

Committee on Energy and Commerce

**Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr.**

Hearing on “Connecting America: Broadband Solutions to Pandemic Problems”

February 17, 2021

Right now, struggling families that lack internet connectivity have been shut out from school, work, telehealth, and other vital connections.

Across the country, children are unable to attend virtual classes because they do not have a reliable internet connection.

In New Jersey, studies have found that nearly 17 percent of residents have no internet access in their homes. Of the families making \$35,000 per year or less, only half have home internet connections. For many school kids, the dining room table or a bedroom workspace have replaced their classrooms, so a lack of connectivity means that, in essence, they are locked out of school. Congress must step in and provide support.

It’s not just our kids. Struggling parents are trying to fill out job applications and complete educational courses on smart phones. Many, if not most, vaccine appointments require online registration. And to make matters worse, many libraries that once provided a reliable internet connection are now closed to protect public health.

Nowhere is this problem more acute than on tribal lands. Many tribal students, who were sent home from college and schools for their own safety, returned to homes without sufficient internet connections for video conferencing or uploading assignments. Many tribal members cannot work from home or sell goods online, cutting off key sources of income. These same tribal communities are also among the last to receive important updates on health and emergency procedures, which are critically important for prevention.

Fortunately, Democrats and Republicans came together at the end of last Congress to pass the historic Emergency Broadband Benefit program. Under this program, eligible households can receive a discount of \$50 per month for service, or \$75 per month for service on tribal lands. The Federal Communications Commission is in the process of setting this program up.

We also passed the Broadband Connectivity grant program that will provide \$1 billion for a range of efforts to increase connectivity on Tribal lands. The National Telecommunications and Information Administration is working to set up that program now, including significant tribal consultation.

February 17, 2021

Page 2

And then just last week, this Committee approved \$7.6 billion in funding to expand E-rate assistance for remote learning and remote library services. We all want schools and libraries to open—but we must ensure they are opened safely. Until that is possible, we must prevent our kids from falling into the homework gap. And this funding will allow millions of teachers, students and families to access the technology and tools they need to participate in virtual classrooms and other online activities.

We will also continue to support broadband deployment across the country through an infrastructure bill similar to the Moving Forward Act passed by the House last year, but ignored by then Senate Majority Leader McConnell.

I look forward to our continued work to find bipartisan solutions to these issues.