

March 22, 2021

The Honorable Frank Pallone, Jr.  
Chairman  
Committee on Energy and Commerce  
2107 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Cathy McMorris Rodgers  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Energy and Commerce  
1035 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Pallone and Ranking Member McMorris Rodgers:

Thank you for holding today's hearing on revitalizing our nation's infrastructure and economy.

USTelecom proudly represents broadband providers, suppliers and technology innovators in every corner of the country. Our broadband networks have been resilient and fully capable of carrying the surge in high bandwidth traffic during the last year, but this means little to the millions who lack broadband access or simply cannot afford service in the first place. We all must recognize the digital divide is not solely an issue of access, but of affordability and adoption as well.

It is thus an important and timely step that \$9.3 billion for broadband affordability and adoption is included in the LIFT America Act, and your leadership in achieving this is appreciated. But there is still much work ahead to achieve our shared goal of universal and affordable connectivity for all in America. Even as the cost of broadband in the United States is decreasing—too many still remain without broadband connectivity. That is why we applaud the initial emergency broadband program that Congress has passed—and urge you to pursue even bolder and bigger steps to provide support on a long-term basis after the pandemic passes.

It is critical to engage across all sectors—public, private, and non-profit—to ensure support to help all unserved communities get and stay connected. We can start with the estimated 17 million school-age children who have no broadband connection at home.

USTelecom and our members are staunch advocates for the critical direct spending on broadband infrastructure included in the LIFT America Act, as well as the important federal investments in broadband over the past few months that can help achieve our shared goal of universal connectivity. This will only happen if funding is spent with precision and coordination among all federal and state government agencies.

As Congress considers additional resources in high cost and otherwise unserved parts of our country, we respectfully believe more can be done to avoid waste and prevent overbuilding existing support

programs so that every new dollar reaches truly unserved communities as efficiently and quickly as possible.

Two areas where we encourage the Committee to continue to focus include:

#### **Updated and Data Driven, 21st Century Broadband Maps**

Thanks to the Broadband DATA Act, updating and modernizing our nation's broadband coverage maps is currently underway and incremental results should be available from the FCC later this year. We know that many of the Americans that lack broadband do not show up on any map today, simply because their neighbor has service available. This updated map must guide the distribution of all of the historic and essential funding Congress has approved to reach the unconnected—including those carried out by the states. Duplicative mapping efforts are counterproductive and costly.

#### **Stringent Interagency Coordination**

The Department of Agriculture, the Department of Commerce and the Federal Communications Commission, along with various stimulus grants over the years, have prioritized serving the highest number of eligible locations possible through their broadband programs. While this goal seems like a good one, the reality is it often results in funding the same locations over and over again while leaving remaining unconnected locations without connectivity.

To “avoid” overbuilding, each program continually changes the definition of unserved, based on an ever increasing minimum speed requirement. By doing so, new programs can essentially overbuild the same locations covered by previous programs by simply upgrading speeds to the locations that are less expensive and easier to serve. The fast connections get faster while the unconnected stay unconnected.

Truly closing the digital divide means first connecting the unconnected. To accomplish this goal, we must ensure that all government broadband programs, both federal and state, are using the same sets of data and minimum speed requirements when identifying unconnected locations. Explicit and binding interagency coordination is critical in this regard, as is ensuring the efficient allocation of funds by avoiding funding duplication.

We hope the Committee will focus on what we know is the most efficient way to allocate our finite resources: public-private partnerships. Working together, government and industry innovators have shown how these partnerships are the most proven and efficient way to competitively distribute government funds to connect American communities.

Broadband plays an essential role in any plan to lift our families, neighbors, and enterprises up and move our nation forward. USTelecom members are committed to continuing to work side-by-side with you, and with partners throughout government to build and invest in these networks, and bring high-speed broadband deeper into all corners of America. We look forward to working with you and the Committee to ensure all in America are connected to the power and potential we know our world-class communications infrastructure delivers.

Sincerely,



Jonathan Spalter