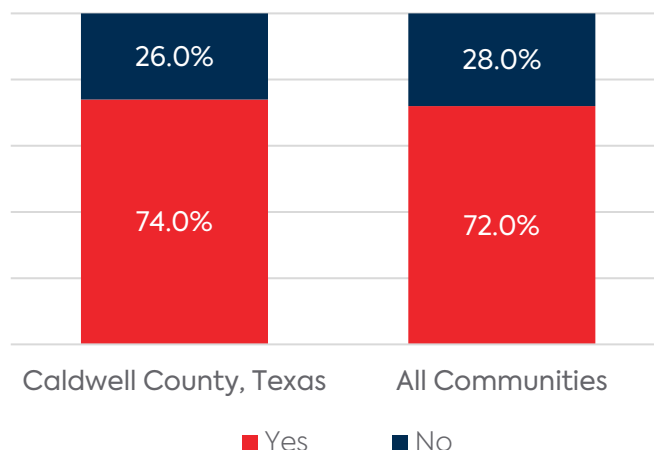
MOBILE CONNECTIVITY

A little less than two-thirds (65.7%) report that they subscribe to mobile internet service, which they access via a smartphone or similar mobile device. This is a little less than what is reported in other Connected Communities (72.0%).

Additionally, 10.7% of these mobile-connected households report that they rely on their mobile connections at home as their primary source of internet connectivity, or use mobile service to connect other household devices to the internet.



Households Subscribing to Mobile Internet Service



HOUSEHOLD SURVEY RESULTS: Caldwell County

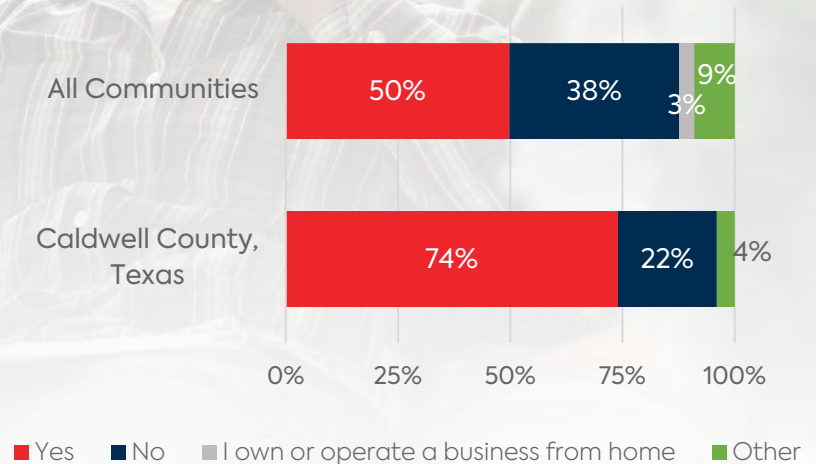
TELEWORK

Teleworking, or telecommuting, refers to working outside of the conventional workplace by way of telecommunications or computer-based technology. The COVID-19 pandemic forced many organizations to allow their staff to telework.

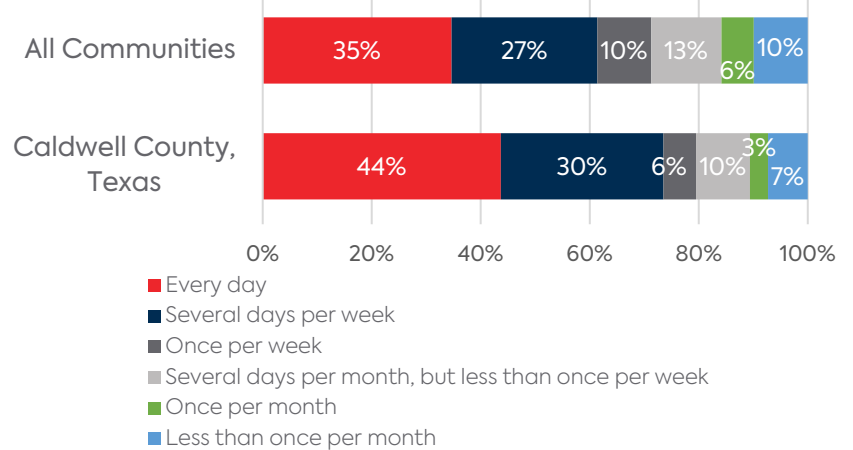
Teleworking is quickly becoming a critical part of growing a local economy because it represents an opportunity to attract or retain employees even when employees are not located in the same community as their employers. However, this only works if those employees have access to advanced broadband infrastructure.

Approximately 74% of employed respondents in Caldwell County telework in some capacity. Nearly one-half (44%) of this group telework every day.

Do You Currently Telework?



How Frequently Do You Telework?



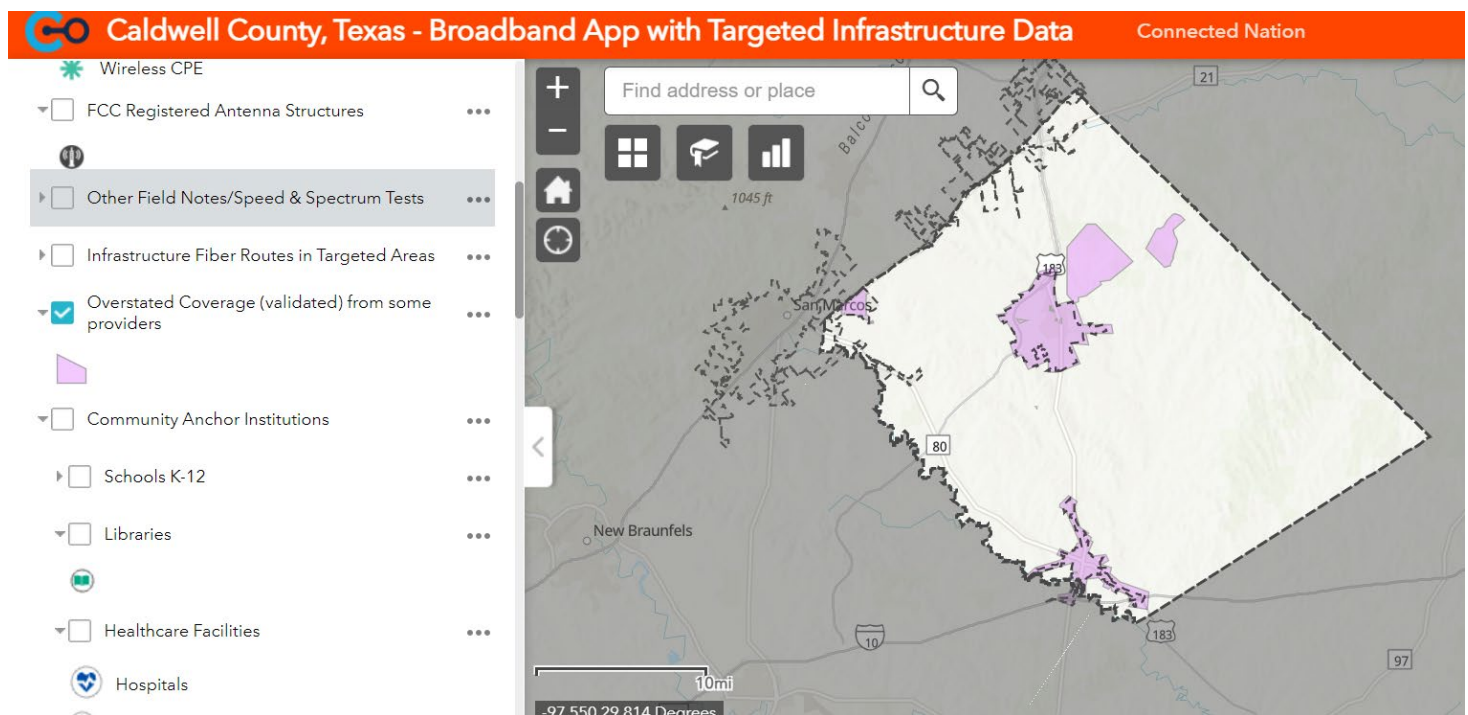


RECOMMENDATIONS

04

The following recommendations are presented to assist Caldwell County in expanding broadband access and adoption throughout the community.

Having correct information about access to internet coverage in Caldwell County is important for future grant eligibility and opportunities, and to understand where gaps exist. In concurrence with survey work, Connected Nation performed a partial field validation audit to determine if some advertised internet coverages were overstated. For example, fiber to the home (FTTH) services have been reported as available around Lockhart and Luling; at the time of the field validation, those services were not available in those areas. Therefore, such overstated coverage will be removed from subsequent maps. Areas with overstated services were often associated with FCC Form 477 data, which was used in cases when a provider elected not to participate in Connected Nation Texas' broadband map. The interactive map can be viewed at <https://connectednation.org/texas/caldwell/interactivemap>.



Information from this field validation should always be considered when planning future actions surrounding broadband in Caldwell County.

Goal 1: Develop Public-Private Partnerships (P3s) to Deploy Broadband Service.

Objective:

Connected Nation’s partial field validation audit revealed that Caldwell County’s 100% broadband coverage was overstated. These findings were consistent with the survey results, which revealed that the leading barrier to broadband adoption was lack of internet service — thus proving that 100% broadband coverage was overstated. Therefore, to address outstanding broadband service challenges, Caldwell County might consider developing a P3 to address these broadband service gaps. The benefit of a P3 is that Caldwell County can guide experienced private-sector partners to implement tasks related to project components that the county may not want to administer on its own.

P3s take many forms, limited only by the imagination and legal framework in which the municipality operates. Texas law may prevent a municipality from owning or operating a telecommunications network, but may not necessarily restrict a municipality from investing capital in such a network. A P3 should not be simply seen as a method of financing. The strength of these partnerships is that each party brings something important to the table that the other lacks or can’t easily acquire. Caldwell County can offer infrastructure (publicly owned building rooftops, light poles, towers, and other vertical assets for mounting fixed wireless or wireline infrastructure) for the deployment of a network, as well as guaranteeing committed anchor tenants, and possible funding sources.

One example of a potential P3 would be a collaboration with the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA), whose dark fiber routes across the county include proximity to the communities of Lockhart, Luling, San Marcos, and Seawillow. Access to such dark fiber could support improved public safety networks, fiber redundancy for the local school district(s), increased connectivity for healthcare facilities, as well as providing the foundational cornerstone to improve broadband access across the county.

Other participants in a well formed P3, such as the Gary Job Corps, could enhance the goals discussed in Actions 2-4 below. Expanding the ecosystem even further to included companies like, or similar to, PCs for People (<https://www.pcsforpeople.org/>) may bring no-cost or low-cost P3 partners that can have a direct and immediate impact within the county.

Actions:

Action 1 - Establish an office to oversee broadband information, deployment, and communication with providers and the community.

Duties of this office may include:

- Deploying requests for quotes (RFQs) for services needed in Caldwell County regarding broadband deployment and maintenance of broadband infrastructure.
- Overseeing the development and management of any broadband partnerships.

- Directly reporting to Judge Haden and the Commissioner’s Court on broadband activities in Caldwell County.
- Establishing relationships with current providers and opening communication with potential new providers.
- Establishing a relationship with Caldwell County’s Congressman Michael Cloud or his staff to oversee broadband grants, subsidies and/or loans available from the federal government.
- Collaborating with other key legislators. Contact James Baker, Director of Public Policy, 361-884-2222. Congressman Lloyd Doggett also represents a smaller portion of Caldwell County around the Lockhart and Martindale areas. He may be reached at his Austin office at 512-916-5921.

Action 2 – Examine models of partnerships to determine what will be most beneficial to Caldwell County and relevant partners. Below are some models for consideration.

- a. **Model 1: Private Investment, Public Facilitation** — Make available public assets, share geographic information and systems data, and streamline permitting and inspection processes. Offer economic development incentives to attract private broadband investment.
- b. **Model 2: Private Execution, Public Funding** — Identify revenue streams that can be directed to a private partner. Funding may include appropriated payments from the Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds established by the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, the Coronavirus Capital Projects Fund, Reconnect Loan and Grant Program, and several others listed at <https://connectednation.org/current-broadband-funding/>. New revenue streams are likely to become available from the FCC and/or state government.
- c. **Model 3: Shared Investment and Risk** — Evaluate how to best use assets to attract private investment, evaluate funding new assets to attract private investment, evaluate building new broadband assets to businesses and/or homes for leasing to private ISPs.

Action 3 – Review authority issues, understand the legal tools and instruments that could shape the partnership, negotiate the agreement. Hiring a knowledgeable consultant, not affiliated with any vendor, could provide valuable advice, and help county officials sort through the best solutions for Caldwell County.

Action 4 – Ensure the critical elements of a broadband partnership are outlined before entering into any agreements. There are several key functions that must be clear depending on the nature of the agreement:

- Designing, financing, constructing, operating, maintaining, and refreshing the network.

- Obtaining and maintaining all required authorizations, including federal, state, and local registrations, right-of-way approvals, permits, easements, pole attachments, etc.
- Providing services to customers and performing related marketing, installation, billing, customer service, and technical support.
- Complying with all legal and regulatory requirements that apply to the services provided over the network.

Responsible Party:

- Establishing a broadband office would be the responsibility of Judge Haden and the Commissioners Court.
- Feedback from broadband providers, businesses, residents, and anchor institutions would be valuable.

Resources:

- <https://broadbandusa.ntia.doc.gov/> -National Telecommunications and Information Administration guide to funding broadband projects
- <https://connectednation.org/what-we-do-for-you/> -Connected Nation supports communities in broadband planning, deployment, and digital inclusion
- <https://ilsr.org/how-mcallen-texas-quietly-built-residents-a-free-wi-fi-network-over-the-summer/> -Examples of one Texas town meeting residents' broadband needs
- <https://www.nga.org/news/commentary/governors-expanding-access-broadband-2021/> - Governors Start 2021 by Expanding Access to Broadband
- <https://nextcenturycities.org/becoming-broadband-ready/> - Becoming Broadband Ready
- <https://www.usda.gov/broadband> -Department of Agriculture broadband website and Includes loan programs and more
- <https://connectednation.org/current-broadband-funding/> - Connected Nation's current list of broadband funding
- <http://www.connectmycommunity.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Local-Policy-Guide.pdf> -Removing barriers to broadband expansion
- <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2020/02/how-states-are-expanding-broadband-access> -Examining state broadband programs

Goal 2: Improve the Online Presence of Libraries and Build Community Awareness of Online Resources.

Objective:

Libraries have played a vital role in advancing digital awareness and adoption. While the libraries in

Caldwell County did not participate in the Connected Nation survey, they remain critical anchor institutions in the effort to bridge the Digital Divide. As libraries continue to evolve to address new technology trends and meet changing demands, they are ripe for helping communities like Caldwell County in new ways. With the proper support and resources, libraries can play a bigger role in helping to bridge the community's broadband adoption gap. Caldwell County's overall internet adoption rate is 55%. Enhancing the libraries' online presence and offering digital literacy classes can increase residents' usage of these resources and promote wider internet usage throughout the community.

Caldwell County reports 53.8% of its residents are Hispanic or Latino. National statistics suggest this demographic is the lowest adopters of broadband. According to Pew Research in an article published July 16, 2021, entitled *Home broadband adopting, computer ownership vary by race, ethnicity in the U.S.*, "Eight in 10 white adults report owning a desktop or laptop computer, compared with 69% of Black adults and 67% of Hispanic adults. Eight in 10 white adults also report having a broadband connection at home, while smaller shares of Black and Hispanic adults say the same — 71% and 65%, respectively."

The county's libraries can play a key role in increasing internet usage among these underserved populations by increasing their online resources and offering digital literacy classes. This may require that some promotional or collateral materials be published in Spanish, as well as English, to ensure that the Hispanic population is aware of these opportunities.

Actions:

Action 1 – Promote digital skills training currently offered by local libraries. Additionally, the county should assess the current state of digital resources, social media, and the community's awareness of these resources, among all libraries in the county.

- Currently, Dr. Eugene Clark Library offers free computer classes to the public and has 16 available computers. The classes are taught one-on-one and by appointment with a local instructor. These classes could be expanded to reach more people by offering free, online digital training materials, which would allow the public to teach themselves at their convenience, and learn at their own pace.
- Tri Community Library, Luling Public Library, and Martindale Community Library do not currently offer free computer classes. Recommended action includes exploring the feasibility of offering classes at these locations.
- Luling Public Library does offer free Wi-fi and public computers.

Action 2 – Develop a strategy for improving the libraries' digital resources and online presence. Improving the online presence of libraries could include more frequent usage of social media, electronic distribution of library surveys, development of instructional videos for upload to YouTube, and livestreaming of library events. Increasing the libraries' online presence in the community will help promote digital literacy and help residents become more comfortable with receiving information via

the internet. Offering digital literacy skills training online, both in English and Spanish, can attract more patrons to the libraries. This activity also promotes broadband adoption in the community, allowing for further inclusion in the digital economy.

Action 3 – Develop a strategy for building awareness about the libraries’ digital presence. Work with community partners to spread the word about the libraries’ online resources, and the various ways residents can digitally interact with them. Develop outreach materials that reach critical groups in the community, such as families with children, senior citizens, low-income residents, Hispanic and Latino populations, and others. Churches are important outreach partners, as well as Chambers of Commerce and other philanthropic partners.

- Local Chambers include Lockhart Chamber of Commerce, <https://www.lockhartchamber.com/>, Luling Chamber of Commerce, <https://lulingcc.org/>, and the Greater Caldwell County Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, <http://caldwellcountyhispanicchamber.com/>.

Responsible Parties:

The programs can be housed under the office of broadband, with local libraries, Chambers of Commerce, and churches partnering to market to their members.

Resources:

- American Library Association – PLA, AT&T team up to bring digital literacy training to families http://www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2021/05/pla-att-team-bring-digital-literacy-training-families_.
- AARP Joins with Nonprofit to Teach Tech to Older Adults: [AARP](https://www.driveyourlearning.org/)
- Connected Nation Initiative: <https://www.driveyourlearning.org/>
- Telehealth information: <https://connectednation.org/telehealth/>
- Digital Learn Curriculum: <https://www.digitallearn.org/>

Some organizations that include both English and Spanish:

- Goodwill Foundation – [English](#) and [Spanish](#)
- Public Library Association – [DigitalLearn.org](https://www.digitallearn.org/)
- Grow with Google https://grow.google/intl/es-419_us/

Goal 3 – Caldwell County should increase internet adoption rates of their residents and businesses.

Objective:

Caldwell County should implement strategies that will help to overcome barriers to broadband adoption, such as affordability. Through information received from FCC 477 data, and directly from providers, Caldwell County allegedly has 100% internet access at 25/3 Mbps. Even if overstated, adoption of fixed internet in the county is low — 55.1% of residents subscribe to fixed connections and cite cost as one of the leading barriers to adoption. Caldwell County businesses show 69% have adopted fixed connections — and cost remains one of the leading barriers.

Another explanation for the low adoption rates in Caldwell County is the presence of the large Hispanic population. Studies have found that the most significant — and consistent — gaps in technology usage, access, and skills are among four demographic groups: low-income residents, seniors, those with limited English proficiency, or those with a disability. The Pew Research Center statistics are cited under Goal 2.

Actions:

Action 1 - Local broadband providers should do more to promote broadband services in English and Spanish to ensure the information is reaching all Caldwell County residents. Providers should promote their services locally to the community through flyers, participation and sponsorship in local events, and direct mailings. Providers also need to increase speeds to attract new customers and make sure customers have the necessary speeds to run modern-day applications. Caldwell County should establish and build relationships with local providers to understand their offerings and help market their services to the public. Information should be available via Caldwell County websites, Chambers of Commerce websites, schools, local businesses, etc.

Providers listed here were confirmed in the field audit as offering some form of connectivity in Caldwell County:

- AT&T (DSL, Fixed Wireless, Long Haul Transport Fiber)
- CenturyLink (DSL)
- Charter (Hybrid Fiber Coaxial)
- Communications Etc. d.b.a. Particle Communications (Fixed Wireless)
- FiberLight (Middle Mile)
- GHz Communications, Inc. (Fixed Wireless)
- Guadalupe Valley Telephone Cooperative (DSL)
- GVEC.net (Fixed Wireless, FTTH)
- LOGIX (Middle Mile)
- Rise Broadband (Fixed Wireless)
- Spry Wireless (Fixed Wireless)

VTX Communications (Fixed Wireless)
Zayo (Middle Mile)

Action 2 – Promote low-cost broadband programs available in Caldwell County. The office for broadband services should gather and publicize these programs in English and Spanish via the county website and other county resources to make sure that necessary information about private or federal programs is reaching those who will benefit most. Below are a few steps to identify programs available to Caldwell residents.

- Contact all local providers and compile a list of their low-cost offerings. Below are a few that may be available in Caldwell County.
 - AT&T offers the Access from AT&T program for \$10 per month for households on SNAP – Apply at <https://www.att.com/shop/internet/access/#!/> or call 1-855-220-5211
 - Charter Communications offers Spectrum Internet Assist for \$14.99 for households participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), free or reduced cost lunch, The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) of the NSLP, and the Supplemental Security Income (for applicants 65 years of age and older). Applications are available at [Low-Income Internet Service | Spectrum Internet Assist Program](#)
- Promote the Emergency Benefit (EBB) Program, which provides up to a \$50 per month discount on service and associated equipment, and a one-time discount on a laptop, tablet, or desktop computer of up to \$100 for qualifying low-income households. ISPs must opt in to allow customers to take part in those discounts. To find providers that offer this service, go to <https://getemergencybroadband.org/companies-near-me/>. Details regarding the program can be found at <https://www.fcc.gov/broadbandbenefit>. Please note this program is available temporarily and is scheduled to end once the pandemic emergency period is over. However, the infrastructure bill that was approved by the U.S. Senate and is currently pending in the House has funding to make the program permanent at \$30 per month.
- Post a link to <https://www.everyoneon.org/> on the broadband office website so that residents can use the resource to find local low-cost, high-speed internet offers by ZIP code or contact local providers listed in this plan to determine their offerings.
- Bring awareness to the FCC **Lifeline program** that provides a \$9.25 per month subsidy for the purchase of voice telephone service (including mobile) and broadband by low-income households. An enrollment form is available via the Public Utility Commission of Texas. Direct residents to go to <https://www.texaslifeline.org/> to apply.

Action 3 – The county could develop a Broadband Service Improvements page on its website, similar to that of Prosper, Texas (<https://www.prospertx.gov/broadband-service-improvements/>), to keep the community informed about broadband-related activities, expansion, frequently asked questions (FAQs), tips, etc.

Goal 4 – Close the Digital Divide in Caldwell County by offering free public Wi-Fi.

Objective:

Even though the adoption rate is low in Caldwell County, survey participants who do use the internet report very high digital literacy, thus widening the divide between those who adopt the internet and those who do not. This statistic also carries over to the business community, where employers and employees self-report a high level of technical skills. Although Goal 2 addresses how to increase the libraries' role in bringing about digital awareness, more needs to be done to close the Digital Divide. The objective of Goal 4 is to increase public computer access and free Wi-Fi so that residents can access technology in places they feel comfortable and are supported. If a business or resident cannot afford equipment or an internet subscription, and if broadband is not available at their location or their service has been interrupted, public internet availability is essential. An increased usage of technology and the internet, coupled with improved basic computer skills among residents, has been shown to drive economic development, create new jobs, and improve quality of life for the entire community.

While community organizations did not participate in the survey, the broadband survey shows 13% of local businesses provide public Wi-Fi, compared to 25% in other communities.

Aside from collaborating with the entities listed below, the county should examine “public gathering areas” that could be leveraged for the placement of free/low-cost public Wi-Fi. Such locations might include the City of Lockhart Disc Golf Course, Lions Park, Lockhart City Park, etc.

Actions:

Action 1 – Bring together community anchor institutions such as libraries, community centers, and senior centers that often host public computing centers to discuss their important role in providing open, public internet access to residents in downtown areas or other public spaces. This is a simple, straightforward way to get the community to participate in bridging the Digital Divide. Other opportunities may exist with religious facilities, local government offices, or various social service providers that offer services in English and Spanish.

Action 2 – Compile a list of organizations that can provide public access to computers and/or free Wi-Fi. Working with community anchor institutions, identify the number of public computers available and/or Wi-Fi hotspots.

Action 3 – Explore gaps in service to ensure that all residents have access to a public access computer and a Wi-Fi hotspot within a reasonable distance. Following the inventory, identify gaps in the community's public computers. These gaps could appear geographically or among various

demographic groups. Partnering organizations may also have institutional knowledge of groups impacted by a lack of public computer access.

Action 4 – Review community hotspot availability in public places, such as parks and other recreational centers. Develop plans to create hotspots in any areas where people attend recreational activities, such as tourist attractions. If available, use the hotspot welcome page to promote local amenities and events.

Action 5 – Once gaps are identified, develop a plan to improve the availability of public computers in the community. A plan of action should include not only the development of new public computer centers and the installation of additional equipment within existing facilities, but also the expansion (where possible) of access to existing facilities (e.g., longer hours at the library, centers open on the weekends, etc.)

Responsible Parties:

The County should host this initiative through the broadband office or appoint a committee to bring back information and recommendations to the Commissioners Court. Partners could include:

- Libraries
- Schools
- Community and senior centers
- Nonprofit organizations
- Social service providers and agencies

Resources:

- Broadband Benefit – <https://www.usac.org/about/emergency-broadband-benefit-program/application-and-eligibility-resources/household-eligibility/in>
- Lifeline – Low-Income Texas residents can qualify for help in paying their monthly cell phone – <https://www.lifelinesupport.org/>
- Website of updated discount offers sorted by ZIP code. – <https://www.everyoneon.org/find-offers>
- Updated list of broadband funding – <https://connectednation.org/current-broadband-funding>