



July 16, 2021

The Honorable Raul Ruiz, M.D.
Chair, Congressional Hispanic Caucus
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Chair Ruiz and Members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus:

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored our nation's gaps in affordable access to high-speed internet. Across the country, many were unable to afford internet service, which became critical to participation in daily life that moved online, including school, work, and medical appointments.

Members of the Latino community were no exception. With just 65 percent of the Hispanic community saying that they have broadband access at home, a shift entirely online left far too many without the connectivity they need to participate in a virtual world.

To help close the digital divide, Congress and the Federal Communications Commission implemented the Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) program, which provides discounts on broadband service to families and households struggling to afford internet service during the pandemic. To date, more than three million households have enrolled. But this program is only temporary and at its conclusion will still leave a crucial affordability gap that needs to be closed.

Even before the pandemic, 17 percent of Hispanic teens found themselves lacking internet access or a device that would allow them to complete homework assignments. And only 65 percent of Hispanic adults have adopted broadband, a number that lags behind the white adoption rate by 15 percent. While given a lack of federal programs like Lifeline that target those undocumented members of the community, these numbers are likely worse among that group, with nearly 40 percent of Hispanic immigrant households lacking broadband access, a rate exceeding white households by 13 percent.

Beyond that, when the pandemic hit, 65 percent of Hispanic adults said that access to the internet was essential, but over 50 percent also voiced serious concerns about paying their broadband bill given their economic situation. Affordability of broadband service continues to be a significant issue for the Latino community.

In addition to affordability, a lack of digital readiness has also contributed to this community's lagging adoption rate. One survey stated that 22 percent of Hispanics do not have the digital

skills they need to function effectively online. And a language barrier due to the lack of materials and outreach in Spanish compounds the already complex set of adoption issues facing the Hispanic community.

Now is the time to build on the success of the EBB, to ensure that every person in every Latino community can access the internet. While the bipartisan infrastructure agreement is a good start for closing the gap, early reports have indicated that too little is dedicated to affordability in the framework, which if not increased, could leave affordability gaps in place.

To reach the goal of universal access and close the digital divide, the solution must be two-fold. First, there must be a new permanent, broadband benefit program for lower-income households, codified and funded by Congress through dedicated funding. This program must be direct-to-consumer to guarantee access to the benefit and maximize consumer choice to allow them to select the provider and services that meet their needs. And equally as important, it has to go beyond the reach of the existing Lifeline program, which doesn't target those with immigrant or mixed immigration status, leaving them subject to the harmful effects of the digital divide.

Second, federal and state governments should allocate funding for digital readiness through grants for community outreach at the local level, including to the non-English speaking members of the Latino community.

As members of the Latino community, we've seen firsthand the power of the internet within our communities. We call on policymakers to create a new permanent broadband benefit and provide support for digital readiness and empowerment programs. The time is now to take bold action to close our nation's digital divide.

Sincerely,

Hispanic Technology and Telecommunications Partnership (HTTP)
League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)
MANA, A National Latina Organization
National Hispanic Caucus of State Legislators (NHCSL)
National Hispanic Media Coalition (NHMC)
The Latino Coalition
UnidosUS
United States Hispanic Chamber of Commerce (USHCC)

cc: Members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus





NHCSL
National Hispanic Caucus
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