



National  
Urban League

# CONNECTING AND UPLIFTING AMERICA: THE LEWIS LATIMER PLAN FOR DIGITAL EQUITY & INCLUSION

Ten years ago, the National Broadband Plan observed that as “more aspects of daily life move online and offline alternatives disappear, the range of choices available to people without broadband narrows. Digital exclusion compounds inequities for historically marginalized groups.” In light of these trends, that Plan warned “the cost of digital exclusion is large and growing.”

Unfortunately, only modest efforts to address those costs have been expended in the interim. Now, as the COVID-19 pandemic accelerates the shift to “remote everything,” the costs of exclusion have grown even larger. The need for policymakers to act has become even more urgent, compelling us to ask, ***how can the tools of the information economy be employed to create a more equitable and inclusive society?***

The answer lies in accomplishing four big, but achievable, goals:

- Deploying networks everywhere;
- Getting everyone connected;
- Using networks to improve how we deliver essential services, such as workforce development, health care and education; and
- Creating new economic opportunities to participate in the growth of the digital economy.

The National Urban League, working with other civil rights organizations and public policy experts, has developed the Lewis Latimer<sup>1</sup> Plan for Digital Equity and Inclusion (the “Plan”), a detailed and comprehensive agenda to reach these goals and erase persistent and dangerous gaps.

**The Availability Gap.** For millions of American homes, businesses and other enterprises, there is no available broadband network capable of allowing them to participate fully in 21st century life. This is generally a rural problem, where private capital alone is unable to justify investment in building needed infrastructure for low density populations and higher capital costs are required to reach fewer customers.

Currently, the federal government has not gathered the necessary data to define and identify what constitutes an unserved area, nor does it have a good map of the locations where no networks are available. Further, the current system of subsidizing high-cost deployments is under significant stress, unable to fund the necessary build-out for many years, if not decades.

**To Close the Availability Gap,** the Plan recommends that Congress make available to the FCC sufficient appropriations to fund capital expenses necessary to deploy broadband networks to all Americans.

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<sup>1</sup> This plan was inspired by, and is offered in memory of, the life of Lewis Howard Latimer (1848-1928), an African-American draftsman, soldier, scientist, and researcher whose parents were born into slavery. Latimer made groundbreaking contributions that changed the course of human history, including working with Alexander Graham Bell on the development of telephones and Thomas Edison on electric lighting.

The Plan also recommends that the FCC:

- Re-examine, in light of COVID-19, the network performance standard below which broadband is deemed unavailable, and above which subsidized networks are required to perform to receive capital funding support;
- Produce an accurate map of broadband availability, helping to pinpoint locations lacking any broadband network;
- Eliminate the Eligible Telecommunications Company (ETC) requirement, which disqualifies existing and future providers who could otherwise deliver service quickly and efficiently;
- Produce a set of best practices for reducing deployment costs and times; and
- Hold a series of reverse auctions to allocate subsidies necessary to close the Availability Gap. These investments should be based on technology-neutral criteria to support a mix of solutions that can be rapidly deployed. Further, the FCC needs to closely scrutinize applicants to assure that the winners have technologies capable of meeting the performance standards, the experience, and the resources necessary to deploy and operate the networks, and the incentives to complete their build out to all promised locations on a timely basis.

**The Adoption Gap.** Even among those Americans for whom a broadband network is available, there are still tens of millions who have not adopted broadband in their homes. Indeed, in terms of number of Americans affected, the Adoption Gap is approximately three times larger than the Availability Gap. There are two principal causes of the Adoption Gap. One is a lack of digital readiness. A second, and more significant cause, is the unaffordability of entry-level broadband services for a significant portion of the American population.

**To Address Digital Readiness.** Digital readiness refers to skills needed to use information and communications technology to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information. The lack of such skills is a significant barrier to certain population groups adopting and then fully utilizing broadband services.

The Plan's principal recommendation for addressing digital readiness is to create a national Office of Digital Equity to help coordinate training targeted to the demographic groups with the lowest rates of adoption.

Among specific recommendations for the Office, the Plan proposes that the Office:

- Establish a Digital Navigators Corps to help unconnected persons solve a wide range of adoption issues;
- Create an Online Digital Readiness Portal to provide every American with access to free, age-appropriate content that teaches digital skills and enhances digital readiness across languages to assist in initial efforts to use internet services and in upgrading skills to more fully utilize such services; and
- Issue reports on the effectiveness of the different digital readiness strategies.

**To Address Affordability.** The principal government program addressing broadband affordability today is Lifeline, which provides a \$9.25 monthly subsidy for communications services. There is a broad consensus that Lifeline is deeply flawed, with too small a subsidy, ineffective distribution, and relying for funding on an unsustainable model based on a regressive tax on telephone services. Today, Lifeline is used almost exclusively for mobile, rather than in-home broadband services.

While mobile services have significant value, in-home services create better opportunities for enormous public benefits, benefits that today are not captured. We all gain, for example, when the unemployed can train online for new careers, and use the same tools everyone else does to search, apply for, and interview for new jobs, getting them back in the work force quickly. Likewise, everyone benefits when at-risk communities can receive telehealth at home, improving community outcomes and lowering costs for government medical programs. Finally, everyone wins when all children have the tools to do their homework and engage in online learning in their homes, improving educational achievements.

To capture these benefits, the Lifeline program requires substantial overhaul. The Plan provides a framework for a new program, Lifeline+, that would:

- Assure that current program benefits continue;
- Assure that lower-income households already eligible for government support for employment, health care or education benefits also receive support for a broadband connection and devices, where needed;
- Utilize existing government programs to provide more efficient distribution of the broadband benefits;
- Where possible, apply savings generated by expanded online usage of government services to help fund the programs, in addition to providing a more sustainable funding source through appropriations provided directly by Congress; and
- Eliminate the ETC requirement for providers, and direct broadband subsidies directly to beneficiaries in the form of an electronic voucher or debit card to maximize choice of service provider for beneficiaries and to reduce waste and fraud.

**The Utilization Gap.** Deploying networks everywhere and assuring that everyone has the skills and means to connect are necessary steps. But they are not sufficient to achieve digital equity and inclusion. We also need to utilize the digital platform to improve essential services. The COVID-19 crisis has forced our economy and society to run a massive—if unplanned—experiment in “remote everything.” While that experiment has produced some positive trends, such as with greater utilization of telehealth, it has also shown that we have a long way to improve in other areas, such as education. We need to be more intentional in developing these new capabilities, to assure that they lift up, rather than disadvantage, low-income persons, and communities of color. The Plan provides a series of recommendations on how policy can, in conjunction with universal availability and adoption, improve the delivery of essential services.

**Workforce Development.** Government should improve the digital tools that enable people interested in every job type to upgrade their skills and to search, apply and interview for jobs and ensure that small businesses can use broadband-based tools to improve their prospects.

The Plan makes several recommendations that would do so, including:

- The White House and Congress should expand access to digital resources and technical assistance for enterprises located in rural areas and communities of color;
- The Department of Labor should develop more broadband, technology and telecommunications sector-related registered apprenticeship training programs;
- The federal government should provide incentives for companies, states, municipalities, nonprofit organizations and the private sector to create and scale new workforce development and digital skills training programs;
- Federal agencies should increase and improve data collection related to workforce development; and

- States should modernize their unemployment benefits systems to offer unemployed citizens access to opportunities for future employment more effectively.

**Health Care.** With healthcare services increasingly provided online, government must assure that everyone has access to user-friendly, health-enabling tools that connect them to high-quality, affordable health care services and medical information they can understand.

To do so, the Plan recommends that the federal and state governments act to reduce disparities in access to health care services. Federal and state governments should, among other policies:

- Adopt consistent policies across state Medicaid programs;
- Remove geographic and originating site restrictions;
- Remove limitations on eligible services, providers and facilities, and remove unnecessary restrictions on practitioners eligible to provide telehealth services; and
- Fund programs supporting digital health care infrastructure and technical assistance, digital health literacy and workforce diversity.

In addition, the Plan recommends:

- The Department of Health and Human Services should allocate funding to develop, recruit, and retain health care professionals from underrepresented groups; and
- The FCC should modify the Connected Care Pilot Program and the Telehealth Program to focus more on improving health outcomes for low-income communities and communities of color.

**K-12 Education.** Technology is creating a new educational infrastructure with a vast expanse of new, diverse and relevant opportunities. Sadly, uneven implementation of these technologies is widening rather than narrowing existing gaps in educational outcomes. We must assure that new educational infrastructure provides all students with equal access to the tools and content of fast-evolving digital learning. Further, we need to provide teachers the support they need to enable students to maximize the value of digital content.

To do so, the Plan provides proposals to:

- Ensure students have support for digital learning from teachers and other appropriately trained adults, such as online tutors;
- Invest in a federal research and development agenda focused on advancing new models of technology-empowered teaching and learning that promote equity and improve outcomes for all students;
- Invest in culturally responsive and relevant online learning tools;
- Reform funding systems to ensure adequate and equitable distribution of resources, particularly to advance digital learning;
- Improve access for students of color and others to educational experiences that improve their ability to utilize technology; and
- Develop a National Strategic Agenda for Education Technology Research & Development, focused on improving outcomes for students of color.

**Higher Education and R&D.** Colleges and universities, with some of the best broadband networks in the world, remain an underutilized resource for digital equity and inclusion. We also underfund research and development in improving teaching and training.

To address those shortfalls, the Plan recommends:

- Using university resources to help institutions servicing those who have been disadvantaged by the digital divide;
- Focusing future research on understanding how digital education can improve outcomes and overcome persistent performance gaps;
- Understanding and promoting best practices for using digital education to build a more equitable and inclusive society; and
- Increasing efforts to identify, develop, test, and deploy applications of digital educational technologies that foster economic and social mobility.

**Government Services.** Low-income and minority communities would benefit significantly from greater online access to government services. Many government information systems, however, are outdated. Further, budget gaps lead to failures in upgrading and maintaining digital infrastructure. Overall, governments must systematically improve their ability to use technology to deliver services.

To address these issues, the Plan recommends that federal, state, and local governments:

- Optimize government websites for mobile use;
- Establish a one-stop-shop for citizens to access and control personally-identifiable information held by government agencies;
- Improve automated online government customer support;
- Take steps to eliminate data poverty, the social and economic inequalities that result from a lack of collection or use of data about an individual or community;
- Require all government forms be provided digitally for data entry, signing and submission; and
- Modernize and secure existing government systems and facilitate low-contact and remote ways to access government websites and services.

**Civic Engagement.** Failings of digital equity and inclusion limit many Americans from full engagement in the political and civic lives of their communities. Misinformation is overwhelming accurate information and poisoning the digital conversation, particularly for communities of color. Platforms have created new problems related to micro-targeting in advertising, algorithmic bias, digital redlining and other uses that make the Internet a problematic platform for communities of color.

To address these problems, the Plan recommends that:

- Congress:
  - Hold a series of civil rights-focused hearings with high-level executives from companies that have been major repositories of disinformation;
  - Increase investment in reliable, relevant, and trusted information for underserved communities by grants through the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to local noncommercial stations, for journalism by and for underserved communities; and
  - Restore funding to the Office of Technology Assessment.

- The White House:
  - Empanel a commission to study how information on COVID-19 was made publicly available, how this information affected societal response and what should be done to limit the impact of false and dangerously misleading information moving forward, while preserving First Amendment rights and values; and
  - Promote the establishment of a private-industry-led information accuracy certification body.
- The FTC:
  - Establish social media best practices;
  - Propose recommendations with respect to limiting the potential damage of political microtargeting; and
  - Mandate real-time ad transparency and access to archives.

***Institutionalization.*** Achieving digital equity and inclusion requires a sustained, systemic and appropriately resourced effort that is highly reliant on intergovernmental coordination and collaboration. Currently, policymakers do not have the tools or data to monitor and evaluate efforts to close the gaps identified in the Plan.

To address these needs, the Plan recommends that the federal government:

- Examine biases that could affect its existing collection, analysis and interpretation of data;
- Collect the data necessary to review use of governmental information and digital services by each population it serves, and track how constituents interact with each agency;
- Partner with state and local governments to collect relevant data, including as part of efforts to expand access, adoption and utilization carried out at the local level; and
- Convene an annual National Digital Inclusion Summit to review progress, determine key barriers to progress and adjust policies, as necessary.

**The Access to Economic Opportunity and Participation Gap.** Several decades ago, famed venture capitalist John Doerr said the personal computer industry’s growth from zero to \$100 billion in 10 years was “the greatest legal accumulation of wealth in history.” Subsequently he had to amend his comment. Noting that the Internet dwarfed the PC revolution by going from zero to \$400 billion in five years, Doerr said “There are waves and then there is a tsunami.” That tsunami has continued. Today, the top five American companies by market cap (Microsoft, Apple, Amazon, Alphabet, and Facebook) all rode the tsunami Doerr described.

Unfortunately, those opportunities for wealth accumulation were not equitably distributed throughout society. This means that the jobs especially the higher paying jobs in the technology industry have not been populated by Blacks and Latinos in any significant way. The National Urban League’s State of Black America Report in 2018 found that of the 40,000 jobs amongst the four major Silicon Valley technology firms only 1,000 were held by Blacks and the number for LatinX is paltry. Moreover, business inclusion and opportunity in the growing tech sector has lagged miserably for Blacks and Latinos. To say that this is a problem is an understatement.

This is not a new problem. For example, the person for whom this Plan is named, Lewis Latimer, was a free Black patent-holder, the son of slaves, whose achievements should be viewed as critical to the success of his employers, Thomas Edison, and Alexander Graham Bell. Unfortunately, but typically, while Latimer was a key contributor to Edison’s and Bell’s seminal and wealth creating inventions, but he had no ownership stake in vast businesses they spawned.

We need to break that historic pattern. While much of the Latimer Plan is focused on assuring that all Americans, regardless of race, income, or location, have the tools and skills to fully participate in the economy and society of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we also want to close the existing gaps that limit the opportunities to participate meaningfully in the business of value creation as broadband and broadband enabled enterprises continue to innovate, grow and prosper. We also must ensure that job opportunities are available for the country's growing Black and Latin communities at every level in the technology and technology-related business sector.

Access to economic opportunity and inclusion is incredibly complex, but with public and private intention, this gap can be closed. Our nation will be stronger, more equitable and more prosperous because of it. In truth, this gap was created by legal and historic barriers to access to capital and legal barriers to full citizenship and opportunity. In the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, government and industry began to address some of these barriers, but these efforts lacked sustainability or faced legal challenges that raised the specter of “reverse racism.” The televised murder of George Perry Floyd, Jr. and the Black Lives Matter movement have prompted a renewed interest in a whole-of-government response and intentionality by many corporations to close that gap. Corporate America, in a number of ways, has accepted their own accountability to ingrain diversity, equity and inclusion into their corporate DNA, including by creating racially and gender diverse corporate boards, staffing, C-suites, procurement, philanthropy and community investment.

Civil rights organizations, led by the National Urban League, have pioneered negotiating written memorandums of understanding with several telecommunication companies to set forth goals, timetables and initiatives to advance diversity, equity and inclusion.

At this moment, an awakening among racial justice technology sector business leaders and government regulators and legislators must embrace a new vigor and intentionality towards diversity, equity and inclusion. This Plan would be hollowed and incomplete without an emphasis on this new reality.

***To close the economic opportunity and participation gap***, industry, government, and community organizations must work together to improve and increase the commitments to racial equity in corporate board membership, staffing, the C-suite, procurement, philanthropy, and community investment.

To facilitate this collaboration, the Plan makes a number of recommendations, including:

- ***Infrastructure.*** Congress must include in any infrastructure legislation mandates for companies that will directly benefit from the increased federal investment in infrastructure to enhance their performance in improving access to economic opportunity and inclusion in the categories noted above.
- ***Measure Diversity.*** The Department of Commerce, and the FCC should collect information that allows the government and the public to understand and evaluate how the private sector, and the technology and related sectors, are improving diversity, equity and inclusion in the categories noted above.
- ***Incentivize Diversity.*** The Department of Commerce, FCC, the Small Business Administration and the Securities Exchange Commission should evaluate annually and report to Congress on what measures could be adopted to enhance the performance of private enterprise in improving diversity, equity and inclusion in the categories noted above.

- **Highlight Sustainable Success.** The Department of Commerce, the FCC, the Small Business Administration, and the Securities Exchange Commission should publish an annual report on the best practices for enhancing the performance of private enterprise in improving diversity, equity and inclusion in the categories noted above.

**Institutionalization.** Achieving the digital equity and inclusion goals of deploying networks everywhere, getting everyone connected, using the networks to improve how we deliver essential services, and improving economic opportunity and participation in the digital economy requires a sustained, systemic and appropriately resourced effort. Such an effort will be reliant on intergovernmental coordination and collaboration. Currently, policymakers do not have the tools or data to monitor and evaluate efforts to close the gaps identified in the Plan.

To address these needs, the Plan recommends that the federal government:

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