



A Union of Professionals



May 11, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker of the House  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy  
Minority Leader  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Majority Leader  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer  
Minority Leader  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader McCarthy, and Minority Leader Schumer:

The ongoing coronavirus pandemic is revealing more than ever how essential connectivity is to our society and our economy. Everyone in the country has been affected by this global public health crisis, and workers – not CEOs – are on the frontlines of the fight: teachers providing tele-education to the nation’s students, technicians maintaining networks experiencing increased use in order to ensure service quality, and nurses caring for patients to combat the virus, to name a few. Congress can support these workers by facilitating connectivity for those staying home, practicing physical distancing in order to flatten the curve. On behalf of our collective 4.4 million members, we write to strongly urge Congress to ensure that future legislation in response to the pandemic encourages universal access to broadband. Specifically, in order to meet that critical national need we urge Congress to:

1. Fund broadband infrastructure expansion in un- and underserved areas with strong labor protections for those building and servicing that infrastructure included;
2. Appropriate \$4 billion for an Emergency Connectivity Fund, administered through the FCC’s E-Rate program; and
3. Direct the FCC to create an Emergency Lifeline Broadband Benefit for low-income households of \$50 per month to cover the cost of an adequate broadband service.

The United States is facing an unprecedented public health emergency that requires the majority of the population to work, learn, and meet daily needs while staying at home. With hundreds of millions of people in this country now at home in order to limit the spread of the coronavirus, our country must ensure that people can maintain access to life-saving information, educational opportunities, employment information, and public services from home during this time. Even as states begin to reopen, public health authorities are calling for continued physical distancing, which will keep millions of people working and learning from home. The need for connectivity across the country has never been greater, exacerbating the consequences of the already existing digital divide, which has left millions of families in our country, especially those

in small towns and rural communities, unable to afford basic broadband service. Now, that divide has grown and will continue to grow with the massive increase in unemployment causing hardship for millions of households.

A recent FCC report recently found that as of Dec. 2017 about six percent of Americans lack access to high-speed broadband and that nearly one-fourth of the population in rural areas lack access to this service. Even with the FCC's conservative estimate, which according to other studies understates the true digital divide, that is 18 million people in the United States without access to broadband. This is unacceptable at the best of times. Now with millions of Americans finding themselves out of work that number will surely grow amidst this public health emergency and lead to long-term damage to our country. As the House Task Force on Rural Broadband noted in its launch, high-speed Internet is an essential service. A broadband connection provides a gateway to jobs, education, healthcare, public safety, civic participation, and communications among friends and family. It is urgent that Congress provide the \$80 billion for broadband infrastructure deployment to unserved and underserved locations to close the digital divide that was called for in a plan released by Rep. Pallone, House Majority Whip Clyburn, and the ten members of the Rural Broadband Task Force last week. This funding would provide the support the private sector needs to reach the currently unserved, largely rural communities with future-proof broadband infrastructure. In planning a broadband infrastructure program, Congress should set standards that require robust speeds, minimal delays, other service quality measures, and promote employment of skilled, career employees and good jobs in local communities. In addition, Congress must include strong labor protection language to ensure recipients of the funding respect workers' rights.

The homework gap is rapidly becoming an unacceptable education gap for millions of students, particularly in low-income households, communities of color, and rural areas. In 2018, Pew Research Center indicated that 15 percent of K-12 students were victims of the homework gap. With the number of K-12 public and private students at 56.6 million, that means that roughly 8.5 million students lack home Internet access. Now, with nearly all public and private school buildings closed, many students have no way to connect to the Internet to continue their education. The FCC issued a public notice clarifying that schools and libraries closed due to the coronavirus pandemic may allow community members to use E-Rate-supported networks on their premises without jeopardizing E-Rate funding. Given that schools across the country have closed and instruction is taking place remotely, Congress should direct the FCC to address off-campus broadband needs for all students and appropriate \$4 billion for an Emergency Connectivity Fund, administered through the FCC's E-Rate program.

The pandemic is causing widespread job loss, disproportionately harming low-income families, especially in communities of color and Native American and Alaska Native communities. These individuals may struggle to pay their broadband bills -- if broadband is available to them at all. During a time when communication tools have never been more critical, and unemployment has never increased so rapidly, Congress must enact policies to ensure that everyone has broadband Internet. It is a necessity for every US household today. Reliable and affordable broadband enables all people in the US to more easily comply with national stay-at-home guidelines and local orders, which will mean a faster end to the outbreak. It provides telehealth for everyone—particularly seniors and veterans. Unemployed workers and small business owners need a quality broadband service to work from home or apply for emergency benefits. As all levels of education and training are likely to transition online for the foreseeable future, reliable Internet access is essential for students to be successful.

The FCC recently waived the Lifeline de-enrollment and non-usage rules. These measures will help to reduce gaps in connectivity for existing low-income households subscribed to the Lifeline program. However, more must be done to ensure all households can connect to broadband during this crisis and during the economic downturn our country will experience. Congress must direct the FCC to create an Emergency Lifeline Broadband Benefit for low-income households of \$50 per month to cover the cost of an adequate broadband service. The FCC should also take additional steps to waive or modify existing program rules in order to meet the connectivity needs of existing subscribers and ensure that Lifeline assistance is also available to newly struggling households who have experienced a sudden drop in wages or loss of income due to the pandemic.

It is clearer than ever that affordable broadband is essential. Yet tens of millions of Americans don't have broadband Internet at home. Everyone in the country has been affected by this global public health crisis, but people of color, low-income families, and rural communities are particularly affected, leaving our nation's most vulnerable communities struggling to stay connected with school, work, healthcare, entertainment, and their loved ones during this public health crisis. In response to this crisis, Congress must ensure that future legislation in response to the pandemic encourages access to broadband that is adequate to meet the significant needs of people working and learning over broadband connections.

Signed,



Chris Shelton, President  
Communications Workers of America (CWA)



Randi Weingarten  
American Federation of Teachers (AFT)



Mary Kay Henry  
Service Employees International Union (SEIU)