



National
Urban League

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“Strengthening our Communications Networks: Legislation to Connect and Protect”

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Chairman Doyle, Ranking Member Latta, Chairman Pallone, Ranking Member McMorris Rodgers, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Alisa Valentin, and I am the Senior Director of Technology and Telecommunications Policy at the National Urban League. I bring you greetings on behalf of our President and CEO Marc H. Morial.

As a historic civil rights organization with 92 local affiliates dedicated to aiding underserved communities through economic empowerment, the National Urban League has long recognized that access to high-speed internet is a civil right. The Covid-19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated that everyone across the country no matter their income, race, or geographic location needs broadband to learn, work, receive health care, and access critical government services. In 2021, the National Urban League published *The Lewis Latimer Plan for Digital Equity and Inclusion* where we presented four very achievable goals, which included: 1) deploying networks everywhere; 2) getting everyone connected; 3) creating new economic opportunities to participate in the growth of the digital economy; and 4) using networks to improve how we deliver essential services, in particular workforce development, health care, and education.¹ In our report, we also recognized that in order to achieve these goals, we must erase several persistent and dangerous connectivity gaps including availability, adoption, and affordability. Today, I will focus on the affordability gap.

Nearly 47 million people in the United States are left offline because they are unable to afford broadband. The affordability gap disproportionately impacts Black and Latinx households.² In fact, 29% of Black adults and 35% of Latinx adults do not have a home broadband connection.³

¹ *The Lewis Latimer Plan for Digital Equity and Inclusion*, National Urban League (March 30, 2021), at 10, https://nul.org/sites/default/files/202104/NUL%20LL%20DEIA%20041421%20Latimer%20Plan_vFINAL_1136A_M.pdf.

² *No Home Left Offline: Bridging the Broadband Affordability Gap*, Education SuperHighway, (Nov. 4, 2021), at 3, <https://www.educationsuperhighway.org/no-home-left-offline/>.

³ Sara Atske & Andrew Perrin, *Home broadband adoption, computer ownership vary by race, ethnicity in the U.S.*, Pew Research Center (July 16, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/07/16/home-broadband-adoption-computer-ownership-vary-by-race-ethnicity-in-the-u-s/>.

This divide knows no geographic bounds. Surveys from the Census Bureau show that three times as many households in urban areas remain unconnected as in rural areas.⁴

Prior to the pandemic, low-income families were dependent on the FCC's Lifeline program, which was the only federal program focused on providing affordable communications services to low-income households.⁵ Lifeline was created during the Reagan administration in 1985 and was later expanded to include wireless services under the Bush administration in 2005 and internet services under the Obama administration in 2016.⁶ The program provides a \$9.25 monthly subsidy to qualifying low-income households for communications services.⁷ While Lifeline is a key tool to help bridge the affordability gap, the program must be modernized to reach the low-income households who need it most.

The Lifeline program is very underutilized with a participation rate that hovers at around 19% or 6.5 million households despite estimates that more than 34 million households are eligible.⁸ We need a whole-of-government approach to get households enrolled in what is already a literal lifeline for millions of families. That is why the National Urban League supports the goals of H.R. 4275, the *Ensuring Phone and Internet Access for SNAP Recipients Act of 2021*.⁹ This bill requires the FCC and USDA to submit an annual report to Congress on enrollment in the Lifeline program by SNAP recipients. Additionally, it requires the Commission to report on the number of new broadband consumers projected to join Lifeline through federal assistance programs and the efficacy of various efforts to advertise the program. It is important that we understand how best to improve outreach and awareness efforts for this critical program and how best agencies can coordinate with one another to ensure benefits do not go unclaimed.

The requirements of the *Ensuring Phone and Internet Access for SNAP Recipients Act of 2021* should also be extended beyond Lifeline to include the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), which was recently established with the passage of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. Almost 12 million households have enrolled in this \$14.2 billion program and estimates show that approximately 48 million households, or nearly 40% of the nation, are eligible.¹⁰ We need to take a variety of approaches to ensure we are reaching households to enroll in these critical

⁴ Eduardo Porter, *A Rural-Urban Divide, but Not the One You Think Of*, The New York Times (June 1, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/01/business/rural-urban-broadband-biden.html>.

⁵ *Lifeline Program for Low-Income Consumers*, Federal Communications Commission, <https://www.fcc.gov/general/lifeline-program-low-income-consumers>.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Program Data*, Universal Service Administrative Company, <https://www.usac.org/lifeline/resources/program-data/> (last visited: May 21, 2022).

⁹ *Ensuring Phone and Internet Access for SNAP Recipients Act of 2021*, H.R. 4275, 117th Cong. (2022), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/4275/text?r=4&s=1>.

¹⁰ *ACP Enrollment and Claims Tracker*, Universal Service Administrative Company, <https://www.usac.org/about/affordable-connectivity-program/ACP-enrollment-and-claims-tracker/> (last visited May 21, 2022); Press Release, The White House, Fact Sheet: President Biden and Vice President Harris Reduce High-Speed Internet Costs for Millions of Americans (May 9, 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/09/fact-sheet-president-biden-and-vice-president-harris-reduce-high-speed-internet-costs-for-millions-of-americans/>.

connectivity programs. Congress, the FCC, and NTIA have also recognized that outreach efforts must include the funding of trusted organizations working on the ground that are often stretched thin with efforts to secure communities with other critical services such as housing, employment, and health care.¹¹ The National Urban League could not agree more and submitted comments to the FCC recommending an ACP navigator program to fund third party intermediary organizations to conduct outreach.¹² The burden of advertising these programs should not fall solely on the shoulders of advocates seeking to serve the underserved. Government must ensure we have the resources to do so.

Corporate America also plays a role and that is why we were pleased to see the White House secure commitments from internet service providers to either reduce prices or raise speeds to offer ACP-eligible households a high-speed internet plan at 100 Megabits per second (Mbps) for no more than \$30 per month. There must be continued cooperation through public-private partnerships so this program is transformative in the lives of our most vulnerable communities.

While industry, civil society, and government are all doing their parts to make sure ACP is fully utilized, we must think about solutions for the future that extend the life of the program. Although the National Urban League has not taken a formal position on the spectrum bills being discussed at this hearing today, we believe that Congress should consider a number of ways to provide permanent, sustainable funding for the Affordable Connectivity Program such as using proceeds from spectrum auctions to fund digital equity efforts. Spectrum funds should support a number of digital inclusion activities including affordable high-speed internet for low-income consumers, digital navigators who can engage communities without connectivity, digital skills training, internet-enabled devices, and outreach and awareness efforts to inform eligible households of existing broadband affordability and digital equity programs. In an era of rising income inequality and increasing dependency on the digital ecosystem, we must recognize that there is both a moral imperative and an economic benefit to connecting every household to high-speed internet.

The economic benefits of communications services must include both workers and small business owners. The National Urban League believes that spectrum auction winners should be encouraged or incentivized to hire from underrepresented communities beyond entry level positions, establish diversity hiring goals, and increase supplier diversity. NUL has worked with other civil rights groups to advise companies on how to prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion throughout their organizations.¹³ This has led to commitments to incorporate racial equity in

¹¹ FCC Proposes Outreach Efforts for Affordable Connectivity Program, Federal Communications Commission, <https://www.fcc.gov/fcc-proposes-outreach-efforts-affordable-connectivity-program>; Digital Equity Programs, National Telecommunications and Information Administration, <https://broadbandusa.ntia.doc.gov/resources/grant-programs/digital-equity-programs>.

¹² National Urban League Comments, Affordable Connectivity Program, WC Docket No. 21-450 (filed March 15, 2022), https://www.fcc.gov/ecfs/file/download/DOC-5fe3ce68a5800000-A.pdf?file_name=NUL%20response%20FCC%20ACP%20NPRM%20pdf.pdf.

¹³ Civil Rights Groups Sign Groundbreaking Diversity Agreement with T-Mobile US, National Urban League (Oct. 15, 2019), <https://nul.org/news/civil-rights-groups-sign-groundbreaking-diversity-agreement-t-mobile-us>.

corporate board membership, staffing, the C-suite, procurement, philanthropy, and community investment. We have taken up these efforts because we know that Black and Latinx workers deserve job opportunities at every level in technology and technology-related industries alongside opportunities for entrepreneurs of color to experience the economic benefits of this sector.

We have reached a critical juncture in history, and it is time to move forward in creating an inclusive technology ecosystem that centers the needs of communities of color, low-income communities, and other marginalized populations. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today and I look forward to answering your questions.