

Committee on Energy and Commerce

**Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr.**

***Hearing on "Closing the Digital Divide: Overseeing Federal Funds for Broadband
Deployment"***

May 10, 2023

Access to reliable, high-speed internet is essential for all Americans to fully participate in our modern society and economy. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated our reliance on broadband to work, to study, and to just connect with family and friends.

As our future is increasingly online, we must bridge the digital divide and eliminate connectivity gaps that are leaving too many communities behind.

Unfortunately, too many American households do not have access to reliable, high-speed internet. They are being left out and are the wrong side of the digital divide. There are several main reasons for this.

Some people simply live where there is no available broadband. For others, they may not be able to afford the broadband services that are available, or they may lack the skills to fully utilize digital technology.

Approximately 24 million American households lack high-speed internet service and nearly one third of Americans without broadband stated that it cost too much.

As our future is increasingly online, we must bridge the digital divide and eliminate connectivity gaps that are leaving too many communities behind.

And that's exactly what Congress and the Biden Administration did last Congress. We made major investments to eliminate that digital divide by holistically addressing broadband access, affordability, and adoption. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law invests \$65 billion in programs to provide affordable, high-speed internet to Americans and Native communities across the nation. It funds projects to build out and strengthen our broadband infrastructure into rural and underserved communities. It also helps reduce monthly broadband costs for hardworking American families and ensures that people have the skills needed to fully participate in our digital society.

These programs are already increasing internet connectivity for millions of Americans. More than 17 million American households are saving \$30 every month on their internet bill thanks to the Affordable Connectivity Program. And federal agencies are working to create comprehensive maps that will ensure an effective distribution of funds to ensure equitable access to broadband across the country.

This is a complex challenge that requires the participation and expertise of officials at the federal, state, and local levels. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. And both Congress and the Biden Administration have responded to the need for coordination between various broadband programs and their complementary goals.

As one important step, Congress created the Office of Internet Connectivity and Growth within the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) to coordinate many of the programs focused on broadband access and digital inclusion.

The NTIA has also substantially increased its own capacity to address its expanded role. They are bringing on board the subject-matter experts and leaders necessary to assist with grants and monitor their progress. They are putting a thorough and thoughtful framework in place to implement these programs carefully and effectively.

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law is making a major difference in closing the digital divide and yet not one Republican on this Committee supported the new law. I am concerned that we are going to hear a lot of fear and negativity about these investments from Committee Republicans today even though they have been talking for years about the need to expand broadband access in their districts. The investments they opposed will do just that.

And now, House Republicans' threats of a default crisis would undermine our ongoing efforts to close the digital divide. Their Default on America bill passed last month would claw back unobligated funding for Tribal broadband, students' internet connectivity, and accurate broadband mapping that is so critical in ensuring that we are deploying broadband where it is needed most.

This is the wrong approach. The investments included in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law are necessary to tackle the long-standing gaps and provide us a real opportunity to completely connect Americans. We should be working together with our federal, state, and local partners to ensure that every American has access to affordable high-speed internet.