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Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on
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"The Need for Universal Broadband: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic"

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Subcommittee Chairman Quigley, Ranking Member Womack, Full Committee Chairwoman DeLauro, Ranking Member Granger, and Members of the Subcommittee on Financial Services and General Government, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the National Urban League in today's hearing. My name is Joi Chaney, and I serve as Senior Vice President of Policy and Advocacy and Executive Director of the Washington Bureau for the National Urban League. I bring you greetings on behalf of Marc Morial, our President and CEO, who regrets that he is unable to join us today.

The National Urban League is an historic civil rights organization dedicated to providing economic empowerment, educational opportunities and the guarantee of civil rights for the underserved in America. Founded in 1910 and headquartered in New York City, the National Urban League has 90 affiliates serving 300 communities in 37 states and the District of Columbia, providing direct services that impact and improve the lives of more than two million people nationwide.
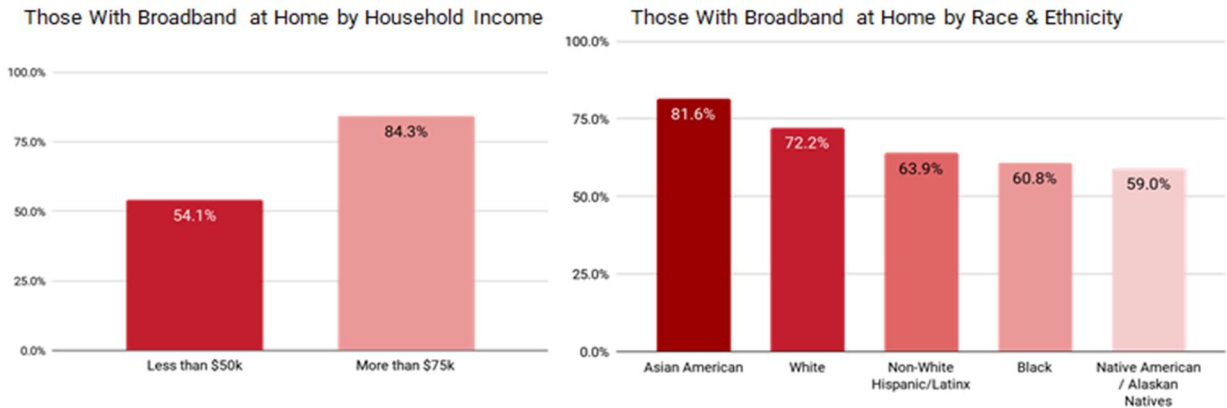
I am honored to testify today about the need for universal broadband and how we can leverage the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic for a more inclusive, 21st century society. Rarely does an issue have implications across so many indicia of equity, including racial justice, economic opportunity, health care, education, and workforce development.

It is undeniable that the COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented, widespread impact on households across our country, changing the way we work, attend classes, obtain healthcare, access government services, worship, connect with loved ones and entertain ourselves. All of these activities shifted online, making access to reliable home broadband internet more critical than ever.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, many individuals, families, and children relied on their schools, places of work, and other public "third spaces" like libraries, churches, internet cafes and coffee shops to connect to the internet because they did not have a broadband internet connection in the home--with a disproportionate number of these Americans being from communities of color or low-income communities. According to the US Census, about 60 percent of Black households and 64 percent of Latinx households have broadband at home compared to 72 percent of White households. Only 54 percent of

households earning $50,000 or less have broadband in the home compared to 84 percent of households earning $75,000 or more.

The Digital Divide is large, disproportionally affecting low income Americans and communities of color

Those With Broadband at Home by Household Income

- Less than $50k: 54.1%
- More than $75k: 84.3%

Those With Broadband at Home by Race & Ethnicity

- Asian American: 81.6%
- White: 72.2%
- Non-White Hispanic/Latinx: 63.9%
- Black: 60.8%
- Native American / Alaskan Natives: 59.0%

Source: US Census American Community Survey, 2018 5 year estimates

Why we need digital equity and inclusion

National Urban League

Overnight, "third spaces" disappeared and the pandemic revealed two different Americas: one where people were connected and one where they were not at a time when we needed connection the most. The pandemic accelerated the ongoing migration to "remote everything," particularly for essential activities such as employment, health care, and education. The benefits of being connected grew even faster, but so did the costs to communities who were not connected. The COVID-19 pandemic proved that broadband was no longer a nicety; it had become a necessity, just as necessary as electricity and running water.

But policymakers and experts will tell you that this has been a decades-old issue in the making. In fact, ten years ago, the National Broadband Plan (NBP) observed that as "more aspects of daily life move online and offline alternatives disappear, the range of choices available to people without broadband narrows. Digital exclusion compounds inequities for historically marginalized groups." Based on those trends, the NBP also warned that "digital exclusion is large and growing. For individuals, the cost manifests itself in the form of lost opportunities. . . .People with low incomes, people with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, people living on Tribal lands and people living in rural areas are less likely to have broadband at home." The NBP further predicted that "our accelerating reliance on digital technology appears to be driving greater disparities; [and if] left unaddressed, those gaps will likely grow."

The National Urban League's own 2018 State of Black America Report also raised concerns about the digital divide and launched the Digital Inclusion Index. The index provided evidence that the new job, business, and educational opportunities created by increased digitization of our world were not being equally shared.

Unfortunately, despite commendable public and private efforts to close the gaps, disparities in digital life were not prioritized. The disparities grew at the speed of innovation with the costs hidden to all except those who faced the challenge of finding a public hotspot or public computer to do the things most of us did within the comfort of our own homes without much thought to our privilege.

But with the onset of the COVID-19, the costs of not being connected could no longer be hidden within families, within school systems, within workplaces, within economies, within our nation.

For instance, a growing "homework gap," at the start of the pandemic shined an uncomfortable light on the digital inequities that persist for many K-12 students. The schools that had the resources were able to transition to online learning fairly quickly. However, the schools who did not have the resources were left scrambling when schools were forced to abruptly close. In some communities, students received laptops and their teachers began posting videos of lessons, giving assignments and responding to students' questions and messages. In other communities, students were being asked to pick up packets of schoolwork that they were left to figure out by themselves or with their parents.

Further, some school districts, such as Philadelphia Public Schools (PPS), appeared to give up, as they initially stated that PPS would not provide remote learning instruction, citing inequity as the main reason. The Superintendent stated that "If [it's] not available to all children, we cannot make it available to some." For these students, the traditional summer slide in educational achievement—which could usually be mitigated through a thoughtful summer online tutoring program—had become a catastrophic COVID slide, placing unconnected students in danger of falling permanently behind.

A similar story can be told about healthcare. We see the lack of broadband access leading to inequality in obtaining the vaccine for COVID-19. However, the relationship between access to broadband and access to healthcare is not a short-term story but rather, part of what will be a long-term trend.

Telehealth has become a critical necessity since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some estimates show that healthcare providers are seeing 50 to 175 times more patients using telehealth than they did immediately before the pandemic. We don't expect this trend to simply reverse post pandemic because of the benefits telehealth provides to those who cannot easily visit a doctor in person. Nevertheless, telehealth is out of reach or made more difficult for those Americans without a home broadband internet connection. One study found that only 38.6% of the people who live more than a 70-minute drive from a primary care physician subscribe to an Internet connection capable of handling telehealth services.

Many of the individuals without access to telehealth are also earning lower incomes and cannot afford to take time off work or pay for childcare to get seen by a doctor. Even for those who can afford to take time off, the responsibilities of child and/or elder care or the frustrations of public transportation deserts often prevent taking time off to visit a doctor in person. Without access to telehealth, they either postponed critical life-saving preventative care or chronic disease management services, or they waited until they had an emergency. This is the exact scenario we sought to avoid when we invested in health care reform.

Another illustration of how our country is paying the cost for our failure to close the various broadband gaps was the scene in my home state of Florida at the start of the pandemic, with hundreds of Floridians risking their safety to line up to obtain an unemployment form because the state's website crashed. In employment, as well as other critical government services, we could point to similar examples, all of which make it painfully obvious that the public sector is still far behind where it should be in terms of providing services over the Internet.

And while these examples focus on those who cannot afford or do not have available broadband service on demand in the home, there are others who could have it, but who lack the digital literacy and sophistication to use internet services. This includes a disproportionate number of older Americans who would desperately benefit from connectivity for health care, for access to benefits, for community.

These examples underscore the need for universal broadband and why it is critical that we apply the lessons learned from this crisis to build a more inclusive modern society. We will never go back to a time when we are not dependent on in-home connectivity. Thus, finally, our nation must make the overdue investments to achieve digital equity and inclusion, as a matter of civil rights, as a matter of human rights.

By "digital equity and inclusion," we mean the full participation in digital life by virtually all Americans, using a home broadband internet service that is available, affordable, and accessible.

Our Lewis Latimer Plan for Digital Equity and Inclusion provides an agenda for achieving that vision by honing in on four big, but achievable goals:

- Deploying networks everywhere;
- Getting everyone connected to those networks;
- Using the networks to improve how we deliver essential services like education, employment, and healthcare; and
- Creating new economic opportunities to participate in growth of the digital economy.

To achieve these goals, the Latimer Plan provides a detailed and comprehensive agenda.

The first gap the Plan addresses is the availability gap between those who have access to broadband networks where they live and those who do not. For millions of American homes, businesses and other enterprises, there is no available broadband network

capable of allowing them to participate fully in 21st century life. This is generally a rural problem, where higher capital costs are required to reach fewer customers. In sparsely populated areas of the country, private capital alone is unable to economically justify the investment required to build high-speed broadband infrastructure. Further, the current system of subsidizing high-cost deployments is under significant stress, unable to fund the necessary build-out for many years, if not decades.

This is why the National Urban League applauds efforts made by the Biden Administration with the American Jobs Plan, as well as in Congress, including the *Leading Infrastructure For Tomorrow's America Ac*t -- the *LIFT America Act* and the many bills that are contained within it. We are also heartened by today's hearing. We see it as a signal of commitment to learning from this moment and making historic generational investments and innovations to close the digital divide and in particular the broadband divide.

As you do your work, however, we charge you with embracing the scope of the Latimer Plan by addressing the full set of gaps contributing to the digital divide. Only then will you meet the needs of the nation, especially for communities of color and communities earning lower incomes.

More directly, this means that our investments must not only solve for the deployment or availability gap, but they must also solve for the adoption gap, the utilization gap, and the economic opportunity gap to truly achieve digital equity. And digital equity is what this moment in our nation calls for.

Even among those Americans for whom a broadband network is available, there are still tens of millions who have not adopted broadband in their homes. In terms of the number of Americans affected, the adoption gap is approximately three times larger than the availability gap. There are two principal causes of the adoption gap: (1) lack of affordability and (2) lack of digital readiness.

Today, there are 93 million Americans who do not subscribe to broadband. Our data shows that between 69 million and 78 million of those do not subscribe for reasons other than lack of availability. There have been extensive surveys of the unconnected that have asked why they do not have broadband. For instance, Pew Research Center recently found that:

- Unaffordability is the single largest reason that Americans do not subscribe to broadband with 50% of non-subscribers citing service unaffordability and 31% citing computer unaffordability vs 22% citing unavailability or insufficient service; and

- 27% say unaffordability of service (21%) or a computer (6%) is the #1 reason for not subscribing vs. 7% for unavailable or insufficient service.

As such, it does not help much to have lightning-fast broadband at your front door, if you cannot afford to subscribe to it.

This is why we are supportive of the [Federal Communications Commission's Emergency Broadband Benefit](). We were thrilled to see it launched on May 12th. It addresses affordability during this current crisis. But our goal is not to return to pre-pandemic inequity once the emergency is over. We need a sustainable solution to ensure Americans can afford quality broadband long-term.

There are some who believe greater deployment alone can close both availability and adoption gaps through competition that will drive down prices. While we would love this to be true, the data we have seen does not support this or is uneven at best. Moreover, where competition had some benefit, it had little impact on low-income adoption. Thus, while competition is good, and lower prices for everyone is even better, we must acknowledge that competition alone will not solve the broadband affordability problem for families earning the lowest incomes. For tens of millions, paying for broadband at almost any price is unaffordable.

We also have to be careful not to fall into the old traps of aggressively solving for one community's problem - a community that is racially diverse but predominantly White, while relying on hope and market principles to solve for another community's problem - a community that is also racially diverse but disproportionately composed of people of color and those earning lower incomes. That would be neither equal nor equitable. We do not want to leave anyone behind as we recover from the pandemic and step into the next chapter of our nation's history.

We need to fund a program that will provide long-term, sustainable support for the poorest Americans. Any such permanent broadband benefit program should also set minimum service standards that will regularly be re-evaluated and adjusted to remain current. And to fund this, we know that the costs cannot fall only on the American taxpayer. We need appropriations especially in the beginning so that the neediest in our society won't have to wait, but we also need industry to put skin in the game. One idea is a Digital Equity Fund that could be the repository of contributions, including from spectrum auction proceeds. We also need to ensure even greater accountability with respect to internet service providers.

While we believe a broadband benefit to be the strongest solution to unaffordability, our Latimer Plan proposes an alternative in which Congress creates a new program to guarantee access to essential services. The new program, which we call Lifeline+, would include LifelineMobile, which would continue the current Lifeline subsidy for basic voice and mobile functions with some limited data, albeit with comprehensive reforms; and LifelineHome. LifelineHome would be composed of LifelineJobs, which would provide broadband at home to the unemployed, empowering them to utilize online programs to upgrade their skills, as well as search, apply and interview for jobs; LifelineMed, which would provide broadband at home to low-income persons, to utilize the full suite of telehealth services; and LifelineEd, which would provide broadband at home to low-income families with K-12 schoolchildren and members of their households, to utilize all forms of digital learning.

Regardless of whether you adopt a permanent benefit or explore an alternative idea, it is clear that a generational investment from the public through Congressional appropriations *and* private actors through a range of means is what is required to close the digital divide.

Another significant barrier to broadband adoption is the lack of digital readiness. Digital readiness refers to the skills and equipment needed to effectively use information and communications technology to find, evaluate, create, and communicate online. The lack of such skills is a significant barrier for certain demographic groups, hindering their ability to adopt and fully utilize broadband at home.

Issues of digital readiness could be addressed by adopting the Digital Equity Act, which appropriates federal funding for state comprehensive digital equity plans and for digital equity projects undertaken by individual groups, coalitions, and/or communities of interest. The legislation also directs the National Telecommunications and Information Agency (NTIA) at the Department of Commerce to evaluate and recommend the most effective practices for advancing digital inclusion.

Moreover, we would establish an Office of Digital Equity at the Department of Commerce to help coordinate training targeted to demographic groups with the lowest rates of adoption or creating a National Digital Navigators Corps through a collaboration between NTIA and the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) to conduct training and outreach in non-adopting communities.

In addition to the availability and adoption gaps, there is another, less obvious gap that is increasingly relevant to how we use the tools of the information age to create a more equitable and inclusive economy and society. That is the utilization gap, which is the difference between how our communications networks are being used today and how they could be used to improve outcomes across industries.

Many commentators have noted that government services have not digitized fast enough and that government service providers have not taken full advantage of the availability of broadband to improve customer service, capacity, resiliency, adaptability, transparency, or security. The COVID-19 crisis has not only brought the availability, adoption, and affordability gaps to the forefront, it has also demonstrated that, despite the capacity and capability of our networks, we are suffering from a utilization diffusion lag, similar to that which accompanied electrification in the 1900s. Learnings from this unprecedented experience, however, could illuminate a better path forward. As the Washington Post noted in praising the Latimer Plan's discussion of the utilization gap, "Treating broadband as infrastructure is the right approach, yet for the investment to pay off, we must build more than wires."

There is already precedent for this in President Biden's Executive Order 13985 on *Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government.* As the order mandates, the federal government is now committed to pursuing:

[A] comprehensive approach to advancing equity, including for people of color and others who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequality. Affirmatively advancing equity, civil rights, racial justice, and equal opportunity is now the responsibility of the whole of our government. Because advancing equity requires a systematic approach to embedding fairness in decision-making processes, executive departments and agencies (agencies) must recognize and work to remedy inequities in their policies and programs that serve as barriers to equal opportunity. By advancing equity across the federal government, we can create opportunities for the improvement of communities that have been historically underserved, which benefits everyone.

The Executive Order further mandates that "each agency must assess whether, and to what extent, its programs and policies perpetuate systemic barriers to opportunities and benefits for people of color and other underserved groups."

If one were to make such an assessment, it would inevitably find that today, and to an even greater extent in the future, those opportunities and benefits are either best, or exclusively, provided online. It is not surprising that in a report by the Partnership for Public Service on "Federal Success Stories from the COVID-19 Pandemic", the best examples of improving service to customers all included online innovation.

One example was the Veterans' Administration developing a COVID-19 "chatbot" to triage veterans based on their specific questions and needs. Another was the CDC developing a coronavirus "self-checker," used by over 13 million users, that assists people in checking their symptoms and instructing them what to do next, reducing the burden on health care systems across the country.

Of course, these models, while deserving of praise, are not available to those who are not online or do not have the means to connect. And access via mobile device is not adequate for complex or long-term processes. Therefore, as discussed throughout the Latimer Plan and this testimony, a foundation of the efforts called for in the Executive Order must be universal access to the tools of the digital economy and society via investments in availability and adoption.

Lastly, while we are focused on ensuring all Americans have the tools, skills, and resources to participate fully in 21st century society and the digital economy, we also want to close gaps that limit opportunities to participate meaningfully and to create value in the tech industry as broadband and broadband-enabled enterprises continue to innovate, grow, and prosper. The Latimer Plan identifies this as the access to economic opportunity gap. This is the gap between how different communities have access to opportunities for wealth generation created by broadband and digital technologies.

Early tech optimists touted the rise of the internet as having the potential to be the great equalizer of society. Instead, it has exacerbated the historic divisions between the haves and have nots, leaving minority communities with fewer avenues to participate and

develop economic opportunities in the Internet economy. The National Urban League's 2018 State of Black America Report found that of almost forty thousand employees working for just four major Silicon Valley technology companies, fewer than one thousand were Black American. Latinx employees are similarly underrepresented. As the technology sector has increased in size and profitability, Black and Latinx entrepreneurs have continued to be left behind.

Technology cannot be the great equalizer, however, if opportunities for wealth accumulation are not equitably distributed throughout society. We must ensure that job opportunities are available for the country's growing Black and Latinx communities at every level in technology and technology-related industries. Entrepreneurs of color deserve a place in the governance of these companies. They should have equal access as vendors and collaborators in the building and utilization of new digital infrastructures and the prolific wealth creating ecosystem that controls it.

In closing, the COVID-19 pandemic has forever changed the way we will work, learn, and connect with others in society. The pandemic has made it abundantly clear that if we do not learn from the lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic by making universal broadband a reality, our failure will not simply leave us where we are today. If we do not close the digital divide, our communities will continue to fall behind at the speed of each new innovation and with them our nation in the global marketplace.

We named our digital equity and inclusion plan in memory of Lewis Howard Latimer (1848-1928), a Black American draftsman, soldier, scientist, and researcher whose parents were born into slavery. Despite the severe limitations of his time, Latimer made groundbreaking contributions to science that changed the course of human history. Working with Alexander Graham Bell, Latimer helped draft the patent for Bell's design of the telephone. Latimer also was involved in the field of incandescent lighting, a particularly competitive field in the late 19th century, working for Hiram Maxim and Thomas Edison. Latimer wrote the first book on electric lighting, entitled Incandescent Electric Lighting (1890), and supervised the installation of public electric lights throughout New York, Philadelphia, Montreal, and London. As successful as Mr. Latimer was, his story also illustrates the longstanding problem of Black and Latinx participation in the tech sector and the experience of America's working poor. A free Black patent-holder and the son of slaves, his inventions and contributions were critical to the success of his employers, Thomas Edison, and Alexander Graham Bell. Yet, unfortunately and all-too-predictably, he had no opportunity to take ownership or accumulate generational wealth from the vast businesses those inventions spawned.

It is our job to ensure these historic injustices do not continue to repeat themselves. Demanding broadband access is really about demanding inclusion and enabling all Americans to participate in modern society and our economy. Whether in rural or urban communities, much of American life requires quality, fast, reliable, and secure internet on demand. You cannot adequately keep up in school without it, you cannot communicate with financial institutions without it, you cannot compete in business without it, you cannot receive job training or even apply for a job without it, you cannot converse easily for

government services without it, including registering to get COVID-19 vaccine, and you cannot connect with loved ones and the broader community without it.

The National Urban League therefore urges Congress to aggressively and comprehensively address the digital divide issues identified in the Lewis Latimer Plan and to consider our recommendations for solving those issues, including a sustainable, long-term or permanent broadband benefit. We must seize this moment of overdue investment in America and Americans to ensure that *all* of us, including those who work on the frontlines or represent communities that have been historically underserved and systemically disenfranchised, can benefit from this digital era. This includes expanding availability, ensuring affordability, lowering barriers to adoption, improving utilization, and demanding access to economic opportunity that universal broadband will provide.

Thank you to the subcommittee for the opportunity to testify. Thank you to my colleagues at the National Urban League who helped me prepare for today and for the experts who helped us develop, draft and release the Lewis Latimer Plan for Digital Equity and Inclusion. I look forward to answering any questions.