

July 26, 2021

Senator Susan Collins
United States Senate
413 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Mike Rounds
United States Senate
716 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Maggie Hassan
United States Senate
324 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senate
506 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator John Hickenlooper
United States Senate
374 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Thom Tillis
United States Senate
113 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Angus King
United States Senate
133 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Jon Tester
United States Senate
311 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Joe Manchin
United States Senate
306 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Todd Young
United States Senate
185 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Jerry Moran
United States Senate
521 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Mark Warner
United States Senate
703 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Rob Portman
United States Senate
448 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Members of Congress:

[CEO Action for Racial Equity](#) is a Fellowship of over 100 companies that mobilizes a community of business leaders with diverse expertise across multiple industries and geographies to identify, develop and promote scalable and sustainable public policies and corporate engagement strategies that will address systemic racism, social injustice and improve societal well-being for 47M+ Black Americans.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how essential broadband is to American life, including education, jobs, and medical care. While there are multiple causes of the “Digital Divide,” key are 1) a lack of physical broadband infrastructure that provides **reliable access** to the internet required for learning and work, and 2) an inability for households to **afford** broadband, even where it exists.



As you draft legislation under the bipartisan infrastructure framework that includes \$65B for broadband infrastructure, addressing these two issues in both U.S. urban and rural environments will address known racial disparities in the Digital Divide:

Accessibility

The Digital Divide is usually framed as a “rural” issue due to substandard or no broadband infrastructure in remote areas. However, urban communities, including many Black communities and low-income households, are also deeply affected by inadequate and/or outdated broadband infrastructure.

U.S. cities and urban counties have many residents who lack home broadband service. Specifically, 13.9 million metropolitan households live without an in-home or wireless broadband subscription. [1] For comparison, this is more than triple the 4.5 million rural households without a broadband subscription. Many urban low-income neighborhoods including public housing units were not historically considered when initial broadband infrastructure was constructed and continue to lack reliable service today. Even in urban areas with high levels of broadband access, low-income families are still three times as likely to lack access as the wealthiest urban families.[2]

The Digital Divide is a significant issue for Black Americans in both urban and rural areas. Approximately five million Black American households in urban areas are without access to broadband.[3] In rural counties, broadband availability is almost 20 percent lower where a majority of residents are Black compared to rural counties that are predominately white.[4] Overall, 36.4% of Black households (16M) do not have a computer or broadband access.[5]

We urge you to provide an equitable appropriation of funds to both urban and rural communities as part of the infrastructure package in order to close the Digital Divide and achieve full broadband coverage. This will ensure all Americans, regardless of race and geographic location, with access to a reliable broadband network to fully participate in society and contribute to the growth of the U.S. economy.

Affordability

Even when urban residents have physical access to a broadband network, many people, primarily those in low-income households, do not have the financial means to afford high-speed internet. As part of COVID-19 relief, the Emergency Broadband Benefit (“EBB”) has been an important step in addressing the affordability gap. However, it is a temporary solution to an ongoing problem. Only 59% of American households with annual incomes of \$20,000 or less subscribe to broadband versus 88% for the remaining population.[6] Likewise, 50% of disconnected students come from families with annual incomes less than \$50,000.[7] When considering race, the affordability gap is compounded: as of February 2021, 21% of Black Americans live below the poverty line and may struggle to afford broadband once the EBB expires.[8]

We urge you to continue to provide a low-cost broadband option as part of the bipartisan infrastructure framework to ensure low-income households are not left



behind in the digital economy. The EBB has been a good starting point, especially for those whose lives have been disrupted by COVID-19. However, additional investment in a long-term broadband subsidy is required to properly address the Digital Divide. A continuing broadband subsidy should also be coupled with adoption programs in order to promote the benefit and simplify the enrollment process.

Thank you for your leadership and commitment to prioritizing accessible and affordable broadband in both urban as well as rural communities. Closing the Digital Divide will improve millions of Americans' lives for the better.

Sincerely,

CEO Action for Racial Equity

CC:

Hon. Chuck Schumer

Hon. Mitch McConnell

[1] Lara Fishbane and Adie Tomer, "[Neighborhood Broadband Data Makes it Clear: We Need an Agenda to Fight Digital Poverty](#)", The Brookings Institution, February 6, 2020.

[2] Allan Holmes, Eleanor Bell Fox, Ben Wieder and Chris Zubak-Skees, "[Rich People Have Access to High Speed Internet: Many Poor People Still Don't](#)", The Center for Public Integrity, May 12, 2016.

[3] Bill Callahan and Angela Siefer, "[Limiting Broadband Investment to 'Rural Only' Discriminates Against Black Americans and Other Communities of Color](#)", National Digital Inclusion Alliance, June 2020.

[4] Rep. G.K. Butterfield, "[Race and the Digital Divide: Why Broadband Access is More than an Urban vs. Rural Issue](#)", The Hill, May 13, 2019.

[5] [The Digital Divide: Percentage of Households by Broadband Internet Subscription, Computer Type, Race and Hispanic Origin](#), United States Census Bureau, September 11, 2017.

[6] John B. Horrigan, "[Analysis: Digital Divide Isn't Just a Rural Problem](#)", The Daily Yonder, August 14, 2019.

[7] Titilayo Tinubu Ali, Sumit Chandra, Sujith Cherukumilli, Amina Fazlullah, Elizabeth Galicia, Hannah Hill, Neil McAlpine, Lane McBride, Nithya Vaduganathan, Danny Weiss, and Matthew Wu, "[Looking Back, Looking Forward: What It Will Take to Permanently Close the K-12 Digital Divide](#)", Boston Consulting Group; Common Sense Media, 2021.

[8] Jeehoon Han, Bruce D. Meyer, James X. Sullivan, "[Real-time Poverty Estimates During the COVID-19 Pandemic through February 2021](#)", University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy, March 18, 2021.

