

Opening Statement
Chairman Mike Doyle
Subcommittee on Communications and Technology
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Hearing on “Empowering and Connecting Communities through Digital Equity and Internet
Adoptions”
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Good morning and welcome to the Subcommittee on Communication and Technology’s hearing on “Empowering and Connecting Communities Through Digital Equity and Internet Adoption.” I’d like to thank our witnesses for appearing before us today to discuss this important topic.

Today, we will hear about the challenges of internet adoption that go beyond a lack of access. All too often we talk about how many Americans don’t have access to broadband and discuss the resources necessary to close that gap, but the far more insidious threats are those who have broadband available to them but don’t sign up - and those that don’t have the basic skills to use digital technologies.

Our witnesses today will discuss the range of challenges that these folks face, the risks we face by leaving millions of people behind, and a range of potential solutions.

Among the principal barriers faced by these communities are affordability, digital literacy, and access to devices.

First off, internet access is expensive, and when cost-constrained consumers are forced to choose between mobile and home internet, they often go mobile-only. Millions though, forgo both.

Internet and mobile service can cost hundreds of dollars a month. That’s the equivalent of a car payment. In effect, many of us are essentially buying our ISP a new car every 5 years.

This a very serious challenge to adoption, particularly in households making less than thirty-five thousand dollars a year. Adoption numbers are even lower in low-income rural communities.

Finding ways to close the affordability gap is just one part of closing the digital divide. Another key piece to this puzzle is digital literacy and training - and ensuring that people have the skills, understanding, and confidence to use technology and get connected.

Organizations like the National Digital Inclusion Alliance and their partners like Computer Reach, based in Pittsburgh, have long worked to provide digital literacy training and provide access to low cost devices and technology.

These programs help engage communities and provide folks with pathways - not just to get connected, but to leverage that connectivity to educate and empower themselves and their family members.

Whether it's being able to apply for jobs, enabling kids to do homework, connecting seniors to telehealth services or veterans to support communities, these digital inclusion programs are often essential for opening people's eyes to the importance of, and opportunities presented by, getting online.

Increasingly digital literacy isn't just the ability to use a computer, but it's a fluency in technology. As we look at the manufacturing sector, jobs that used to be based entirely on manual tasks are being supplanted by interacting with digital tools and systems.

And employment in these sectors requires a level of base fluency just to get your foot in the door.

The same is true for some many other industries that are evolving as technology changes the way people work.

In rural communities, or where adoption is low, these programs are particularly important. They can help upskill the workforce with the basic tools to use digital technologies. We see this in factories in Pittsburgh with robotics, but we also see it in rural America with precision agriculture.

While the nature of these industries hasn't changed, the tools people are using have - and we need to ensure that folks in our communities have the basic skills to use them.

I'm not talking about high schoolers, I'm talking about the people who have done these jobs most of their lives but haven't needed to use or interact with these newer technologies.

The same is true for telehealth services. For seniors who are homebound, or who want to remain in their homes, these services are a lifeline. But for many of them, digital literacy and access to affordable devices remains a barrier to adoption of these new technologies.

We also see this problem manifest itself in schools - with the homework gap. Our educators are working to integrate technology into the curriculum, but many students lack access to home internet. When your teacher is assigning you homework that you need to go online just to see what the assignment is or to complete it, the lack of internet access is a cruel stumbling block.

We have all heard stories of children sitting in cars outside of fast food restaurants and libraries to get on wi-fi or parked in overlooks that can get a trickle of broadband. We can't afford to let this generation fall behind. These children are our nation's future, and we need to find ways to close the homework gap for them, and for ourselves.

It is my hope that we can have a productive discussion about the challenges faced by *all* of our communities and come to some consensus on solutions that can help close the digital divide.

And as I have said before, I stand ready to work my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to come up with real solutions to address these challenges.

Thank you and I look forward to the testimony of our witnesses.