

BRIDGE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

COVID-19 has shifted many aspects of everyday life online. From work to education to health care, access to broadband internet and reliable devices is more critical than ever. The digital divide across socioeconomic, racial and geographic communities is exacerbating gaps in educational achievement as students shift to distance learning and in health outcomes as telehealth becomes critical for many patients to access care.

The broadband provisions included in the December 2020 COVID relief package represent meaningful progress toward addressing and closing the digital divide during the pandemic. But the digital divide predated the pandemic and will outlive it in the absence of longer-term, sustainable policy solutions.

The federal government should take action to promote broadband deployment and develop a sustainable low-income connectivity program to make sure all Americans can stay connected to their communities, schools, critical services, health care providers and workplaces. While targeting connectivity gaps, care should be taken not to undermine the incentives that have encouraged tremendous private sector investment in robust and resilient networks.

1. Expand and modernize support for low-income households to purchase broadband.

The Emergency Broadband Benefit Program will provide additional assistance during the pandemic, but it is a temporary program. Given the ongoing need to address the digital divide, Congress should adopt a new long-term program that is designed to help the most vulnerable consumers purchase broadband and devices. The modernized program should:

- a. Be supported by a sustainable, appropriated, long-term federal funding stream;
- b. Provide the subsidy directly to low-income beneficiaries in the form of an electronic voucher or debit card to give them the flexibility to choose the provider and service that best fits their needs;
- c. Eliminate the Eligible Telecommunications Carrier (ETC) requirement to encourage broad provider participation;
- d. Increase efficiency and prevent waste, fraud and abuse by having the government handle all eligibility verification; and
- e. Be designed so that it is easy for eligible users to apply for and receive the benefit. In doing so, the federal government should explore ways to leverage participation in other existing programs where feasible to boost participation in this new program.

2. Clarify and expand the E-Rate program to provide critical resources to meet student and teacher connectivity needs for e-learning.

Congress should clarify and expand the E-Rate program to ensure that students and teachers can fully participate in virtual classrooms and distance learning. To do so, Congress should:

- a. Clarify that E-Rate can be used to reimburse the costs of internet service for e-learning to support student and teacher connectivity needs for educational purposes during the COVID-19 public health emergency;
- b. Clarify the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) authority to expand its definition of a school campus in the context of distance learning throughout the COVID-19 public health emergency;
- c. Direct the FCC to coordinate any E-Rate provisions with the Department of Education and any federal low-income broadband programs to ensure efficient use of funds; and
- d. Ensure that students and teachers can rapidly obtain broadband service by directing the FCC to streamline E-Rate administrative procedures.

3. Fund the purchase of connected devices for use in e-learning.

Congress should establish and fund a program to support purchases of equipment for students and teachers in low-income communities and households engaged in distance learning. Funding for such a program should be channeled through states to school districts through block grants or other grant-in-aid programs, while using existing eligibility criteria (e.g., from the E-Rate program).

4. Accelerate broadband buildout in unserved areas of the country.

Congress should make the needed investments to bring high-speed internet to unserved parts of the country by taking the following actions:

- a. Make the necessary funding consistently and reliably available to the FCC to support the buildout of broadband infrastructure to help close broadband coverage gaps. Investments should be based on technology-neutral criteria to support a mix of solutions that can be rapidly deployed.
- b. Work with state and local governments to support the adoption of uniform timeframes with streamlined permitting processes for reviewing broadband deployment applications.
- c. Accelerate the distribution of FCC funding for high-speed internet projects as the agency improves its broadband maps.

5. Support access to online health care services.

Congress should permanently remove geographic and site restrictions on Medicare telehealth benefits. Additionally, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services should maintain and expand its waiver authorities that expanded the availability and flexibility of benefits during the pandemic.