



The Honorable Chairman Frank Pallone Jr.  
Committee on Energy & Commerce  
2125 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

May 5th, 2021

**To:** The Subcommittee on Communications and Technology of the Committee on Energy and Commerce

**Re:** Hearing on “Broadband Equity: Addressing Disparities in Access and Affordability”

**From:** The National Digital Inclusion Alliance

On January 29th, 2020, The National Digital Inclusion Alliance’s (NDIA) Executive Director, Angela Siefer testified before the Subcommittee on Communications and Technology of the Committee on Energy and Commerce at the hearing on “Empowering and Connecting Communities through Digital Equity and Internet Adoption.” At the time, Siefer said, “The most successful digital inclusion programs are rooted in the communities being served,”<sup>1</sup> but that funding for state and local digital equity planning and implementation was missing as was the need for an increased awareness of the problem of the digital divide as well as solutions for it.

Within six weeks of the hearing, the world shut down due to COVID-19 and awareness of the problems the digital divide causes was suddenly universal. Through the CARES Act, ARPA, and the Consolidated Appropriations Act, Congress swiftly directed funding and support aimed at closing the digital divide with a mix of short-term and long-term solutions. Even so, the digital divide still persists.

In addition, the pandemic has accelerated the rate at which this funding is needed and illuminated the need for a high-touch, highly personalized approach to closing the digital divide. As the Connecticut Commission for Educational Technology found in their Home Connectivity Report<sup>2</sup>, closing the digital divide is complicated. Even when provided a no-cost internet subscription, many K-12 families opted out of the program because of a variety of factors such as a distrust of the ISPs, privacy concerns, or confusion about their eligibility for the program.<sup>3</sup> Closing the digital

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<sup>1</sup> Angela Siefer, House of Energy & Commerce Hearing on Empowering & Connecting Communities Through Digital Equity and Internet Adoption’ January 29, 2020

<https://energycommerce.house.gov/committee-activity/hearings/hearing-on-empowering-and-connecting-communities-through-digital-equity>

<sup>2</sup> Home Internet Connectivity : Barriers and Opportunities to closing the Digital Divide for Connecticut Students. Connecticut Commission for Educational Technology. (February 22, 2021).

[https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DAS/CTEdTech/publications/2021/2021\\_CET\\_K-12\\_Winter\\_Connectivity.pdf](https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DAS/CTEdTech/publications/2021/2021_CET_K-12_Winter_Connectivity.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid p. 5 CT reference

divide will not be easy or cheap. It will require strategic, thoughtful policies, bold leadership, intergovernmental collaboration, and a large investment in human capital to ensure all residents are equipped with the technologies and tools required to thrive in the 21st century. As we all witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost of not closing the digital divide is too great. To that end, NDIA recommends Congress take the following actions to address disparities in access and affordability:

1. Allocate funding for state and local digital equity planning and implementation
2. Allocate funding for community-based digital equity planning
3. Establish an Office of Digital Equity in the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration
4. Extend the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program and address low-income affordability through a permanent benefit
5. Invest in broadband networks built to address affordability
6. Create a National Digital Inclusion Corps
7. Ensure broadband cost data transparency
8. Direct funding derived from spectrum auctions proceeds to establish an independent fund dedicated to funding digital equity initiatives

As follows is a brief overview of each recommendation.

### **Allocate funding for state digital equity planning and implementation**

As outlined in the Digital Equity Act of 2019<sup>4</sup> and the Accessible, Affordable Internet for All Act<sup>5</sup> dedicated funding is needed to support state digital equity planning and implementation. Congress should allocate \$2.62 billion to the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Telecommunication and Information Administration (NTIA) to establish the following:

- \$120 million for the establishment of a State Digital Equity Planning Grant Program
- \$1.25 billion for the establishment of a State Digital Equity Capacity Grant Program to implement digital equity plans
- \$1.25 billion for the establishment of a National Digital Equity Competitive Program for digital inclusion activities

### **Allocate funding for community-based digital equity planning**

The pandemic has made it clear that in addition to the need for comprehensive digital equity planning at the state level, individual communities must also plan and organize strategies to effectively address their community's digital divide. Understanding an individual community's

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<sup>4</sup> Digital Equity Act, S.1167, 116th Cong. (2019)

<sup>5</sup> Accessible Affordable Internet For All Act, H.R. 7302, 116th Cong. (2020)



unique assets and gaps is essential to effectively addressing the community's digital access needs. Community based solutions are often overlooked and underfunded. Meanwhile, they are highly effective in increasing broadband adoption and use.<sup>6</sup> Congress should allocate \$1 billion to the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Telecommunication and Information Administration (NTIA) in block grants to states to distribute and provide support to localities to conduct local digital equity planning.

### **Establish an Office of Digital Equity in the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration**

As outlined in the Lewis Latimer Plan for Digital Equity and Inclusion,<sup>7</sup> NDIA recommends Congress should establish an Office of Digital Equity to coordinate across federal agencies and initiatives to increase adoption of broadband at home, and to advocate for policies designed to achieve digital equity and inclusion. As its principal role aligns with community development, we think it best suited for the Department of Commerce, in the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA).

The Office would be the principal entity charged with meeting broadband adoption goals and tracking progress towards those goals. The Office would take on the responsibilities of the American Broadband Initiative, with an expanded scope of functions and new funding to help meet the goals. In addition, the Office would be the logical location to house the Digital Equity Act programs.

### **Extend the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program and Address Low-Income Affordability Through a Permanent Benefit**

While it deliberates how to best support low-income consumers get online in the long-term, Congress should extend the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program established through the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021<sup>8</sup> established to help lower the cost of high-speed internet for eligible households during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. As the program is temporary in nature and has been estimated to remain in place anywhere between two and ten months,

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<sup>6</sup> John Horrigan. Reaching the Unconnected Benefit for kids and schoolwork drive broadband subscriptions, but digital skills training open doors to household internet use for jobs and learning. Technology Policy Institute. (August 2019).

[https://techpolicyinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Horrigan\\_Reaching-the-Unconnected.pdf](https://techpolicyinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Horrigan_Reaching-the-Unconnected.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> The Lewis Latimer Plan For Digital Equity and Inclusion, National Urban League. 11 (April 2021)

[https://nul.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/NUL%20LL%20DEIA%20041421%20Latimer%20Plan\\_vFINAL\\_11\\_36AM.pdf](https://nul.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/NUL%20LL%20DEIA%20041421%20Latimer%20Plan_vFINAL_11_36AM.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, Pub. L. No. 116-260, div. N, tit. IX, § 904, 134 Stat. 1182, 2130 (2020), available at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/133/text> (Consolidated Appropriations Act)



extending the program by allocating additional funds could help bridge the gap for many households in getting and remaining online until additional or alternative solutions are derived.

Simultaneously, Congress should address low-income affordability through the establishment of a permanent support mechanism for low-income households. While Congress should work to decrease broadband subscription costs for all U.S. households, analysis shows that merely addressing market rate affordability will not be sufficient for low-income households.<sup>9</sup> No matter the cost, some U.S. households will not be able to afford a subscription and for those households a permanent support solution is necessary. Congress should use lessons learned from the EBB to create a sustainable, flexible, and accessible support program for low-income households.

### **Invest in broadband networks built to address affordability**

The connectivity crisis created by the pandemic has spurred a number of communities to create or expand broadband alternatives, aimed at providing decent connection speeds for lower-income neighbors at very low cost (or no cost), and/or quickly filling availability gaps in commercially underserved areas. They range from community wi-fi networks and public access points, to local nonprofit wireless ISPs building and operating extensive private LTE and millimeter-wave systems. What they share is a mission-driven operating philosophy, and the ability to leverage community partnerships and community volunteers to meet community needs.

Congress should dedicate funds to support non-traditional, not-for-profit broadband network initiatives serving communities -- urban as well as rural -- where adequate internet service is unavailable, or where lower-income households cannot afford the available commercial services.

### **Create a National Digital Inclusion Corps**

As outlined in the Lewis Latimer Plan for Digital Equity and Inclusion<sup>10</sup> Congress should direct the NTIA and the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) to create the Digital Inclusion Corps. In collaboration, NTIA and CNCS can explore best-practice models for building and managing the Corps, leveraging lessons learned from existing programs like AmeriCorps, Senior Corps and Learn and Serve America. The Digital Inclusion Corps would provide much needed capacity to community based organizations working to solve a wide range of identified adoption issues—including home connectivity, devices, and digital skills—on behalf of local community members, either remotely or in- person.

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<sup>9</sup> John Horrigan. *Focusing On Affordability: What Broadband Adoption Rates In Cities Tell Us About Getting More People Online*. Benton. (April 19, 2021). <https://www.benton.org/blog/focusing-affordability>

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at The Lewis Latimer Plan For Digital Equity & Inclusion 63



In 2018, NDIA concluded a two-year pilot program funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Services. Based on learnings from this pilot program and NDIA's affiliates such as NTEN<sup>11</sup> and The St. Paul Neighborhood Network's Community Technology Empowerment Project (CTEP)<sup>12</sup> who place digital inclusion fellows in community based organizations, NDIA identified a need for a systematic, national effort to embed digital inclusion champions in all communities and anchor institutions.

As the Latimer plan outlines, a national program can build on these successful models and ensure the expansion needed to address digital equity barriers. Specifically, Congress should direct the NTIA and the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) to create the Digital Inclusion Corps. In collaboration, NTIA and CNCS can explore best-practice models for building and managing the Corps, leveraging lessons learned from existing programs like AmeriCorps, Senior Corps and Learn and Serve America. The Corps should target segments of the population that are less likely to have adopted broadband at home, including low-income individuals, racial and ethnic minorities, senior citizens, people with disabilities, those with lower education levels, people in rural communities, those on Tribal lands, and people whose primary or only language is not English.

### **Ensure Broadband Cost Data Transparency**

As outlined in the Accessible, Affordable, Internet for All Act<sup>13</sup>, Congress should direct the Federal Communications Commission to collect data from the Internet Service Providers (ISPs) on prices charged for broadband service. The FCC should collect and publish this data for broad use by public interest groups, consumers, researchers, and other Federal agencies. This data is essential for benchmarking, measuring the efficacy of broadband adoption programs, and ensuring U.S. households are able to access affordable, high-quality broadband.

### **Direct funding derived from spectrum auctions proceeds to establish an independent, private digital futures foundation to fund digital equity initiatives**

Congress should create an independent fund financed by windfall and future spectrum auction proceeds fully dedicated to funding digital equity initiatives and programs.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Leana Mayzlina, Recapping the 2019 Digital Inclusion Fellowship, NTEN (July 9, 2020)

<https://www.nten.org/article/recapping-the-2019-digital-inclusion-fellowship/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.spnn.org/CTEP>

<sup>13</sup> Accessible Affordable Internet For All Act, H.R. 7302, 116th Cong. (2020)

<sup>14</sup> Michael A. Calabrese, Lester Salamon. *How to Close America's Digital Equity Gaps: Toward a Digital Futures Foundation*. New America. (April 5, 2021).

<https://www.newamerica.org/oti/policy-papers/how-to-close-americas-digital-equity-gaps-toward-a-digital-futures-foundation/>



We assert it is time for a significant, sincere and long term investment in digital equity. Use of spectrum revenue would do just that.

### **Conclusion**

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 500 affiliated organizations in 44 states, the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Each of the recommendations outlined here is based on our affiliates’ on-the-ground experience and research.

