

Written Testimony of Joshua D. Edmonds

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Before the United States House of Representatives

Committee on Energy and Commerce

Subcommittee on Communications and Technology

On

“Empowering and Connecting Communities through Digital Equity and Internet Adoption”

January 29, 2020

Honorable Chairman, Ranking member and Committee members:

On behalf of the City of Detroit, I would like to express a sincere thanks for the opportunity to discuss digital equity and internet adoption, two issues that are critical for the people that I serve. These issues transcend specific geographies and demographics, and have a far-reaching impact on our great nation as a whole.

Digital equity is a commitment for the least of us. It requires an honest assessment of what diverse populations need to achieve meaningful participation in a digital society. For some communities, that involves building infrastructure, other communities require additional support to ensure that residents can subscribe to reliable, affordable broadband plans. But at the core of any digital equity initiative is understanding the plight of older adults, veterans, low-income families, disabled residents, small business owners, and unemployed Americans all seeking to engage in a digital society. Local leaders are uniquely positioned to help galvanize the stakeholders that can help these populations and others take advantage of digital opportunities.

As the City of Detroit's Director of Digital Inclusion and a Digital Inclusion Policy Fellow with the Poverty Solutions Initiative at the University of Michigan, I am responsible for developing a digital equity strategy that will sustainably increase internet subscribers while placing an emphasis on digital skills training and resident device acquisition. I play a vital role in implementing digital equity initiatives for a city where one in four residents still do not have broadband access of any kind.¹ Cities like mine and across the nation do not receive any federal

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates

funding to address this issue. Thus, it is imperative to examine why the digital divide goes beyond infrastructure and encompasses larger societal issues.

Cybersecurity

Over 200,000 residents utilize the City of Detroit's library system to access Wi-Fi networks. These residents include the low-income, school age children, and the elderly who are oftentimes relegated to searching for online connectivity in parking lots. This is alarming for a variety of reasons – including cybersecurity concerns that do not receive as much oxygen in conversations about broadband access. Referencing a report conducted by researchers at UC Berkeley, residents in underserved communities are largely unaware of cybercrimes, and cities are also largely unaware on how to better protect their residents.² Residents utilizing open and unprotected networks to access the internet is not just an internet access problem, but a problem of national security.

Financial Illiteracy

According to a recent report published by the Federal Reserve Bank, from 2012-2017, ~1,600 banks closed in both rural and urban counties. The large reason, online banking. The Federal Reserve Bank found that areas composed of residents with lower income, fewer years of education, and a greater proportion of African Americans, were the most affected.³ Those who are struggling with connectivity are most likely to suffer the impact. As banking continues to migrate online and digital equity remains unaddressed, financial illiteracy and digital illiteracy will continue to grow. Again, Americans in both rural and urban communities will be locked out of financial opportunities.

² <https://cltc.berkeley.edu/2019/04/15/improving-cybersecurity-awareness-in-underserved-populations/>

³ <https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/november-2019-bank-branch-access-in-rural-communities.htm>

Tech-Enabled Workforce

According to a recent Department of Labor report, there are over 700,000 unfilled IT jobs in the U.S.⁴ Beyond searching and applying for jobs online, the demand for skilled tech workers is growing, while the pipelines remain predominately rooted in communities ripe with socioeconomic advantages. Investing in digital equity ensures economically distressed communities can gain access to digital literacy trainings and devices that will allow them to amass the digital familiarity needed to partake in existing workforce efforts. Our national goals to build our workforce depend on Americans having reliable, affordable broadband access.

Population

Broadband access does not only ensure that cities can compete, it ensures that they retain the talent and maintain the population that helps their communities to thrive. According to data provided by CityLab, Rust Belt cities, the Great Plains and the South have suffered significant population decline over an approximate 40-year span⁵. As rural, tribal and urban communities wrestle with losing talent, taxpayers and revenue, investments in digital equity could arm affected areas with the ability to grow their own talent by supporting localized digital inclusion programming that places an emphasis on both broadband access and tackling obstacles that keep residents from connecting to the digital world.

Healthcare

According to the American Hospital Association, telehealth represents the future of care delivery that increases residential access to physicians and specialists ensuring Americans have the care when they need it. 76% of U.S. hospitals provide telehealth services; however, one of the larger

⁴ <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/06/18/there-are-70000-open-tech-jobs-here-is-how-firms-are-hiring-for-them.html>

⁵ <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2019/05/economic-geography-talent-brain-drain-research-map-move/588673/>

issues is both broadband access and broadband adoption.⁶ Rural populations will continue to be at a disadvantage without access to telehealth opportunities. Given that the US has a significant aging population,⁷ the value in ensuring the US has appropriate digital equity investments could boost telehealth participation for residents most in need of care.

Census 2020

The U.S. Census Bureau has embarked on their first data collection that will be predominately conducted online. Citing the lack of residents with internet access, the Associated Press listed Detroit as the “toughest community” to count in America.⁸ Detroit, like other communities across the U.S. with pronounced digital inequity, risk missing out on our share of the \$1.5 trillion in federal resources. That has a direct impact on education, healthcare, infrastructure projects, and could potentially reduce Congressional representation. If the federal government is using the internet as a vehicle to determine population sizes to ultimately allocate funding, the federal government should also provide resources for communities to boost broadband adoption and to ensure an accurate count.

Americans with Disabilities

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Unfortunately, according to a recent Pew Research Study, Americans with disabilities are less likely to have home broadband and technical devices.⁹ We can extrapolate that if these Americans do not have home broadband or a device, digital literacy is likely an obstacle to broadband adoption. With more than 56 million Americans living with a disability, investments

⁶ <https://www.aha.org/factsheet/telehealth>

⁷ <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2018/cb18-41-population-projections.html>

⁸ <https://apnews.com/9e753cf7f046bd5b436aacc54bf207a3>

⁹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/07/disabled-americans-are-less-likely-to-use-technology/>

in digital equity would ensure Americans with disabilities are afforded the same opportunity to digitally engage in today's economy regardless of their geographic location.

Homework Gap

The homework gap is a harsh reality for school age children regardless of whether they live in Indigenous, rural, urban, or hard to reach communities. For the millions who do not have the requisite digital access to complete assignments, the homework is unforgiving and does not discriminate—their opportunities can be limited or eliminated without connectivity. In 2018, Common Sense Education¹⁰ conducted a national survey geared towards gathering information about the digital divide from teachers. Forty percent of teachers said that many of their students did not have adequate access to the internet or computer to complete schoolwork at home.

Schools with more than three-quarters of students being students of color are more likely to say over 60% of their students do not have home access to the internet or a computer.¹¹ There is widespread agreement that investing in digital equity initiatives would help arm our children with the necessary footing needed to excel in the classroom by providing home-based support.

Broadband Access versus Adoption

In table 1.1, I listed each subcommittee representative, their respective district, and combined the Microsoft¹² and FCC data¹³ to address the myth that broadband availability guarantees broadband usage. The methodology Microsoft used to collect broadband usage comes from data Microsoft collected when rolling out national software updates. It is important to examine the

¹⁰ Common Sense is the nation's leading nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of kids and families.

¹¹ <https://www.benton.org/headlines/homework-gap-teacher-perspectives-closing-digital-divide>

¹² <https://news.microsoft.com/rural-broadband/>

¹³ <https://www.fcc.gov/general/broadband-deployment-data-fcc-form-477>

disparity between broadband usage and availability, and make recommendations to support localized adoption programs that will reduce the differentials.

Representative	District	Broadband Availability	Broadband Usage
Shimkus (R)	IL-15	70%	24%
Scalise (R)	LA-1	93%	39%
Olson (R)	TX-22	96%	60%
Kinzinger (R)	IL-16	94%	34%
Bilirakis (R)	FL-12	99%	61%
Johnson (R)	OH-6	74%	24%
Long (R)	MO-07	85%	24%
Flores (R)	TX-17	90%	47%
Brooks (R)	IN-05	92%	44%
Walberg (R)	MI-07	82%	32%
Gianforte (R)	MT-00	77%	30%
Walden (R)	OR-02	84%	41%
Latta (R)	OH-05	89%	31%
Pallone (D)	NJ-06	99%	70%
Doyle (D)	PA-18	96%	52%
McNerney (D)	CA-09	96%	43%
Clarke (D)	NY-09	100%	43%
Loebsack (D)	IA-02	87%	30%
Veasey (D)	TX-33	100%	35%
McEachin (D)	VA-04	90%	49%
Soto (D)	FL-09	98%	55%
O'Halleran (D)	AZ-01	54%	30%
Eshoo (D)	CA-18	100%	63%
DeGette (D)	CO-01	99%	53%
Butterfield (D)	NC-01	90%	34%
Matsui (D)	CA-06	98%	49%
Welch (D)	VT-00	86%	39%
Luján (D)	NM-03	70%	23%
Schrader (D)	OR-05	96%	55%
Cárdenas (D)	CA-29	100%	46%
Dingell (D)	MI-12	97%	50%

Table 1.1

Strategic Partnerships Can Help Reduce the Digital Divide

In my role at the City, I also work directly with internet service providers in varying capacities.

While my role can be very challenging, most of the providers have been great partners. When the City recognized Digital Inclusion Week this past October, Comcast was one of the first sponsors,

with additional support from Verizon and AT&T. This past holiday season, when working with Los Angeles based social enterprise, human I-T, and the Detroit Housing Commission, we were able to provide 75 families with free computers. I made one phone call to Comcast, and they agreed to provide 75 families six months of free internet access through their Internet Essentials program.

These are examples of how local leadership has called on industry to fill in where the federal government is silent. In Detroit, we have developed public-private partnerships without any government funding, but it an unsustainable model. We need federal resources to continue our work. If we were to receive additional funding, we could do more robust outreach, and incentivize more localized funding from philanthropic organizations.

In conclusion, the City of Detroit has stories that are familiar to thousands of cities and towns across the US that are starving for digital opportunities. Thank you for the opportunity to be heard on a national level. I hope my testimony serves as a launch pad that will spur digital equity investments that give American communities the footing needed to compete in the digital economy.