

**Opening Statement of Republican Leader Robert E. Latta
Subcommittee on Communications and Technology
“Connecting America: Broadband Solutions to Pandemic Problems”
February 17, 2020**

As Prepared for Delivery

Good morning, and welcome to the first Communications and Technology Subcommittee hearing this Congress.

Congratulations to my friend Chairman Doyle on returning to lead this Subcommittee, and to Chairman Pallone as well for his continued leadership.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only heightened the importance of reliable internet access as so much of our daily lives has moved online. From telehealth to education, closing the digital divide for all Americans has never been more critical. But even before the pandemic changed the way we live, work, and learn, Americans – especially those who live in rural communities – were being left behind because of their lack of access to the Internet. In June of last year, I called on the Majority to hold this hearing because people across the country and Ohioans in my district need better access to the Internet so they can participate in the 21st century economy, get the

healthcare they need from home, and learn remotely while schools remain closed to in-person learning. But even as this hearing is long overdue, it is better late than never, and I am pleased we are having it today. Before moving forward, I'd also like to thank our witnesses who joined us today to discuss this important topic.

One of the most evident needs for improving broadband during the pandemic is our country's unprecedented reliance on telehealth. Telehealth services allow Americans to continue to see their doctors without the risk of contracting the coronavirus. Congress appropriated over \$500 million to the FCC's COVID-19 telehealth program last year, and now we must pursue aggressive oversight to understand how that emergency funding is being used to ensure needs are being met.

In my district, telehealth visits have spiked since the start of the pandemic last March – and I am sure we are seeing similar trends in my colleagues' districts. This includes more than just primary care visits, but also accessing mental health

resources and substance misuse treatment as rates of suicide, drug abuse, and alcoholism are on the rise.

But for all Americans to benefit from telehealth services, we must close the digital divide with long-term solutions.

Under the last Administration, the gap between urban and rural Americans with access to broadband closed significantly. Americans with access to 25/3 megabits per second fixed broadband service fell from 30 percentage points at the end of the Obama Administration in 2016 to just 16 points at the end of 2019. Thanks to Republican policies and historic tax cuts that encouraged private investment, providers were well positioned to immediately step up to the challenges presented by this once-in-a-century crisis.

While this regulatory flexibility enabled broadband providers to immediately upgrade their services for consumers, earlier this week E&C Republicans introduced the Boosting Broadband Connectivity Agenda, a package of broadband infrastructure and permitting reform bills to make sure

broadband gets to all Americans quickly. We urge Committee Democrats to join us in solving these important issues in a bipartisan fashion.

We often hear from our colleagues across the aisle about the need to get broadband to the home, particularly for low-income Americans in urban America. We agree and worked with you all to provide \$3.2 BILLION at the end of last year to increase broadband access for those Americans. And while no American should *have* to go to a McDonald's for internet, at least those Americans have access to it. Many of my constituents don't even have that option.

We must close the digital divide once and for all. The COVID-19 pandemic has required novel approaches to address new problems, but we can't forget about challenges that persisted before the pandemic that still demand our attention. Internet connectivity and access are topics we must tackle together because they will be required for generations to come.

So, thank you again to my friends in the majority for holding this hearing today, and I look forward to the discussion.