

A Roadmap for Public-Private Partnerships

With federal funding, we will have a historic opportunity to close the digital divide, but we must now do the hard work of driving adoption.

President Biden has set the goal of ensuring “every American has access to high quality, affordable high-speed Internet.” Congress has already made a down payment toward providing the resources needed to close the broadband affordability gap and is poised to dramatically increase its investment. To ensure no home is left offline, we need the bold leadership of a public-private partnership to remove the barriers that keep low-income families on the wrong side of the digital divide.



Federal Policymakers

► **Action 1: Ensure that State Broadband Plans Include Programs to Close the Affordability Gap**

As part of the bipartisan infrastructure bill, states must submit a plan for how they intend to use their broadband infrastructure and Digital Equity Act funding. These plans must be approved by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) prior to states receiving their funds. NTIA should require that all state broadband plans include investments in programs to close the affordability gap, including allocating infrastructure funds for the deployment of free Wi-Fi networks in low-income apartment buildings; investments in marketing and direct outreach campaigns to unconnected households; and the creation and staffing of broadband adoption centers.

► **Action 2: Require Federal Agencies to Inform the FCC of Households that are Automatically Eligible for the Affordable Connectivity Program**

One of the largest broadband adoption barriers faced by unconnected households is the need to provide documentation proving they are eligible for the Affordable Connectivity Program. Congress attempted to reduce this burden by providing automatic eligibility approval for households that were enrolled in Medicaid, SNAP,

Free and Reduced Lunch, Supplemental Security Income, Federal Public Housing Assistance, Veterans and Survivors Pension Benefits, Pell Grants, or any of a number of Tribal specific benefit programs. Unfortunately, households must still obtain documentation to prove they are enrolled in one of these programs. To eliminate this barrier, Congress or the President should require the Federal Agencies in charge of these programs to establish data-sharing agreements with the FCC and provide the FCC with automatic eligibility verification for households who state they are enrolled in their program. Agencies could leverage funding from the \$1 billion Technology Modernization Fund included in the American Rescue Plan Act and should be required to implement these data-sharing arrangements within one year. If necessary, Congress should provide agencies with data privacy waivers for this specific purpose.

► **Action 3: Allow Non-profits and State and Local Governments to Remotely Enroll Households in the Affordable Connectivity Program**

In order to maximize the effectiveness of broadband adoption centers, the FCC should modify its Emergency Broadband Benefit rules to allow these organizations to enroll households in the Affordable Connectivity Program without requiring eligible households to come to an adoption center in person. For unconnected households without Internet access, the need to go to a library or an adoption center during the pandemic is an unnecessary burden that dramatically reduces participation in the program. By limiting this provision only to broadband adoption centers run by non-profits or state and local governments and expressly excluding service providers and their agents, the FCC can eliminate concerns about improper enrollments.

► **Action 4: Allow Apartment Owners and Housing Authorities to Aggregate Affordable Connectivity Program Benefits for their Residents**

To maximize the availability and capacity of free Wi-Fi networks in low-income apartment buildings, the FCC should modify its Emergency Broadband Benefit rules to allow apartment owners and housing authorities to aggregate these benefits for their residents. This will enable the purchase of high-capacity, symmetrical, enterprise-grade Internet access circuits for the apartment building, resulting in higher speeds for residents and offsetting the ongoing costs for building owners.