

March 11, 2021

RE: Accessible, Affordable Internet for All Act

Dear Member of Congress:

The American Civil Liberties Union writes to express our appreciation to Majority Whip Clyburn, Senator Klobuchar, and Members of the House Rural Broadband Task Force and House Energy and Commerce Committee for the reintroduction of the Accessible, Affordable Internet for All Act and to urge you to cosponsor the legislation. Access to broadband internet service is essential for everyone in this country to realize their potential, yet, for too long, it has been out of reach for many of us. Today, 17 percent of American adults do not have subscriptions to any form of broadband, including 34 percent of Black adults.¹ Three in 10 Black households with children do not have high-speed internet (over 3.25 million Black children live in these households).² Nearly a quarter (23%) of Black Americans own a smart phone but do not have high speed internet at their home.³ A smartphone is not sufficient to attend class, do homework, or apply for a job. The Accessible, Affordable Internet for All Act will take important steps to remedy these yawning gaps in opportunity.



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To begin, the bill would extend the life of the Emergency Broadband Benefit program by providing an additional \$6 billion to the fund. Congress created the program in December 2020 to provide a \$50 subsidy for low income households to afford broadband services, and a \$75 subsidy for households on tribal land. Right now, amidst a global pandemic, unemployed people are having to choose between buying food and maintaining access to the broadband service that permits them to continue looking for work. School children are unable to join their classmates in virtual learning because they don't have internet access or must share one internet-connected device – often a cell phone – among multiple siblings. Senior citizens on fixed incomes are unable to access telemedicine services or, in some cases, register to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. The Emergency Broadband Benefit represents needed relief, but current funding levels could run out as quickly as within 3-6 months. Providing additional funds to the program will ensure that families that are able to finally access broadband will not suddenly lose the service nearly as quickly as they were able to obtain it.

In addition to funding the EBB, the AAIA Act will also prioritize infrastructure deployment to unserved, underserved, and areas with mid-tier service to ensure everyone will have access to broadband service in their homes by providing loans to build out in those areas, including on Tribal lands. Companies that receive those loans would also be required to offer an affordable service plan and to ensure sufficient speeds with low latency. It would also take steps to include

data collection and transparency surrounding broadband services and would preempt state laws that prevent municipalities from deploying their own broadband services.

The AAIA Act would take a comprehensive approach to ensuring everyone in this country has access to broadband and can afford the service. We urge you to cosponsor the bill and look forward to working with all Members of Congress to close the digital divide for good. Please reach out to Kate Ruane, kruane@aclu.org, if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Ronald Newman
National Political Director



Kate Ruane
Senior Legislative Counsel

¹ Monica Anderson, *Mobile Technology and Home Broadband*, PEW RES. CNTR. (Jun. 13, 2019), <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2019/06/13/mobile-technology-and-home-broadband-2019/>.

² John B. Horrigan, *Students of Color Caught in the Homework Gap* (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, July 22, 2020), <https://futureready.org/homework-gap/>

³ Perrin, Andrew, and Erica Turner, *Smartphones help blacks, Hispanics bridge some—but not all—digital gaps with whites*, PEW RES. CNTR. (2019). <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/20/smartphones-help-blacks-hispanics-bridge-some-but-not-all-digital-gaps-with-whites/>.