April 6, 2021

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
The President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

The COVID-19 pandemic and related economic challenges have been a year-long study in the central role the internet now has in our daily lives. In March 2020, virtually overnight, much of our daily experience – jobs, health care, education, civics and connection to our family and friends – shifted online. A year later, we as a country are working to forge a more equitable recovery and prepare the workforce for an increasingly competitive technology-driven global marketplace. Broadband internet access will be a significant key to unlocking the door to better education, improved healthcare, and higher-skilled jobs.

While there has been progress to close the digital divide, it is clear that more needs to be done. Today, there continue to be multiple barriers to broadband connectivity, resulting in far too many people who still lack internet service. Some don't have access to broadband networks, some cannot afford broadband services, devices or equipment and still others lack the digital literacy skills necessary to make use of them. Approximately 10-15 million students don't have broadband at home. People with disabilities are 20% less likely to be connected to broadband at home or have the technology to go online than people without disabilities. Forty percent of seniors don't have residential service sufficient to meet with their doctors for telemedicine appointments, which have increasingly taken on life-and-death importance. And the numbers are even worse for people of color and indigenous peoples. The digital divide is real. To strengthen our families, our communities and our nation, we must recommit to the bipartisan goal of connecting all Americans to broadband internet service.

America has never shied away from big goals. We put a man on the moon, eradicated polio, and declared a war against cancer because they were national priorities of the 20th century. Closing the digital divide must be a national priority for the 21st century.

While research suggests there are several, often interrelated barriers to broadband adoption, we know one of the primary barriers is that too many people cannot afford broadband service and equipment. Efforts by broadband providers to connect low-income Americans through discounted offerings have succeeded in connecting millions of people, but again more needs to be done. The federal government has never adopted a robust, permanent, and coordinated

program to help more people get connected to broadband. And while Congress should be commended for allocating funding to build out broadband in rural America – a job that needs to continue until complete – addressing the rural broadband challenge is only part of the solution.

Congress should comprehensively address the affordability challenge facing low-income Americans. Existing programs aren't sufficient. The current Lifeline program has been effective at helping people to adopt and maintain telephone service, and it has served as an important safety net to help provide millions with access to broadband. But, the $9.25 per month it provides cannot facilitate the kind of swift and substantial shift of millions of low-income Americans to broadband that this moment requires. The new Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) passed in December to help economically vulnerable families stay connected during COVID-19 was an important first step. But it is a temporary program designed for the pandemic and is not a long-term approach.

It's time for Congress to adopt a long-term federally-funded broadband benefit program that the FCC would manage and administer to provide low income individuals with enhanced financial support for broadband long after the pandemic ends. This new program should provide consumers with a higher benefit than the current $9.25 available from Lifeline. It should use simplified, safe, and streamlined payment systems to encourage full participation, with benefits delivered directly to consumers. The new program's requirements for broadband providers must be simple and straight-forward. The program should also empower consumers by allowing them maximum choice in service offerings. The new program should also remove the current requirement that service providers must become Eligible Telecom Carriers to participate in the program, which unnecessarily limits carrier participation – and therefore competition and consumer choice – in the provision of broadband services to low-income communities.

To make sure this program works and has staying power, it has to have predictable, dependable and consistent funding. And that requires that it be codified and funded by Congress through mandatory directed spending as other entitlement programs are, rather than being subjected to the vagaries of the annual, discretionary appropriations process. Additionally, Congress could explore other supplemental funding sources such as proceeds from spectrum auctions. A predictable, dependable, long-term, broadband benefit program would help ensure that all people across the nation are connected.

Finally, because affordability is only one of the barriers, we have to renew our commitment to a national plan for digital literacy and skills development. To this end, as with the long term benefit program described above, Congress should support grant programs to empower state and local governments, school districts, and community nonprofits to pilot and scale effective outreach to under-resourced communities and multilingual digital literacy training programs. A decade of experience from digital inclusion programs shows that these front-line local

organizations are highly effective at helping people gain the skills, comfort, and confidence they need to join the digital community. We need to give these digital inclusion programs more resources to tackle the numerous intangible barriers that keep too many from adopting broadband.

The undersigned stand ready to work in collaboration with policy makers to reimagine and reassess how to make sure low-income Americans are not left on the wrong side of the digital divide. Together, a long-term broadband benefit program and a renewed commitment to digital literacy training will help ensure that the economic prosperity that emerges out of this recovery is more dynamic, more equitable, and more accessible to every American. We respectfully ask you to create a predictable, sustainable, long-term broadband subsidy to ensure all people are empowered to fully share in the possibilities and opportunities that come with access to the internet.

Sincerely,

ACA Connects – America's Communications Association
African American Mayors Association (AAMA)
American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD)
Asian Americans Advancing Justice (AAJC)
Asian/Pacific Islander American Chamber of Commerce & Entrepreneurship
AT&T
Balm in Gilead
Benton Institute for Broadband & Society
Black Women's Roundtable
Business Forward
Charter
Code for America
Comcast
Doctor On Demand
Eaton
eHealth Initiative
Grubhub
Healthcare Information & Management Systems Society
United States Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
Kapor Center
League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)
The Latino Coalition
LGBT Tech
MANA, A National Latina Organization
Multicultural Media, Telecom and Internet Council (MMTC)
National Action Network (NAN)
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
National Black Caucus of State Legislators (NBCSL)

National Coalition on Black Civic Participation
National Conference of Black Churches
National Consumers League
National Council of Asian Pacific Americans (NCAPA)
National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA)
National Grange
National Hispanic Media Coalition (NHMC)
National LGBT Chamber of Commerce (NGLCC)
National Organization of Black Elected Legislative Women (N.O.B.EL. Women)
National Urban League (NUL)
Personal Connected Health Alliance
ServiceNow
T-Mobile USA
Third Way
UnidosUS
U.S. Black Chambers
US Cellular
US Distance Learning Associates
Verizon