

A photograph of a telecommunications tower with multiple antennas, set against a sunset or sunrise sky over a hilly landscape. The tower is the central focus, with the sky transitioning from orange to blue.

## Closing the Digital Divide Through Robust Broadband Infrastructure

Now more than ever, Americans depend on the internet to access healthcare services, engage in education opportunities, and participate in the global economy. The future of the \$1.7 trillion app economy depends on the strength and density of America's wireless and wired backhaul networks.

Unfortunately, according to even the most conservative estimates, nearly 15 million Americans currently lack access to broadband connections, leaving them on the wrong side of the digital divide. To reach these underserved Americans across the country, the federal government must incent the deployment of needed infrastructure based on the most accurate data available and support legislation that takes steps to fund and support broadband infrastructure and access.

### **Federal Support for Buildout of Fast, Reliable, and Affordable Broadband Infrastructure**

A major reason for the lack of adequate internet connectivity is the high cost of infrastructure deployment. The “last mile” connections—reaching subscribers at their homes—are particularly expensive, especially where there are fewer subscribers to pay for a given stretch of infrastructure.

While major progress occurred on this issue, much more needs to happen to put needed infrastructure in place. The millions of Americans who still cannot access broadband at home lack an important means of accessing work, education, and healthcare, and both internet service providers and policymakers need to know exactly where those coverage gaps are so that federal resources can support deployment to them. Accurate and granular maps are central to efforts to close the digital divide, and without them underserved and unserved areas will remain out of reach. The App Association supports the implementation of the **Broadband Deployment Accuracy and Technological Availability (DATA) Act (S. 1822/H.R. 4229, 116th)**, which became law in March 2020. This law directs the FCC to capture more accurately where broadband customers are receiving internet services and at what speeds.

Access to a reliable internet connection is only half of the equation to get broadband to Americans: policymakers should invest in digital literacy programs and in efforts to lower subscription costs for low-income households. The COVID-19 pandemic caused many to face a substantial loss of income and unable to afford an expensive at-home internet connection. In the **American Rescue Plan (ARP)**, Congress authorized \$3.2 billion for the Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) Program to subsidize internet service providers' (ISPs') service to low-income households and individuals, providing a \$50/month (\$75/month for tribal communities) discount. Households can also apply for an up to \$100 discount on a laptop, desktop, or tablet provided they spend between \$10 to \$50 toward the purchase of such a device. The App Association supports initiatives like these because they help bridge gaps in digital literacy and increase both educational and economic opportunity for communities.

## To Support the Growth and Potential of the Dynamic American Economy, We Urge Congress to:

- ✔ **Support the broadband *access* provisions in the bipartisan infrastructure bill (H.R. 3642):** To support broadband deployment to unserved and underserved areas, the bipartisan infrastructure bill (H.R. 3684) would authorize a new Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment Program at the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA). The program would authorize up to \$42.45 billion in federal grants for states to achieve long-term objectives for “deploying broadband, closing the digital divide, and enhancing economic growth and job creation.” Similarly, to support access for low-income households, the bill would reform the existing (temporary) Emergency Broadband Benefit program, renaming it the Affordable Connectivity Benefit (ACB) and extending it indefinitely. Under the ACB, the FCC would pay internet service providers to provide a subsidy of up to \$30 per month per qualifying, low-income household.
- ✔ **Support the broadband *adoption* provisions in the bipartisan infrastructure bill (H.R. 3642):** In addition to supporting the construction of reliable, high-capacity broadband, the infrastructure bill would invest in efforts to make sure everyone can make productive use of them. Specifically, the infrastructure bill authorizes a Digital Equity Capacity Grant program as well as a Digital Equity Competitive Grant Program, which together would invest nearly \$2.5 billion in efforts to promote digital equity and inclusion. The capacity grants would support states’ digital equity plans, in which recipient states create measurable needs and goals for the availability of broadband technology, digital literacy, and availability and affordability of smart devices. And the competitive grants would support state efforts to close those gaps through training and workforce development programs, subsidize hardware and software for covered populations, and publicly accessible computing centers. A final infrastructure package should include provisions like these to ensure that broadband helps Americans across the nation access work, education, healthcare, and other important opportunities.
- ✔ **If the infrastructure bill passes, conduct rigorous oversight of the implementation of its provisions and related laws:**
  - **Ensure that infrastructure bill funds leverage private sector capabilities:** States should not rely solely on local governments to build out and manage broadband facilities. Models exist that leverage private sector expertise and resources to provide the best broadband facilities. For example, we support the **Eliminating Barriers to Rural Internet Development Grant Eligibility (E-BRIDGE) Act (H.R. 3193/S. 1695)** because it would ensure that economic development organizations can apply for economic development grant funds through public-private partnerships or through consortia to deploy broadband infrastructure.
  - **Ensure that the FCC continues apace with carrying out the Broadband DATA Act:** Compiling an accurate picture of the served, unserved, underserved, and partially served parts of the country is still a worthy endeavor, as is collecting information on the affordability of broadband in different parts of the country. Going forward, the FCC, Congress, and other policymakers need to understand in detail where the problem areas are on an ongoing basis.