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Op-Ed by Angela Siefer, Executive Director of the National Digital Inclusion Alliance

Here's how we end the digital divide

By Angela Siefer

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The COVID-19 pandemic dispelled any doubt about the importance of broadband in the quest for equity in the digital age. The federal government is now rethinking its entire approach to universal broadband access and use — and it's about time.

A whopping 27% of Americans report not subscribing to home broadband. Texas isn't faring much better: According to the Census Bureau, 19% of households across the state do not have a home broadband subscription.

While the challenge of the availability of internet service in rural areas is real and urgent, our nation's digital divide is also driven by huge disparities in broadband adoption.

If we truly want to “Build Back Better,” we need a national commitment to eliminating this broadband adoption gap. That's going to take all hands on deck: funding and leadership from the federal government, buy-in and investment from broadband providers, and deeper partnerships with the community organizations here in Texas and across the country that are on the front lines helping unconnected Americans get online.

Until recently, Washington had largely ceded its responsibility on broadband adoption, crossing its fingers that the private sector would handle it. In this vacuum of federal leadership, some broadband providers have made valuable efforts to help close this gap, but it is not enough.

Even before the pandemic, most providers [offered low-cost programs](#) — generally in the range of [\\$10-\\$18 per month](#) — for low-income Americans. During COVID-19, many provided additional discounts and free introductory periods. Comcast's Internet Essentials initiative, the largest example, reports having connected more than 10 million Americans since 2011, and recently doubled the program's broadband speeds.

Private sector partners are essential to digital inclusion work, but the federal government must be a bigger part of the solution. To get everyone connected in a meaningful way, we need public agencies, private companies and community-based efforts all rowing in the same direction.

Congress is finally weighing in. In December, bipartisan majorities in Washington approved more than \$3 billion to create a new Emergency Broadband Benefit. Under this program, low-income and unemployed Americans will be eligible for a subsidy of up to \$50 per month (\$75 on tribal lands) to purchase home broadband. In March, Washington approved over \$7 billion for school students and library patron connectivity.

These two programs are valuable band-aids for now. Next, Congress and the Biden Administration need to build on this momentum.

First, lawmakers need to get to work on a long-term solution that will help low-income families stay connected after the pandemic ends. Low-income families need and deserve a Permanent Broadband Benefit that will ensure every American can afford to purchase home broadband service. Every capable broadband provider should be encouraged to participate so that consumers are empowered with more choices.

Second, policymakers must remember that affordability is only one of the many sociological hurdles fueling broadband adoption disparities. We also must address the need for appropriate devices, digital literacy and digital navigation support.

The National Digital Inclusion Alliance's years of work on this issue has shown that digital navigators — advocates in the community who can help marginalized families navigate the sign-up process, gain access to a device and obtain basic tech support — are critical ambassadors for universal adoption.

The success of Comcast's Internet Essentials effort, for example, rests in no small part on the company's investment in community outreach and digital literacy training to encourage more sign-ups. For these new federal broadband adoption programs to succeed, they'll need similar investments in community outreach partnerships that are critical to closing adoption gaps.

Congress can — and should — continue investing in rural broadband projects. But it can no longer ignore the broadband adoption challenges that are the bigger driver of our digital divide. It's long past time to get everyone connected.

Siefer is the executive director of the National Digital Inclusion Alliance.