

June 29, 2020

Dear Senators:

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) strongly urges you to cosponsor the Emergency Broadband Connections Act of 2020, which will provide emergency funding to help households afford access to broadband internet services. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, most people in the United States have said that broadband service has been essential to their lives.¹ Broadband internet access is necessary now more than ever for people to work, attend school, receive medical care, apply for essential benefits, order food and supplies, and exercise their constitutional rights to speak, protest, organize and associate safely during this time of social distancing.



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Yet, even before the current crisis, many people lacked access to high-speed broadband. According to Pew Research Center, nearly 30% of people with lower incomes have no broadband internet connection at home.² Moreover, with the current economic crisis, a majority of people with lower incomes that do have access are now reporting concern about their ongoing ability to pay for this essential service.³ With unemployment in some states rising as high as 25%, newly unemployed persons may find themselves unable to afford to continue broadband access, making finding new employment even more difficult.

The Emergency Broadband Connections Act of 2020 represents the right approach toward bridging the broadband connectivity gap during the ongoing pandemic. The bill provides 50 dollars a month to help eligible households pay for broadband Internet services, with an increase in the benefit to 75 dollars for eligible households on Tribal lands. The benefit would be separate from the Lifeline program and the Universal Service Fund. Eligible households would include all households eligible for the Lifeline program, all households eligible to receive SNAP benefits, and households experiencing economic hardship resulting from the current economic crisis. To fund the benefit, the bill creates an Emergency Broadband Connectivity Fund with an appropriations authorization of \$8.8 billion dollars to fund the emergency broadband benefit. It would also provide a benefit for connected devices, ensure service by requiring broadband service providers to provide these services upon request from an eligible household, and require Lifeline providers to provide unlimited minutes and data to those that currently rely on the Lifeline program for phone and internet services.

Right now students in every state are divided between those who are able to access their educations remotely and those who are not. Older adults cannot use telehealth services and are placing their health at

risk to receive medical attention in person or skipping doctors' visits. During this extended period of social distancing, people without access to broadband also may lack adequate access to communication with their families, to their religious services, to teletherapy,⁴ to their communities, to the most updated public health advice about the pandemic, and to their governmental representatives, which puts undue pressure on them to violate social distancing recommendations. The newly unemployed may also find themselves unable to safely look for new work if they do not have or lose access to broadband services that are essential to job searches.

With the crisis showing no signs of subsiding and the prospect of returning to everyday life uncertain in the near term, these disparities harm our constitutional rights to speak and associate freely. To alleviate the harms that disproportionately affect students, older adults, the newly unemployed and other vulnerable communities, Congress must take bold action across multiple fronts to ensure access to broadband and connectivity-enabled technology. We urge you to cosponsor the Emergency Broadband Connections Act and support its eventual passage into law whether as standalone legislation or in any forthcoming stimulus package.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent request. Please do not hesitate to contact Kate Ruane, kruane@aclu.org, (202) 675.2336, with any questions.

Sincerely,



Ronald Newman
National Political Director



Kate Ruane
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¹ Emily A. Vogels, Andrew Perrin, Lee Rainie, & Monica Anderson, *53% of Americans Say the Internet has Been Essential During the Covid-19 Outbreak*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (Apr. 30, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/04/30/53-of-americans-say-the-internet-has-been-essential-during-the-covid-19-outbreak/>.

² Monica Anderson & Madhumitha Kumar, *Digital divide persists even as lower-income Americans make gains in tech adoption*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (May 7, 2019), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/07/digital-divide-persists-even-as-lower-income-americans-make-gains-in-tech-adoption/>.

³ Emily A. Vogels, Andrew Perrin, Lee Rainie, & Monica Anderson, *53% of Americans Say the Internet has Been Essential During the Covid-19 Outbreak*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (Apr. 30, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/04/30/53-of-americans-say-the-internet-has-been-essential-during-the-covid-19-outbreak/>.

⁴ William Wan, *The coronavirus pandemic is pushing America into a mental-health crisis*, Wash. Post (May 4, 2020), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/05/04/mental-health-coronavirus/>.