City of Seattle

Mayor Jenny A. Durkan

January 29, 2020

To the U.S. House Committee on Energy and Commerce
    Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr., and Ranking Member Greg Walden
    Communications and Technology Subcommittee Chairman Michael F. Doyle and Ranking
    Member Robert E. Latta
Submitted for the Hearing on "Empowering and Connecting Communities Through Digital Equity and
Internet Adoption"

City of Seattle Comments Concerning Internet Adoption and Digital Equity

Honorable Chairman, Ranking Member and Committee Members:

We appreciate the Committee's leadership and share your goals of closing the digital divide for all
Americans. Thank you for the opportunity to share comments and our expertise in this area. These
remarks reflect our experience in Seattle and Washington State as a leader in digital equity since 1996.

**Closing the digital divide is a critical issue for all Americans, regardless of political party or whether
they live in rural, suburban and urban communities.** Cities like Seattle have made progress to connect
98% of our residents thanks to smart investments in digital equity. [1] Older adults, disabled residents,
jobless and displaced workers, veterans, low-income struggling families, and youth share very similar
challenges, whether they live in cities like Seattle or rural Ferry County, in the Duwamish Tribe or
Yakama Nation, or in any district in the country: It is increasingly difficult to survive without high-speed
internet access and the skills to navigate the digital world. Applying for jobs, finding healthcare,
accessing childcare or your local school, even communicating with our loved ones in times of need – all
these tasks increasingly require online access.

The internet can help people save money, access services, or have access to greater resources to
operate and grow small businesses, but only if they have the skills and the ability to access it. Working
towards digital equity requires targeted investment to reduce historical barriers for rural areas, people
of color, and other underserved communities. Leveling the playing field means ensuring equitable access
to working devices, technical support, high-speed internet infrastructure, and the digital skills needed to
use broadband and online services effectively. It also requires attention to the design of online services
and the capacity to ensure individual's privacy, safety and security online. One resident wrote
that "learning to use the internet and technology is the same as learning to read in the beginning of last
century" in our survey for Seattle's 2018 Technology Access and Adoption Study.

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[1] http://www.seattle.gov/tech/initiatives/digital-equity/technology-access-and-adoption-study

We applaud the introduction of digital equity legislation led by Member McNerney and others, which recognizes the definition and goals of digital inclusion and equity. These definitions were developed by the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) with input from the City of Seattle and experts across the country. The proposed legislation is the right way forward – the federal government must help to develop digital inclusion initiatives, grants and partnerships for delivering digital inclusion programs and support the research and exchange of best practices as we work towards true digital equity in our country.

It's smart business for government to invest in digital equity as we move services online. We need to ensure everyone - residents, workers and visitors - can access, understand and interact with government services online. In Seattle, community-oriented infrastructure including wi-fi and publicly-available computers in libraries, community centers, schools, non-profits and other anchor institutions have helped us distribute public safety and emergency preparedness notifications during periods of poor air quality or extreme winter weather in our region. Digital equity programs also help our residents understand and utilize critical local, state and federal services like online bill-pay, vehicle and business licensing, or communicating with their elected officials. Digital equity needs are especially apparent as more and more crucial government programs – like the 2020 Census – are moving online.

Even in "high tech cities" there are significant gaps and barriers to digital equity. Our 2018 Technology Access and Adoption Study found that low income residents are over 20 percentage points less likely to have internet compared to those above the poverty level. Those with greater incomes have higher rates of access, faster internet speeds, and are generally more comfortable completing tasks online. Ethnic minorities and non-English speakers, as well as those living with a disability, are more likely to rely on others to help them access and use the internet. Studies in Austin and elsewhere have found similar results. These are challenges that we can best address together through all levels of government in partnership with the private sector and trusted community partners.

Fulfilling our potential as a nation online requires support from the entire community, and investments in digital equity help to build these partnerships. Digital equity programs have brought the City and private sector stakeholders together with front-line advocates like community-based organizations, housing communities, educational institutions and communities of faith to help residents get online and build basic online literacy skills. Previous federal and state funding has helped internet and digital inclusion program providers across our state increase broadband capacity and training in tribal courthouses, local libraries, community centers, and social service providers.

The City of Seattle's Technology Matching Fund, started in 1998, has granted $5.4 million to more than 340 community-based organizations and generated an additional $9 million in matching funds. Through these trusted ambassadors 4,692 Seattle residents received skills training in 2018 alone. Our most recent digital equity plan, completed in 2016, brought together representatives from all sectors to develop shared goals and work together on digital equity. One result was a project providing training and helping residents in public housing sign up for internet service. We know that local digital equity programs make a difference, but funding for grants is an ongoing challenge.

Digital equity programs are a critical part of our education and workforce pipeline. Increasingly, our 21st Century workforce demands workers have sufficient digital skills. Employers in every industry are increasingly looking to hire workers who are diverse in their cultural background and experience, and who have the technical skills to be nimble and learn as their jobs – and the technology around us -

evolves. Our nation's workforce will lack the skills to compete in the global market if we do not work to ensure a highly-skilled, digitally literate workforce.

By investing in digital equity, education and workforce development programs can help create diverse, homegrown talent and ensure that opportunities are made available to everyone. In Seattle, we heard from a young person in our Rainier Beach neighborhood who had no idea what opportunities awaited her at Amazon or Tableau or Expedia across town. That is why we've invested in programs like Computing Skills for All, a digital skills training curriculum that teaches coding and application design at our Delridge Community Center, and partnered with technology companies in Seattle like Big Fish Games and Smartsheet to take students on technology careers tours. The Seattle Promise, IT+4, and Apprenti programs help provide a ramp to IT education and skills for work, and we are working to increase the number of technology internships available at the Seattle IT Department.
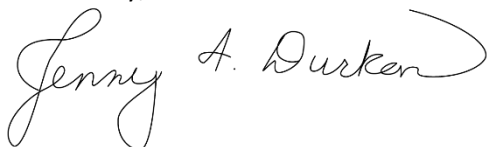
Tech training is just as important for non-technical workers, helping increase skills and wages for other types of employment. Community grants for basic digital literacy yields results. In many of the programs we've supported at the City of Seattle, we have seen workers employ their digital skills to improve their lives and excel at their jobs. Students in the Seattle Jobs Initiative diesel mechanic program need digital literacy to complete online classes and the certification exam. Disabled residents at the Special Technology Access Resource (STAR) Center in Seattle Public Housing have learned to use Word and email, so they can write resumes or communicate with their family in another state or participate in City advisory boards.

One student who works as a housekeeper applied what she learned in her tech tutoring sessions to communicate better with her boss, texting them picture of something if it has broken, or copying and pasting long texts into Google Translate. In another program we've supported, a student enrolled in the learning lab computer class had never used a computer before; she now writes newsletters for her church on the computer. All these are the result of partnerships and investments in digital inclusion programs.

Specific investments in digital equity also leverage other federal, state and local programs. The Department of Labor programs supporting state and local workforce training have provided accelerated training, internship and employment opportunities in the technology sector. A federal digital inclusion program linked with local efforts would help more Americans through training programs like the or homeless transition programs, Ada Developers Academy for Women, or Unloop, a program that helps train people who have been in prison to succeed.

In closing, thank you for the opportunity to be heard and to work with you on empowering and connecting our communities through digital equity. Federal action on digital equity is critical. The global digital landscape is evolving quickly, and too many Americans are being left behind every day. The Federal Digital Equity Act resources will help provide essential resources for front line workers that State and local governments are often unable to provide on our own. These investments are going to pave the way to a healthy economy, healthy communities and a healthier, more connected nation.

Sincerely,

Jenny A. Durkan

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Mayor of Seattle