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July XX, 2021

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Washington, DC 20515

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U.S. House of Representatives
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U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20010

The Honorable Roger Wicker
Ranking Member
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Committee
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20010

The Honorable Mike Crapo
Ranking member
Finance Committee
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20010

Dear Chairwomen, Chairmen, and Ranking Members

As leaders of urban and rural communities across this nation, we are committed to ensuring broadband internet access is affordable, accessible, and equitable for all Americans. Broadband connectivity is an essential resource needed to help our communities realize their fullest potential.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, America’s broadband infrastructure empowered families and students with home internet connections to adapt as education, work, health care, and even visits with loved ones shifted online. But far too many Americans on the wrong side of our

digital divide – disproportionately [African American, Hispanic, or low-income](#) – were cut off from this vital lifeline.

Two distinct challenges drive America’s digital divide: infrastructure *deployment gaps* in communities where broadband service is not available, and *adoption gaps* in communities where high-speed service is available but far too many are still not connected. As Congress continues its work on a landmark infrastructure bill, we urge you to forge a broadband package that embraces – and fully funds – smart solutions to both challenges.

The FCC estimates [4% of Americans](#) don’t have broadband service available at their homes, though most experts agree the true number is [perhaps twice as high](#). And these infrastructure gaps are particularly pronounced in rural communities of color: broadband availability is [16 percentage points higher](#) in majority-white rural counties compared to majority-African American rural counties. This infrastructure bill is a generational opportunity to close these gaps and bring broadband infrastructure to every home and business nationwide.

To reach this goal, Congress must carefully target infrastructure dollars to unserved areas where private investment alone has not yet been sufficient to cover the higher cost of building infrastructure. We cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of earlier federal broadband programs that promised resources for unserved areas but instead [diverted billions](#) to build [duplicative networks](#) in wealthier, already-connected communities. Deployment subsidies should be awarded transparently, through a competitive process that encourages all broadband providers to offer their best solutions and requires awardees to follow through on their promises and complete the work within three years.

But our nation’s digital divide cannot be closed through infrastructure projects alone. The majority of unconnected households nationwide are in neighborhoods where broadband service is already available. [Research indicates](#) that simply subsidizing the construction of additional networks in these already-wired communities will only marginally, if at all, increase broadband adoption – and even then, any gains will take years to realize. We can attack broadband adoption challenges much faster, and more cost-effectively, by directly helping households in need to purchase home internet service.

We already have ample evidence that broadband adoption subsidies work. Broadband providers’ low-income programs have helped connect [more than 14 million Americans](#) over the past decade. Many cities and school districts forged public-private partnerships last year to successfully get unconnected students online at home at no cost to their families. And now, more than [2.3 million households](#) have already signed up for the newly-launched federal Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) program, offering up to \$50 a month to help families in need get and stay connected.

The EBB represents a historic step toward advancing digital inclusion and accelerating broadband adoption. But for now, it’s only a temporary band-aid. To build on this progress, Congress should use this opportunity to enact a permanent low-income broadband subsidy program. Broadband connectivity will remain essential long after the pandemic recedes, and the federal government’s commitment to advancing digital equity must similarly persist for years to come.

We stand ready to work with you to usher in a new era in which all Americans are fully enfranchised participants in our connected future, sharing in all of the benefits and opportunities that come with broadband connectivity.

Sincerely,

Mayor Sylvester Turner (Houston, TX)
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