MEMORANDUM

January 24, 2020

To: **Subcommittee on Communications and Technology Members and Staff**

Fr: **Committee on Energy and Commerce Staff**

Re: **Hearing on "Empowering and Connecting Communities Through Digital Equity and Internet Adoption"**

On **Wednesday, January 29, 2020, at 10:30 a.m. in the John D. Dingell Room, 2123 of the Rayburn House Office Building**, the Subcommittee on Communications and Technology will hold a hearing entitled, "Empowering and Connecting Communities Through Digital Equity and Internet Adoption."

I.   UNCONNECTED HOUSEHOLDS

In a relatively short span of time, the internet has profoundly changed how people across the globe learn, conduct business, express opinions, and engage in society. Yet even as broadband internet service is deployed to communities across the country, millions of Americans are still unconnected from the economic, social, and educational opportunities it facilitates.

The term "digital equity" has been defined as "a condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy, and economy.[1] Recent studies indicate that 28 million—or 22 percent of—American households do not subscribe to home internet service, primarily due to a perceived lack of need or expense.[2] These households are more likely to be low-income households making less than $25,000 per year and somewhat more likely to be in rural areas.[3]

The lack of internet access at home poses difficulties especially for students expected to complete homework away from school.[4] As many as three million school-aged children are

---

[1] *See* National Digital Inclusion Alliance, Definitions (www.digitalinclusion.org/definitions).

[2] National Telecommunications and Information Administration, *Unplugged: NTIA Survey Finds Some Americans Still Avoid Home Internet Use*, (Apr. 15, 2019) (www.ntia.gov/blog/2019/unplugged-ntia-survey-finds-some-americans-still-avoid-home-internet-use).

[3] *Id*.

[4] *Nearly One-In-Five Teens Can't Always Finish Their Homework Because of the Digital Divide*, Pew Research Center (Oct. 26, 2018) (www.pewresearch.org/fact-

without internet access at their homes, and this lack of internet access is sometimes referred to as the "homework gap."[5] These students are most likely to be minorities, from low-income families, or in households with low parent-education levels.[6] These students may have to spend evenings at school, libraries, or in restaurants to access the internet.[7]

II.   BARRIERS TO BROADBAND ADOPTION

A.   Digital Literacy

The American Library Association defines digital literacy as "the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills."[8] In an analysis of digital readiness published by the Pew Research Center in 2016, more than half of American adults are "relatively hesitant" when it comes to using broadband technology.[9] Americans look to libraries to provide digital literacy skills and training.[10] As more employers require applicants to apply online and to be able to use computers, digital literacy is increasingly necessary to obtain and maintain a job.[11]

B.   Affordability

The cost of adoption remains a major factor in the number of American households without internet service. According to a study recently published by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, about six million unconnected households do not have internet access because it is too expensive, and 51 percent said they would purchase

---

tank/2018/10/26/nearly-one-in-five-teens-cant-always-finish-their-homework-because-of-the-digital-divide/).

[5] *Homework Gap Shows Millions of Students Lack Home Internet*, NBC News (June 10, 2019) (www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/homework-gap-shows-millions-students-lack-home-internet-n1015716).

[6] *Id.*

[7] *Nearly One-In-Five Teens Can't Always Finish Their Homework Because of the Digital Divide*, Pew Research Center (Oct. 26, 2018) (www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/26/nearly-one-in-five-teens-cant-always-finish-their-homework-because-of-the-digital-divide/).

[8] *What is Digital Literacy?*, Education Week (Nov. 8, 2016).

[9] *Digital Readiness Gaps*, Pew Research Center (Sept. 20, 2016) (https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2016/09/20/digital-readiness-gaps/).

[10] *Libraries at the Crossroads*, Pew Research Center (Sept. 15, 2015) (https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2015/09/15/libraries-at-the-crossroads/).

[11] *Now Hiring: Digital Literacy Skills Required*, Urban Institute (Sept. 9, 2019) (https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/now-hiring-digital-literacy-skills-required).

home internet at a lower price.[12] Surveys of low-income families in communities across the country suggest that internet service offered at $10-15 per month would be affordable.[13] A Department of Education study also found that cost was a primary reason that low-income families and families with parents of low educational attainment did not have internet access in their homes.[14]

Many major internet service providers currently offer service at discounted rates for low-income families.[15] However, most of the programs, including those that qualify for Lifeline support, do not offer service at speeds that meet the FCC's current definition of broadband internet access service.[16]

C.   <u>Access to Devices</u>

Though a decreasing number of Americans cite lack of device as the reason they do not access the internet at their home,[17] surveys indicate that a significant number of Americans are relying on smartphones as their primary internet connection point.[18] Individuals reliant on smartphones for their internet access are more likely to be persons of color and from lower-income households.[19] Tasks such as completing homework, creating a resume, or applying for a job may be more difficult using only a smartphone.[20]

---

[12] *See* note 1.

[13] Jonathan Sallet, *Broadband for America's Future: A Vision for the 2020s*, Benton Institute for Broadband and Society (Oct. 2019).

[14] National Center for Education Statistics, *Student Access to Digital Learning Resources Outside of the Classroom*, Department of Education (Apr. 2018).

[15] *See* note 8, at p. 69.

[16] *Id.*

[17] NTIA Survey, *supra* n. 1.

[18] *Mobile Technology and Home Broadband 2019*, Pew Research Center (June 13, 2019) (https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2019/06/13/mobile-technology-and-home-broadband-2019/).

[19] *Id.*

[20] *Broadband Subscriptions Are Up, but Too Many Households Are Still Disconnected*, Brookings Institution (Sept. 28, 2018) (https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/09/28/broadband-subscriptions-are-up-but-too-many-households-are-still-disconnected/).

III.   WITNESSES

The following witnesses have been invited to testify:

Angela Siefer
Executive Director
National Digital Inclusion Alliance

Joshua Edmonds
Director of Digital Inclusion
City of Detroit, Michigan

Gigi Sohn
Distinguished Fellow
Georgetown Law Institute for Technology Law and Policy

Jeffrey R. Sural
Director, Broadband Infrastructure Office
North Carolina Department of Information Technology

Roslyn Layton
Visiting Scholar
American Enterprise Institute