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Before the United States House of Representatives  
Subcommittee on Communications and Technology  
Committee on Energy and Commerce

On  
“Empowering and Connecting Communities Through Digital Equity and Internet Adoption”

Washington DC  
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Chairman Doyle, thank you for the opportunity to be here today on behalf of the National Digital Inclusion Alliance and our affiliates including Pittsburgh’s digital inclusion leader, Computer Reach.

Twenty some years ago, in Toledo, Ohio, I was a graduate student setting up computer labs, teaching people how to use Word to create a resume and organizing regional meetings of community technology centers. We thought of our work as “bridging the digital divide”. Our focus was on access to computers and computer training. In 1996, we were not concerned with universal access to the internet. If we had just two computers in a lab connected to the internet, we congratulated ourselves for being cutting edge.

Today folks on the ground who are “bridging the digital divide” are facilitating access to home internet service, devices and digital literacy training. NDIA represents these heroes. They are nonprofit organizations, libraries, local governments, housing authorities and more. NDIA represents over 400 affiliated organizations in 41 states, the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

NDIA’s positions are based in our affiliates’ on-the-ground experience and research. There are a few myths that I would like to address today.

Myth #1. A mis-statement that we hear repeated often is that the digital divide would be bridged if we filled the broadband infrastructure gaps in rural areas. According to the Census’ latest American Community Survey, about fourteen million urban households (in major metro areas as well as smaller cities and towns) and 4 million rural households, still lacked broadband





subscriptions of any kind, including mobile data plans.<sup>1</sup> What did 60% of unconnected urban residents have in common with more than half of the unconnected rural households? They all had household incomes below \$35,000. Households with incomes less than \$35,000 make up 28% of all U.S. households but they account for 60% of those without any broadband internet service.<sup>2</sup>

We do need to address the lack of broadband infrastructure in rural areas. It is a serious problem. But, it is just one barrier to individuals and communities being able to fully participate in society today. The other common barriers, no matter where one lives, are the costs of internet service and devices, plus digital literacy skills. Simplistically equating “the digital divide” with just one of these barriers increases the division in our country.

Myth #2. The excitement around 5G has led to claims 5G will solve the digital divide. It will not. Current broadband technologies were not deployed to all neighborhoods (unless local governments mandated such) and there is no reason to think 5G will be any different. Additionally, 5G as a broadband service will require 5G capable devices. Low income households struggling to pay for internet service will certainly not rush out to purchase a 5G enabled device.

Myth #3. Well intentioned individuals have stated that if we could convince non-adopters of the value of the internet, they would subscribe. Anyone who has resisted using the internet realizes very quickly that the internet cannot be avoided when they try to apply for a job, register for classes or find out what their social security benefits will be. The greatest barrier to broadband adoption is not relevance. It is cost and digital literacy.

Residential internet service in the U.S. is expensive. On the low end, internet service generally runs \$65-70 per month<sup>3</sup>. That’s a lot of money. Unfortunately I cannot provide any detail as to the cost of internet service because that data does not exist. We need the FCC to begin collecting systematic data on the cost of home internet service and make it publicly available.

In the U.S., digital literacy training is under-valued and thus under-funded. One-third of manufacturing workers lack proficient digital skills. Half of all construction, transportation and

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<sup>1</sup> Of 18.1 million households with no broadband of any kind, 13.8 million were in what the Census calls urban areas, including six million in “principal cities” of metropolitan areas, other “urbanized” areas, and “urban clusters” in and around smaller cities and towns. Only about a fourth of U.S. households without broadband were in rural areas. (2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, Tables B28002, GCT2801 and S1101, United States)

<sup>2</sup> 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, Table B28004 (United States). 38% of the households with no broadband at all had incomes below \$20,000. Another 23% had incomes between \$20,000 and \$35,000.

<sup>3</sup> Refers to lowest monthly cost for non-promotional, standalone Internet service at any speed in most U.S. markets. Source: Ongoing NDIA research.





storage workers lack proficient digital skills.<sup>4</sup> There is no funding for digital literacy training.<sup>5</sup> It has been left up to local governments, libraries, and nonprofits to piece together resources to address the basic digital skills training that millions of Americans need to cross that digital divide. Piecing together funding is the wrong strategy for a strong workforce.

Now, let me share some good news. Digital inclusion solutions in the U.S. have been crafted from the ground up. NDIA's affiliates are providing guidance to low-income parents connecting to their children's teachers, teaching seniors how to use their electronic health records, helping veterans learn digital skills in order to acquire a job, and enabling disabled adults to participate more fully in their communities. We know that trust is an important factor. Technology can be quite intimidating. The most successful digital inclusion programs are rooted in the communities being served.

What is missing? Digital equity planning at the state level. And financial support for that planning plus the implementation. A good first start would be to pass the Digital Equity Act. We are also in need of increased awareness of the problem and the solutions.

So, thank you. This hearing is increasing awareness. You are increasing awareness.

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<sup>4</sup> National Skills Coalition analysis of OECD Survey of Adult Skills 2012-14 data. Proficient digital skills defined as: At this level, tasks typically require the use of both generic and specific technology applications. For example, a person might be presented with a new type of online form, and need to navigate across multiple pages and applications to answer the test question. The task may have multiple steps, and may require the use of tools (such as the "sort" function) to solve the problem. The person may have to identify the goal themselves, and engage in higher-level reasoning to solve the problem.

<sup>5</sup> In 2018, combined expenditures for rural broadband infrastructure by USAC and USDA totalled more than \$3.3 billion dollars.