



**National
Urban League**

*Empowering Communities.
Changing Lives.
For An Equitable Future.*

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VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

October 8, 2025

The Honorable Howard Lutnick
Secretary of Commerce
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20230

The Honorable Arielle Roth
Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Communications and Information
Administrator, National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA)
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Ave., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20230

**Re: Restoring Federal Commitment to Digital Equity Through the Digital Equity Act and
BEAD Implementation**

Dear Secretary Lutnick and Assistant Secretary Roth:

On behalf of the National Urban League, I write to strongly urge the reinstatement of the Digital Equity Act (DEA) grant programs and the preservation of state flexibility under the Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment (BEAD) Program to use non-deployment funds as Congress intended. As we commemorate Digital Inclusion Week, advocates across the nation are reaffirming that broadband access, adoption, and digital skills are not luxuries—they are prerequisites for full participation in American life. This week serves as a collective reminder that digital equity is civil rights work, economic development work, and democracy work. It is the time when community leaders, policymakers, educators, and industry come together to highlight solutions, share lessons learned, and elevate the voices of those still excluded from the digital economy.

The National Urban League is the nation's oldest and largest community-based civil rights and economic empowerment organization. With a network of 92 affiliates serving 300 communities in 36 states and the District of Columbia, we provide direct services to more than 2 million people annually. Our mission is to enable African Americans and other underserved communities to secure economic self-reliance, parity, power, and civil rights.



Our engagement on broadband adoption and digital equity is longstanding, including the release of the Lewis Latimer Plan for Digital Equity and Inclusion in 2021. This plan laid out a bold, comprehensive roadmap for closing the digital divide, rooted in five key principles: access, adoption, affordability, availability, and advocacy.ⁱ Among its findings:

- Devices and training are as essential as networks. Millions of households without reliable computers or digital literacy support cannot make meaningful use of broadband.
- Digital navigators and trusted local institutions are indispensable. Community-based organizations—like Urban League affiliates—are best positioned to guide residents through enrollment, troubleshoot connectivity issues, and build long-term trust.
- Affordability remains a systemic barrier. Even where broadband is available, cost continues to deter subscription among low-income families.
- Equity must guide deployment. Federal programs must intentionally target historically marginalized communities that have long been excluded from infrastructure investments.

The Urban League's experience bears out these findings. Through initiatives such as the Urban Tech Jobs Program (UTJP) and other workforce and upskilling efforts, we have helped thousands of adults transition into technology-driven careers, gain digital literacy credentials, and access family-sustaining jobs. These programs illustrate how targeted investments in digital skills directly advance economic mobility and strengthen local economies. The Digital Equity Act and BEAD non-deployment funds were designed to scale precisely these kinds of efforts: funding strategic partnerships with community-based organizations to build digital skills pipelines, expand workforce readiness, and ensure that every household can translate connectivity into opportunity.

The Digital Equity Act of 2021, enacted as part of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, was designed to ensure that “covered populations”—including low-income households, racial and ethnic minorities, rural residents, veterans, older Americans, people with disabilities, English learners, and incarcerated or formerly incarcerated individuals—have the tools to thrive online.ⁱⁱ These programs were created by Congress, defined in statute, and backed by bipartisan support to address the adoption and skills gaps that persist as part of the digital divide.

That is why the abrupt cancellation of the DEA programs, and their mischaracterization in public discourse as a so-called ‘racial handout’, is both inaccurate and deeply damaging. These investments were never about favoring one community over another; they were designed to meet the clear statutory directive to serve covered populations in every state. Ending them undermines Congress’s vision and leaves millions without the



resources needed to leverage broadband for education, health care, workforce opportunities, and civic participation.

Despite recent progress in broadband deployment, millions of Americans remain offline or underconnected. Nearly one in five Black households and one in four Hispanic households remain unconnected.ⁱⁱⁱ Device access is an equally stark challenge: more than 40 percent of low-income households rely solely on a smartphone as their only means of internet access, limiting their ability to fully engage in remote work, education, and telehealth.^{iv} And skills are a profound barrier: the National Skills Coalition found that nearly one-third of U.S. workers lack foundational digital skills, with Black and Latino workers disproportionately represented in this gap.^v

For these reasons, the DEA programs and BEAD non-deployment funds are both essential tools. While BEAD is rightly focused on extending service to every household and business, that is only step one. Ensuring that people can connect and navigate the internet effectively is equally critical, and that requires federal support for workforce development, telehealth, digital skills, education, and adoption programs.

Importantly, Congress explicitly designed BEAD to allow states to use non-deployment funds for these purposes. Restricting BEAD resources solely to infrastructure buildout would undermine the bipartisan intent of the law and fail to deliver on the promise of true digital equity. Congress recognized that building networks is not enough; broadband networks must be usable, affordable, and transformative for covered populations.^{vi}

The DEA and BEAD were designed to work hand in hand: one ensuring the networks are built, the other ensuring people are equipped to use them. Both are needed to achieve lasting digital equity. Trusted local institutions—such as Urban League affiliates, libraries, and community colleges—stand ready to deliver these resources, but they cannot do so without sustained federal support. Research has consistently shown that community-based organizations are essential to building trust and driving sustainable broadband adoption.^{vii}

We are especially concerned about the potential widening of inequities as artificial intelligence (AI) reshapes our economy and daily lives. Without targeted investment in digital skills, access, and adoption, underserved communities risk being further excluded from this new era of innovation and opportunity. Restoring the DEA grant programs is not only consistent with the Administration's stated goals of equity and inclusion, but also essential to ensuring that every community can thrive in an AI-driven economy.



We urge immediate action to reinstate the Digital Equity Act programs and safeguard states' ability to use BEAD non-deployment resources as Congress intended. I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you and your staff to discuss these issues in greater detail and to ensure that the voices of the communities we serve are reflected in your decisions.

Sincerely,

Marc H. Morial
President and Chief Executive Officer
National Urban League

ⁱ National Urban League, *Lewis Latimer Plan for Digital Equity and Inclusion* (2021). Available at:

<https://nul.org/latimerplan>

ⁱⁱ Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Pub. L. No. 117-58, Title III, Subtitle D—Digital Equity Act of 2021.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pew Research Center, "Internet/Broadband Fact Sheet" (2023). Available at:

<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/>

^{iv} Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, *Broadband for America's Future: A Vision for the 2020s* (2019).

Available at: <https://www.benton.org/publications/broadband-americas-future>

^v National Skills Coalition & Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, *Closing the Digital Skill Divide* (2023). Available at:

<https://nationalskillscoalition.org/resource/publications/closing-the-digital-skill-divide/>

^{vi} Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Pub. L. No. 117-58, § 60102 (codified at 47 U.S.C. § 1702), authorizing eligible uses of BEAD funds for "broadband adoption, workforce development, telehealth, and digital equity programs." Full text available at: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/3684/text>

^{vii} Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, *The Case for Digital Equity* (2022). Available at:

<https://www.benton.org/publications/case-digital-equity>