

**Committee on Energy and Commerce**  
**Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery**  
**of**  
**Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Ranking Member Kathy Castor**  
***Hearing on "Closing the Digital Divide: Overseeing Federal Funds for Broadband Deployment"***  
**May 10, 2023**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you to the witnesses for being here.

Reliable broadband internet is essential to our daily lives and allows us to fully participate in the economy, education, see a doctor, apply for a job and more. But a “digital divide” persists between those who have reliable and affordable internet the skills to use it and those who do not.

The digital divide is persistent and complex, and challenges include accessibility, affordability, and adoptability.

Currently, the Biden Administration estimates that 24 million households in the United States lack internet access. This digital divide is a problem in rural and Tribal communities but also in our urban areas where the cost of internet service is still a considerable barrier for millions of Americans. Nearly a third of Americans who do not have broadband in their homes say the reason is because it costs too much.

Back home in Tampa, I have visited with neighbors, especially seniors on a fixed income, who view internet access as luxury. Working with the Tampa Housing Authority, we developed a plan for seniors to get connected through one of my first community funding projects. Residents told me that reliable internet access opens employment, communication with medical providers, cultural groups, and even help with homework with the grandkids.

As our everyday lives increasingly rely on the internet, it’s important that we don’t leave any of our neighbors behind so I am interested in how Congress can ensure that broadband is deployed across America in an equitable manner.

Another particularly troubling part of the digital divide is the “homework gap,” which describes the divide between students who have home broadband access and those who do not. Many students without reliable broadband are forced to squeeze in two more hours of homework at school before the library closes rather than participating in after-school activities, or venture to a commercial parking lot with free Wi-Fi access to complete and submit their assignments.

Although we have made progress toward closing the homework gap through many years of federal and state investments, there is still work to do. Researchers found in 2018 that nearly one in five teens couldn’t always finish their homework because of lack of broadband access. In

2022, that number dropped to about one in ten. While this is good progress, it is unacceptable that in 2022, one in five teens from working class families often have to rely on public Wi-Fi to finish their homework.

No parent should have to spend their evening parked in front of a fast-food restaurant so their kids can get their homework done on time. And no child in America should have to deal with these digital obstacles to complete their assignments.

The federal investments in closing the digital divide reflect the importance and complexity of this challenge.

The Government Accountability Office reported that taxpayers invested \$44 billion from 2015 through 2020 in various efforts needed to close the digital divide such as planning, deployment, affordability, devices, and digital skill development.

Then in 2021, heeding the outcry from farmers, rural communities and Americans still stuck in the broadband gap, Democrats delivered \$65 billion in a transformational investment to connect communities across the country to high-speed, reliable, and affordable broadband internet through the historic Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

A multi-faceted problem like this requires multi-faceted solutions that leverage expertise from a variety of agencies and stakeholders. This helps explain why there are so many important broadband initiatives that support a variety of funding recipients, regions, scopes, and approaches to improving broadband accessibility, affordability, and adoptability.

For example, the FCC's E-Rate program provided discounts on broadband deployments at libraries and schools nationwide, while the Institute of Museum and Library Services' Grants to States program offered support for libraries to expand their services, such as offering digital skills classes. These initiatives are complementary and are both important to reducing the digital divide.

The multi-faceted broadband initiatives highlight the importance of agency coordination to ensure that the investments make it into the communities that need it most. That includes reconciling programmatic differences and deadlines that may make it too burdensome for applicants to take full advantage of the complementary programs available to tackle this issue.

That is where our focus should be: can we in Congress work with our federal agencies to make sure every dollar is spent efficiently and effectively so that these programs succeed? I look forward to having that conversation with the witnesses today.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I yield back.