

February 17, 2021

The Honorable Michael F. Doyle
Chairman
Subcommittee on Communications & Technology
2125 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Robert E. Latta
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Communications & Technology
2322 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Doyle and Ranking Member Latta:

On behalf of USTelecom members, the broadband providers and innovators keeping Americans connected during our nearly full year of remote work and distance learning, thank you for holding today's hearing: "Connecting America: Broadband Solutions to Pandemic Problems."

I am pleased to provide the committee the following information about steps our members have taken to enable connectivity during the pandemic and respectfully share observations that might help inform the committee's future legislative work related to broadband.

Our broadband networks have been resilient and fully capable of carrying the surge in high bandwidth traffic during the pandemic, and unlike the cost of most consumer goods and services, [broadband prices are actually decreasing](#).

These facts mean little to the millions who lack broadband access or simply cannot afford service in the first place. As a nation, we need to recognize the digital divide is not solely an issue of access, but of affordability and adoption as well.

This inequity is particularly acute for school age children. Pandemic or not, no child in America should have to sit in a fast-food parking lot to learn. Our members have stepped up in bold and creative ways to ensure learning does not become another casualty of this terrible past year.

In 2020, USTelecom and EducationSuperHighway partnered to connect low-income students to remote and hybrid learning through the [K-12 Bridge to Broadband initiative](#). Our members work directly with school districts to identify unconnected student households and offer service

to students at home. As of December, the initiative helped more than [800 school districts in 41 states](#) identify and connect students without a home broadband connection.

Across the country, USTelecom members including Consolidated Communications, Alaska Communications, Texas-based BBT, Montana-based Blackfoot, South Carolina-based Hargray Communications, Washington State-based Rainier Connect, North Carolina-based RiverStreet Networks, New Mexico-based WNM Communications and many others have led the way in their own communities, offering free Wi-Fi, discounted service and various grants to support remote learning.

Other members like AT&T have connected nearly 460,000 students and teachers across 44 states with mobile connectivity while teachers across the country can access free service to support virtual classrooms. [Verizon's Innovative Learning](#) is expanding its program to provide broadband access and devices to 111 new Title I schools across the country for a total of 264 schools. The program is available for 38 million students across 40 states and the District of Columbia.

Meeting the challenge of connecting all families and students working and learning remotely requires a strong partnership between government and industry. Our companies are stepping up, but they cannot do it alone. We appreciate the efforts of Congress, the FCC and other agencies who are doing their part as well.

Last March, USTelecom suggested the FCC open a [new funding window](#) precisely to allow E-Rate funds for remote learning as a result of our public health emergency. Yesterday, USTelecom was pleased to file comments at the FCC endorsing the limited use of the E-Rate program during the 2020-2021 Funding Year to connect students at home through E-Rate supported services.

To that end, we appreciate this committee's bipartisan support of significant additional funding for that purpose as part of COVID relief. Provided such funding is limited to the duration of the pandemic and explicitly used for educational purposes, it can make a meaningful difference in the educational opportunities of unconnected students across the country.

We were also pleased to file separate comments at the FCC yesterday providing guidance to the Commission as it works to implement the \$3.2 billion Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) Program established by Congress in December. Our goal—support the agency in establishing a program that will incentivize the broadest possible participation among providers by using existing resources, ensure active consumer participation, and ensure program integrity.

The emergency benefit is both a necessary and welcome start, but to achieve our shared and fundamental goal of universal connectivity, Congress should consider a long-term solution. The emergency benefit can and should serve as a helpful pilot for establishing a sustainable program over the long-term.

In short, your hearing could not be more timely.

Whatever the challenge—COVID-19, economic recovery, racial equity, climate change, healthcare, education, job creation, or national security—broadband must play an essential role in any plan to lift Americans up and move our nation forward.

Throughout this last 12 months, when our citizens have needed them most, America's broadband networks have delivered because of billions of dollars of investments and strong partnerships with government.

You have our commitment to sustain this progress together to finally and fully finish the job of connecting our country, no matter where, no matter what.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jonathan Spalter". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jonathan Spalter
President and CEO
USTelecom – The Broadband Association

Cc: The Honorable Frank Pallone, Chairman
The Honorable Cathy McMorris Rodgers, Ranking Member