

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Subcommittee on Communications and Technology Chairman Michael F. Doyle
Hearing on “Connecting America: Broadband Solutions to Pandemic Problems”

February 17, 2021

As we have all become far too aware over the last year - universal broadband connectivity is critical to our economy, to the education of our youth, and to keeping our communities safe and connected during this unprecedented crisis.

Americans throughout the country have struggled to get connected and to stay connected. Too many households are going without broadband service because they can't afford it, either because it was too expensive before or it's too expensive now.

Free Press, in their testimony, say that 77 million people lack an adequate home internet connection due to high prices or a lack of connectivity.

We all know that our nation needs to invest in deploying new networks - particularly in rural communities - if we are going to ensure that everyone can get online.

But what I think is more concerning about the data presented in the testimony is that far too many people go without because they can't afford service.

That's why I'm glad that we were finally able to come together at the end of last year to include several important broadband provisions in the Covid-bus package to address these challenges.

Among our accomplishments was the creation of a new Emergency Broadband Benefit program based on legislation introduced by our colleague Congressman Veasey.

This \$3.2 billion program will provide qualifying consumers with a \$50 credit each month on their broadband bills.

Congress wrote this legislation to give consumers a great deal of flexibility in how they use this benefit – and it's critical that the program be implemented as such.

I also hope the FCC will ensure that existing tools that are helpful and part of the Lifeline program are available and accessible to participating carriers to the greatest extent possible to help facilitate this new program as well.

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While the Emergency Broadband Benefit is temporary, I sincerely hope we can work together to find permanent solutions to ensuring that broadband service is available and affordable to all.

Last week, this Committee marked up legislation to fund remote learning in our nation's classrooms.

This investment is long overdue - we have known about the homework gap for years - and the pandemic has really laid this inequality bare.

The new \$7.6 billion Emergency Connectivity Fund seeks to start closing this gap. The fund will help low-income students by subsidizing the cost of internet-connected devices and broadband service so that students can learn at home.

Dr. Anderson, in your testimony you talk about the great lengths Topeka schools are going to in order to keep students connected - including setting up WiFi in school park lots.

But as you point out - too many students, and more importantly parents, can't sit in a parking lot all day.

It's critical that we give students and families the resources they need to allow kids to participate in their own education.

It's my hope that we can get these provisions signed into law as quickly as possible - and get help to students and schools in need.

And finally, as we have all said for many years - we need to invest in rural broadband.

We have had more hearings than I care to count where the truth has been obvious, the only way to solve this problem is through federal investment - the business case just does not exist for private investment in many communities.

Last Congress, the House passed H.R. 2 - the Moving Forward Act - which included \$100 billion for broadband deployment and adoption.

I hope that we can work with the Biden Administration and our colleagues in the Senate to take up similar legislation again this Congress - and finally take real steps in this country to close the digital divide.

I look forward to working with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle as we take all of these challenges on together.