Digital Equity through Universal Broadband and America’s Libraries

Broadband Infrastructure Framework

Broadband infrastructure legislation must address digital equity at the same time as deployment to unserved and underserved areas. Congressional negotiators must include provisions requiring recipients of broadband funding to provide “future proof” gigabit service to libraries and other anchor institutions. Negotiators must also secure funding for digital literacy, digital navigators, and similar broadband adoption programs through libraries and other community organizations as framed by the Digital Equity Act of 2021 (S. 2018).

Broadband is essential infrastructure to ensure full participation in our digital economy and civic life. Broadband also enables social connections and access to critical services, such as education and healthcare. Equitable access demands affordable access to high-capacity broadband service, a device and the digital skills to use it – for all. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light the adverse impacts for those individuals who are excluded from the digital world. This digital exclusion carries lasting harm, disproportionately impacting Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, as well as low-income households and rural communities. Achieving digital equity through universal broadband is a matter of economic competitiveness, educational opportunity, and social justice, and must be a national priority.

Libraries’ Role in Addressing the Digital Divide

Since the dial-up days, libraries across the country have stood in the digital gaps to connect our communities, especially for those most vulnerable. An essential thread in our nation’s digital safety net, libraries are committed to improving broadband access, adoption, and use to advance educational and economic opportunity for all individuals.

Library staff work in our communities to spur home adoption by increasing awareness of and confidence in using online resources and services, providing public internet access to all, and supporting digital learning opportunities that empower employment and entrepreneurship. Libraries hold a specific and unique position because of their extensive reach into communities of all sizes and their trusted and noncommercial role.
Libraries in Action

Libraries are often the only source of no-fee internet access and other essential services, including assistance with distance learning, access to telehealth resources, and workforce and job development.

• **Connecting communities:** Many libraries loan hotspots and devices. The Prescott Valley Public Library in Arizona launched “Stay Connected Tech Kits,” lending laptops and hotspots to reduce barriers for students and families lacking home internet or a computer.

• **Promoting positive health outcomes:** Libraries are responding to rapidly increasing telehealth needs by providing access to factual information about the COVID-19 virus, helping with registering for vaccines, and assisting patrons applying for services such as Medicare and Medicaid. The Pottsboro (TX) Library partnered with the University of North Texas Health Science Center to launch a telehealth program through the library for residents in their underserved area to access medical care.

• **Providing spaces for career development:** Library programs help patrons build résumés and access job boards and applications. Libraries are increasingly facilitating career planning for in-demand occupations. The Nevada State Library has enabled the College of Southern Nevada to offer the first-ever dialysis technician training using 3D and virtual reality, available through all libraries in the state.

**Library staff are problem solvers, and America’s libraries are vital community infrastructure.**

From aiding with online health insurance enrollment to expanding broadband access during the pandemic, library staff have clearly demonstrated themselves to be creative and capable collaborators in reaching and empowering diverse groups.

**Key Calls to Action for Decisionmakers**

Emergency recovery funding has been instrumental in boosting universal broadband access and digital equity, but a long-term strategy is required now. A comprehensive approach must address all broadband deployment and adoption obstacles—availability, affordability, adequacy, lack of competition, and digital skills gaps. Additionally, government processes and regulations that prevent or impede progress toward universal broadband must be reformed.

Now is the time for Congress, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to prioritize digital inclusion legislation and future-focused policies that enable innovative and sustainable solutions to close digital divides.

1. **Broadband deployment legislation and initiatives must ensure homes and community anchor institutions have access to future-proof internet speeds that meet today’s and tomorrow’s digital needs.** The American Library Association (ALA) calls for broadband deployment investments that promote networks capable of 100/100 Mbps for consumers, and 1 GBPS for libraries and other anchor institutions. Broadband deployment in Indian Country should be prioritized.

2. **Broadband must be affordable once it is available.** ALA calls for policies that promote competition, permit municipal broadband networks, and allow for interconnection. ALA supports streamlining procedures for permitting, rights of way, and coordinating other regulatory requirements across government agencies. ALA also supports balanced spectrum policies and strong, enforceable network neutrality rules. Further, consumers must have access to both affordable broadband service and connected devices.

3. **Digital literacy training and access to ongoing support must be included in any broadband investment.** Broadband infrastructure legislation must address digital equity at the same time it addresses deployment to unserved and underserved areas. ALA calls for dedicated funding streams for libraries and other community organizations that provide broadband adoption programs such as digital skills training and digital navigator services.

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