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Congress must enact broadband equity for low-income families | Robert E. Branson

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Published 7:00 a.m. PT Aug. 3, 2021

This opinion column was submitted by Robert E. Branson, esq., president and CEO of the Multicultural Media, Telecom and Internet Council.

Each of us has sacrificed, or lost, something during the pandemic. To keep our communities safe, we've sacrificed precious time — more than a year's worth — of in-person celebrations and the everyday connections that come with going to work, attending school, visiting your health care provider or even simple pleasures like travel, sporting events or a trip to the movies. Many of us lost dear friends, family members and neighbors.

For low-wage frontline workers, who are disproportionately represented by people of color and other minority groups, the pandemic exacerbated a series of pre-existing challenges to an untenable degree. Millions of low-income people still don't have home broadband connections, computers or the digital skills needed to navigate them well.

The Federal Communications Commission reports that 14.5 million people still lack access to broadband. According to a recent Pew Research Center survey, only 71% of Blacks and 65% of Hispanics have broadband connectivity at home, compared to 80% of whites. Pew also found that about four in 10 adults with lower incomes do not have home broadband services (43%) or a desktop or laptop computer (41%), and that during the pandemic 34% of lower-income home broadband users have had trouble paying for service.

Low-wage workers on the frontlines — our grocery, retail, delivery, maintenance, sanitation workers and more — risked their health for months and made it possible for others to work remotely, safely from their homes, equipped with reliable broadband internet operating at speeds fast enough to join video conference calls, send emails and manage projects they would otherwise need to be in the office to organize.

It is totally unacceptable that so many of the people who sacrificed so much to carry us through the pandemic make up the same communities being left behind by the digital divide.

To address broadband affordability, the primary barrier that keeps low-income families and people of color from adopting internet connectivity at home, Congress must transform the FCC's temporary Emergency Broadband Benefit program into a permanent, reliable, predictable subsidy to ensure these communities stay connected to the internet and are provided with the opportunities it creates.

Today, having reliable internet connectivity at home is just as essential as electricity, running water or other utilities.

Having internet at home enables children and teens to participate in remote learning and to collaborate with their classmates and teachers. Coming from a family that cannot afford internet service shouldn't preclude any student from gaining the same educational opportunities as their peers from higher-income families.

Having internet at home enables some of the most vulnerable members of our community — seniors, disabled people, those with chronic illnesses, caretakers and more — to directly interact with their health care providers from the safety of their homes. It allows them to order lifesaving medications online and coordinate their delivery.

Having internet at home enables low-income workers to benefit from all of the opportunities that the internet provides, from finding higher-wage jobs, to experiencing remote learning themselves to learning new skills that will help them provide a better life for themselves and their families.

Having the internet at home means that a single parent working double-shifts to make ends meet can order groceries online and have groceries delivered so their children have food to eat the next day. It means that, when it comes time for their children to apply to colleges, they can go online not only to apply for college, but to help them apply for scholarships and grant funding.

There is so much to gain through having fast, affordable and reliable internet. It is truly a social and economic disadvantage to be left behind by the digital divide.

Congress, we cannot keep asking low-income families and the most vulnerable members of our communities to continue sacrificing for the greater good. It's time that we provide

greater opportunity to the low-wage workers who have given us so much. Enact a Permanent Broadband Benefit that bridges the digital divide so that all may have equal access to the internet.

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