



July 16, 2021

The Honorable Suzan K. DelBene  
Chair, New Democrat Coalition  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Chair DelBene and Members of the New Democrat Coalition:

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored our nation's gaps in affordable access to high-speed internet, particularly in rural and low-income households. Across America, many were unable to afford internet service, which became critical to participation in daily life that moved online, including school, work, and medical appointments.

Congress and the Federal Communications Commission have begun to address this affordability gap through the Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) program, which provides discounts on broadband service to families and households struggling to afford internet service during the pandemic. But this program is only temporary. The bipartisan agreement that is being drafted sets an admirable long-term goal to get every community online, but more is needed to build on that progress and ensure that every low-income household has, and can count on, the help it needs to afford internet service now and to stay connected in the years to come.

Even before the pandemic, as of 2018, 25 percent of all school-age children were living in households without internet or a web-enabled device that could impact their ability to complete homework assignments. Lower-income communities were largely unable to access care via telehealth – consumers earning under \$24,000 annually represented only 18 percent of new telehealth users, about half as many as households earning about \$71,000. People living with disabilities, who already lag in internet adoption when compared to other demographics, are facing heightened barriers to daily life in what has become a largely virtual world.

Lacking broadband connectivity, especially during the pandemic, has impeded many from fully participating in society and the economy. Studies show that while three-quarters of adults used the internet to stay connected during the pandemic, 4.5 million rural households lack a broadband subscription.

There are several interrelated barriers to broadband adoption. Data from the Pew Research Center collected in February 2021 found that 20 percent of adults without home broadband cited cost of subscription as the main reason for choosing not to subscribe – a figure nearly identical to the share of adults identifying cost as the main barrier prior to the pandemic. Nearly three-quarters of non-adopters said they are not interested in a home broadband connection. While the barriers to broadband adoption are often complex, it is clear that cost of subscription plays a role for a significant share of non-adopters.

Currently, over three million households are enrolled in the new (but temporary) Emergency Broadband Benefit program. This shows that there is a real need for a broadband benefit program and that progress is being made toward helping Americans afford internet service. But this effort is not enough. An adoption gap remains, particularly among low-income households (under \$30,000) that lag behind their higher income peers (over \$75,000) in broadband adoption by 35 percentage points. Rural households similarly adopt at lower rates than their urban and suburban counterparts.

We have also learned that many homes are not yet ready to go online at any price, even for free. There are major gaps in digital readiness skills. Nearly a fifth of all U.S. adults do not have the digital skills they need to function effectively online. Addressing affordability and digital readiness go hand in hand – closing the digital divide requires that low-income people have both the financial means to pay for broadband and the digital skills to use it.

The infrastructure agreement is an ambitious effort to close the digital divide, but the amount that has reportedly been allocated for affordability is inadequate to ensure that low-income populations can afford broadband now and in the future and are equipped with the necessary digital skills. That's why we urge Congress to expand this funding to include a new predictable, dependable, sustainable broadband benefit program for lower-income households. This program not only needs to be codified and funded by Congress through dedicated funding, but it should be implemented as a direct-to-consumer benefit to ensure both that those most in need are able to access the benefit and that consumers have the choice of provider and services that best meet their needs. We also urge dedicated funding for digital skills training, with a focus on grant programs that empower local actors to pilot and scale outreach to their communities.

Now is the time for policymakers to create a new long-term broadband benefit and provide support for digital readiness. The pandemic and our recovery give us a once in a generation

opportunity to finally close the digital divide for all communities, regardless of zip code, income, or race.

By finding fast, effective, and responsible ways to get every household online, America can truly build back better. We ask for the support of Congress to achieve this vital national goal.

Sincerely,

American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD)

Business Forward

Code for America

National Consumers League

Partnership to Advance Virtual Care

Texas eHealth Alliance

U.S. Distance Learning Association (USDLA)

Women Impacting Public Policy (WIPP)

cc: Members of the New Democrat Coalition

