

BUGET HEARING TESTIMONY

Thank you for the opportunity to address the members of this esteemed committee to assist in the ongoing deliberations on the 2024-25 state budget.

My name is Karmen Rajamani, vice president of government affairs at the Wireless Infrastructure Association (WIA), which represents businesses across the nation that build, develop, own, and operate the nation's wireless infrastructure. We advocate for the widespread responsible deployment of wireless infrastructure to enable connectivity everywhere and ultimately close the digital divide.

I am here today to highlight a pressing issue that has persisted in our state for more than a decade—the lack of universal online access for all New Yorkers. In today's world, online access is not just a luxury; it's a necessity for success at every level.

Without reliable, fast connectivity, New Yorkers cannot engage in modern life as we know it. Everything – from telehealth to accessing critical services to remote learning and working from home and so much more – depends on the ability to get online and stay there.

While New York has made strides in providing connectivity to every corner of the state, the challenge of the digital divide and managing the [increasing demand](#) for bandwidth that can handle ever larger amounts of data persist. It's critical that we remove existing hurdles that are blocking and disincentivizing the necessary infrastructure investment to bring New Yorkers the connectivity they need and deserve

A [2021 broadband report](#) by state Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli indicated that New York ranked second in the nation when it comes to broadband access, with 98.7% of the population connected as of 2019. However, this methodology, as per the Federal Communications Commission, overstated coverage - particularly in rural areas.

Recent data from the Public Service Commission reveals that certain areas of the state remain unserved and underserved by broadband providers, with Hamilton County reporting only 70% coverage. More than [132,000 households](#) in New York still lack broadband access— a fact that we cannot accept in 2024.

The federal government has allocated a total of [\\$1.6 billion](#) in broadband funding for New York, including the nearly \$665 million in federal Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment (BEAD) Program funds announced in June 2023 and more than \$880 million through pandemic-era programs. However, resources alone are insufficient—universal connectivity requires strategic planning and a concentrated commitment to eliminate barriers.

An [audit conducted](#) by the Comptroller's office in 2022 found the state's ConnectALL plan failed to fulfill the promise of universal connectivity. On the federal front, the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), which subsidizes fixed broadband services for more than one in six Americans, is [running out of funding](#).

Despite substantial state and federal investments, there are barriers in the way of universal connectivity. One major obstacle is the sluggish and inconsistent nature of local government review processes. A recent report by [Hudson Valley Pattern for Progress](#) titled "[Making it Mesh: How the Hudson Valley Can Prepare for Next-Gen Wireless](#)" analyzed the disparate local government review processes across jurisdictions. These variations not only lead to delays – or even the derailing of critical projects designed to bring next-generation wireless infrastructure to communities statewide.

The report emphasizes the impracticality of the current application system for all stakeholders involved. Some municipalities lack the capacity to quickly process numerous applications. Meanwhile, the piecemeal application process imposes a substantial administrative burden on providers. In the end, citizens pay the price as they are deprived of the high-speed, reliable online access they need.

While federal regulations aim to tackle inefficiencies in the permitting process, New York's status as a 'Home Rule' state poses enforcement difficulties at the local level. However, it's crucial to note that improving the permitting process doesn't necessitate overturning the authority granted to municipalities through 'Home Rule'.

The introduction of [BILL NAME] by Senator Hinchey is a positive step towards streamlining the permitting process for broadband and wireless telecommunication applications. The measure would eliminate redundancy, reduce administrative burdens for municipalities and service providers, and accelerate broadband deployment.

It is a win-win, allowing municipalities to maintain local control over permitting while efficiently processing nearly identical applications. This legislation would bring more predictability and speed to project approvals, reduce bureaucratic obstacles, and ensure that critical projects are not delayed or derailed.

It is evident that we cannot afford to wait any longer to bring connectivity to every corner of the state. In conclusion, [BILL NAME] presents an opportunity to deliver the connectivity solutions that communities rightly demand across the state. By eliminating the barriers that stand in the way of progress, we can bring New York closer to bridging the digital divide, ensuring equal access to online resources, and propelling economic development and innovation. I urge the Committee to prioritize this crucial issue and work towards the swift passage of [BILL NAME] for the benefit of all New Yorkers.

Thank you for your attention and commitment to the advancement of our state's connectivity infrastructure. If you have any questions about my testimony or need additional information, please let me know.