MEMORANDUM

January 24, 2020

To: Subcommittee on Communications and Technology Members and Staff

Fr: Committee on Energy and Commerce Staff

Re: Hearing on “Empowering and Connecting Communities Through Digital Equity and Internet Adoption”

On Wednesday, January 29, 2020, at 10:30 a.m. in the John D. Dingell Room, 2123 of the Rayburn House Office Building, the Subcommittee on Communications and Technology will hold a hearing entitled, “Empowering and Connecting Communities Through Digital Equity and Internet Adoption.”

I. UNCONNECTED HOUSEHOLDS

In a relatively short span of time, the internet has profoundly changed how people across the globe learn, conduct business, express opinions, and engage in society. Yet even as broadband internet service is deployed to communities across the country, millions of Americans are still unconnected from the economic, social, and educational opportunities it facilitates.

The term “digital equity” has been defined as “a condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy, and economy.” Recent studies indicate that 28 million—or 22 percent—of American households do not subscribe to home internet service, primarily due to a perceived lack of need or expense. These households are more likely to be low-income households making less than $25,000 per year and somewhat more likely to be in rural areas.

The lack of internet access at home poses difficulties especially for students expected to complete homework away from school. As many as three million school-aged children are

1 See National Digital Inclusion Alliance, Definitions (www.digitalinclusion.org/definitions).
3 Id.
4 Nearly One-In-Five Teens Can’t Always Finish Their Homework Because of the Digital Divide, Pew Research Center (Oct. 26, 2018) (www.pewresearch.org/fact-
without internet access at their homes, and this lack of internet access is sometimes referred to as the “homework gap.” These students are most likely to be minorities, from low-income families, or in households with low parent-education levels. These students may have to spend evenings at school, libraries, or in restaurants to access the internet.

II. BARRIERS TO BROADBAND ADOPTION

A. Digital Literacy

The American Library Association defines digital literacy as “the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills.” In an analysis of digital readiness published by the Pew Research Center in 2016, more than half of American adults are “relatively hesitant” when it comes to using broadband technology. Americans look to libraries to provide digital literacy skills and training. As more employers require applicants to apply online and to be able to use computers, digital literacy is increasingly necessary to obtain and maintain a job.

B. Affordability

The cost of adoption remains a major factor in the number of American households without internet service. According to a study recently published by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, about six million unconnected households do not have internet access because it is too expensive, and 51 percent said they would purchase


6 Id.


8 What is Digital Literacy?, Education Week (Nov. 8, 2016).


home internet at a lower price. Surveys of low-income families in communities across the country suggest that internet service offered at $10-15 per month would be affordable. A Department of Education study also found that cost was a primary reason that low-income families and families with parents of low educational attainment did not have internet access in their homes.

Many major internet service providers currently offer service at discounted rates for low-income families. However, most of the programs, including those that qualify for Lifeline support, do not offer service at speeds that meet the FCC’s current definition of broadband internet access service.

C. Access to Devices

Though a decreasing number of Americans cite lack of device as the reason they do not access the internet at their home, surveys indicate that a significant number of Americans are relying on smartphones as their primary internet connection point. Individuals reliant on smartphones for their internet access are more likely to be persons of color and from lower-income households. Tasks such as completing homework, creating a resume, or applying for a job may be more difficult using only a smartphone.

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12 See note 1.
15 See note 8, at p. 69.
16 Id.
17 NTIA Survey, supra n. 1.
19 Id.
III. WITNESSES

The following witnesses have been invited to testify:

**Angela Siefer**  
Executive Director  
National Digital Inclusion Alliance

**Joshua Edmonds**  
Director of Digital Inclusion  
City of Detroit, Michigan

**Gigi Sohn**  
Distinguished Fellow  
Georgetown Law Institute for Technology Law and Policy

**Jeffrey R. Sural**  
Director, Broadband Infrastructure Office  
North Carolina Department of Information Technology

**Roslyn Layton**  
Visiting Scholar  
American Enterprise Institute