

June 11, 2020



The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker of the House  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy  
Minority Leader  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Majority Leader  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer  
Minority Leader  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

## **Re: Investing In Our Nation's Digital Infrastructure Must Be a National Priority**

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader McCarthy, and Minority Leader Schumer:

Since the first case of coronavirus (COVID-19) was [reported](#) in the United States, Americans have faced profound disruptions and been inundated with illustrations of why broadband is essential. Aside from schools and businesses having to embrace digital platforms, local governments found a way to stay operable while providing real-time health and safety updates for their residents in the face of a national emergency. Essential employees, on the front lines of the coronavirus pandemic, turned to social media to share the seriousness of COVID-19 and need for protective equipment. Religious ceremonies and funerals, once marked with vast communal gatherings, used livestreams to reach congregants. All who were able to adapt shared something in common: the ability to get online.

Next Century Cities works to expand affordable and reliable high-speed connectivity to every resident in every community. Our organization is composed of mayors and local officials who are united by a commitment to ensure that the communities they serve can foster meaningful participation in a digital society.

COVID-19 revealed the societal cost of when millions of Americans cannot afford or do not have access to broadband. For populations who are struggling with connectivity, access to information, opportunities, and economic mobility is proportional to high-speed access. Dr. dt ogilvie, Senior Advisor to Mayor Lovely Warren, explained why expanding digital opportunities is a priority in **Rochester, New York**.

“We want to ensure all residents have broadband access. Fast, affordable internet connectivity should be considered as important as electricity, gas, or



water. In fact, internet access should be a utility. It is vital in today's economic, health, and educational systems. In this digital age, the economic, health, and educational opportunities for individuals, families, and businesses are limited, at best, if they do not have broadband access. Affordable, high-speed broadband access equalizes opportunity.”

Centering this ambition goes far beyond any municipality or state. We are writing to urge members of Congress to recognize that achieving our national goals, especially those related to education, economic development, health care, depend on ubiquitous broadband. Local officials are counting on you all to make broadband access and adoption a priority.

Local officials are painfully aware of the impact that broadband access has on educational outcomes. Educators in 48 states, the District of Columbia, and all five commonwealths grappled with the decision to [close schools](#) for the foreseeable future as universities across the country cancelled on-campus instruction. When completing the academic year [online](#) became the only option, many students were simply unprepared to transition to digital learning platforms. For [approximately 40,000 students](#) in the Unified School District of Los Angeles, the lack of broadband access, equipment, or digital literacy remained insurmountable obstacles. Likewise, nationwide, many teachers were equally unprepared to transition online without the requisite training or equipment to reach students in need.

Deeply invested in their communities, local leaders were the first to brainstorm connectivity solutions. According to Mayor Deborah Frank Feinen in **Champaign, Illinois**:

“When the coronavirus forced the rapid transition to online learning and online communication just a few months ago, it also exposed the gap in broadband availability within our community. This broadband availability gap affects most profoundly the low-income population, and while it now appears that on-line learning and online communication will be a part of our “new normal” going forward, it is imperative that we eliminate this gap now. Now more than ever we cannot leave a segment of our population behind. Please help us to eliminate the online access gap now by investing in our nation’s digital infrastructure now.”

Americans of all ages, especially low-income populations and students who lack at-home broadband connection, could ordinarily rely on public libraries for access to broadband. However, libraries that were [closed](#) while stay-at-home orders remain in place drastically limited alternatives.

At Charles Hart Middle School in Washington DC, English Teacher James Israel [said](#) that his students would usually complete their work on their phones while using the school WiFi. They are among the millions of students who feel the impact of being disconnected at home. Students at the University of Texas at Austin have voiced similar concerns. One [described](#) her experience: “I have 2G WiFi at home. Libraries have been



closed and the county judge has pretty much shut down all public spaces in Tarrant County leaving me with no other option. What is especially detrimental is the fact that if it is cloudy or later in the day the WiFi can worsen and fail...”

Entities like the Washington State Broadband Office have tried to intervene, promoting drive-in Wi-Fi hotspots for residents struggling with access. Emily Schuh, Director of Administrative Services, described a collaboration in **Anacortes, Washington**:

“Access, Anacortes Fiber Internet, and the Anacortes Public Library have joined to provide drive-in Wi-Fi at the Anacortes Public Library facility. This free public broadband internet access is available at no charge as part of a statewide initiative in response to the impacts of COVID-19, to provide [Drive-In WiFi Hotspots](#) with free temporary, emergency internet access for Washingtonians who do not have broadband service to their homes with a specific emphasis on remote learning for students. This service can be used for job searches, telehealth, telework, unemployment filing, and census participation.”

Still, drive-in public WiFi options are a short-term solution to a long-term problem. [Research](#) conducted by the Federal Reserve Board reveals that access to high-speed internet will not only affect students in their current academic year, but also has a long-term impact on testing and post-secondary success. It confirmed that access to a high-speed connection both improved standardized testing scores and the breadth of post-secondary schools to which a student applied. The study also revealed that the lack of access will only widen socioeconomic gaps between students who are connected and students who are not.

Important questions remain about the fate of students who once benefited from the generosity of service providers and their free service plans during the national emergency. Dr. Ogilvie in Rochester, New York, asked, “What happens to those households after the 60 days if they cannot afford to pay for access? What happens if schools continue remote education as part of their curriculum?” Too many of these students already lost a portion of their Spring semester and will be left to fend for themselves in Fall.

Small businesses have also felt the deep effects of this pandemic and will not be able to rebuild without widespread broadband solutions. In fact, a Small Business Association [survey](#) found that almost half of small business owners had experienced reduced customer demand, and 28% are not confident in their financial futures. Many of the most [vulnerable small businesses](#) still do not have access to the requisite high-speed connectivity to recover in a stalled economy.

Notably, entrepreneurs with access to online markets have a [30% higher](#) survival rate than small and medium sized businesses that are not connected. E-commerce has [increased](#) by 30% and will continue to be the marketplace of choice as [studies](#) confirm that some form of social distancing may be necessary until 2022. Businesses that are unable to embrace this new normal could be forced to permanently close their doors.



Broadband access changes outcomes for business owners as well as the consumers who keep their businesses alive.

Companies and government entities of all sizes were forced to adopt work from home models and will continue to rely on them for as long as the COVID-19 threat looms. According to Tom Mullen, Chief Data Officer of **Riverside County, California**:

“We transitioned more than 7,000 employees, approximately one third of our total workforce, to remote workers in a matter of weeks. This required the rapid deployment of new tools and services that rely on broadband availability and reliability at sufficient speeds that support secure virtual connections and video conferencing. Employee home broadband connections are vital for the continued operations in our county and community.”

Reflecting on the holistic impact that connectivity has on economic development, education, and staying informed, Schuh from the City of Anacortes added:

“Washington State’s Stay Home, Stay Safe order was issued on March 23 which brought an acute awareness of how access to high speed internet can keep us informed, connected, working, educated, and entertained. Anacortes Fiber Internet has connected over 150 customers since the Stay Home order went into effect following strict guidelines to ensure the safety of our community members and staff. To continue our effort to expand broadband access to all City of Anacortes businesses and residents, it is imperative for us to have funding mechanisms available to continue with the design and construction of the broadband infrastructure for our island community.”

High-speed internet connections have also played an integral role in the public health campaign to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Health care providers, like [St. Luke’s University Health Network](#) in Pennsylvania, are fast-tracking telehealth services including video conferencing tools to facilitate online consultations. Telehealth options allow medical professionals to meet with distant patients and helps mitigate the risk of exposure to the virus by eliminating physical contact. In Grass Valley, California, telehealth brought together patients and doctors that were [over 95 miles apart](#). The success of these telehealth services depends on both patients and providers having access to high-speed connectivity. Without it, again, the benefits are reserved for the connected.

In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic and civic unrest, it is important to note the digital divide has a direct impact on Americans’ ability to participate in our democracy. The internet has become the 21<sup>st</sup> century public square and serves as an important tool for expanding civic engagement. Organizations like [Vote.org](#) provide citizens with easy-to-access information on how to register to vote, apply for an absentee ballot, where to find polling locations, and more. Further, online voter guides and candidate websites give voters access to extensive information on the candidates at every level of government.



Student organizers with “[No Fail Yale](#),” for example, were able to rally support and push for an institutional grade system change exclusively through online activism. Their efforts were [successful](#) and Yale administration has since adopted a universal pass/fail grading policy. Organizers in Austin, Texas, formed the “[Mutual Aid Collective](#),” an online center for coronavirus resources and an emergency fund for those affected by the disease. In two different corners of the country, high-speed internet connections were vital for organizers to exercise their First Amendment rights.

City councils that have resorted to conducting meetings online provide another example of how being connected supports participation in an ongoing dialogue about America’s democracy. Local officials have had to introduce emergency measures, debate priorities, and vote without being able to meet in traditional forums. Though online meetings have been a necessary measure, residents who do not have the requisite broadband connections cannot participate in meetings or the public debate about proposals that govern their communities. While municipal governments are taking [steps](#) to ensure that citizens are not disenfranchised, the task is difficult and results are imperfect. Opening public comment to include phone calls, email, and physical mail still pose significant burdens for residents who are struggling with broadband access. Expanding broadband access and adoption is an effective remedy.

Congress must acknowledge that digital infrastructure is essential and invest in the requisite broadband expansion, adoption programs, and network sustainability strategies that give Americans access to widespread digital opportunities. As Zach Friend, Supervisor in **Santa Cruz County, California**, eloquently stated:

“The pandemic has shone a bright light on the realities of the digital divide. Many rural and lower income areas, including in my county, were left to shelter in place without the ability to do schoolwork, access medical care or even submit for benefits. One Congressional vote could wipe away the digital divide and place all of our communities on equal footing.”

We found a way to bring electricity into every home and superhighways to every corner of the country. We can find a way to connect every resident in every community to the high-speed connectivity that they need. Investing in digital infrastructure is critical for the well-being of our economy, democracy, and citizens.

Sincerely,  
Next Century Cities

