Bridging the Digital Divide and Shrinking the 'Homework Gap'

It has been three months since the term "social distancing" became part of the American lexicon. Social distancing now means that distance learning, working from home, telemedicine, and e-commerce are the primary ways that Americans engage each other. Fortunately, due in part to the current administration's Internet governance policies, U.S. broadband carriers have been able to meet the shifting demand while voluntarily keeping households that are unable to make payments connected.

However, the global pandemic and its associated shutdown of businesses and schools have exacerbated the Digital Divide in America. Rural connectivity lags, and many lower-income families lack the necessary digital tools to connect. Additionally, as people are unable to visit their doctors, they need to use new tools to stay healthy. To help close America's Digital Divide, the Chamber released the following policy principles:

Broadband Funding Principles

1. Technology Neutrality: Allow all technologies (and providers) to compete for funds to serve truly unserved areas, prohibit duplicative funding, and establish funding programs without existing Section 254 limitations, such as existing telecommunications carrier requirements.

2. Collocation: Support collocation by enabling funds to be used for leasing tower space in addition to capital expenditures.

3. Speed to Market: In a COVID-19 environment, speed matters and funding should be distributed to those who can stand up broadband networks quickly.

State-mandated school closures have resulted in parents playing the role of part-time educators while their children connect to online education. Unfortunately, many low-income students lack the necessary connectivity to keep up with their peers. This "Homework Gap" threatens the expansion of opportunities to minority communities. Here are some policy principles to shrink this gap.

Homework Gap Principles

1. Funding Source: Fund out of general appropriations, not universal service contributions.

2. Program Design: A separate program from E-rate, but to the extent FCC finds useful, it can borrow E-rate rules.

3. Targeted and Temporary: The program should last for only the duration of the national emergency and be targeted to low-income households without a home broadband connection or in jeopardy of losing their broadband connection, including related equipment and/or a computer (laptop, tablet, or desktop computer).

4. Technology Neutrality: Allow any technology.

5. Eligibility: Limited to; 1) connectivity (wired or wireless), 2) service equipment (e.g. modems, routers, hotspots), and 3) devices (e.g. tablets/computers/smartphones).

It's time for Congress to pass long-term broadband funding and permitting relief to sustainably bridge this divide while offering temporary, targeted, and timely solutions to address COVID-19 - specific disparities. That's why the Chamber supports the approach taken by the STREAMLINE Act and wireline streaming

[and cable franchising reform in addition to notice requirements](#) when state and local governments intend to alter public rights of way.

If done correctly, this will improve education and health care opportunities for deserving communities while giving our slumping economy a much-needed boost.

–Jordan Crenshaw, Executive Director and Policy Counsel at the U.S. Chamber's Chamber Technology Engagement Center