

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell Opening Statement

U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation Hearing, "The State of Broadband Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic"

Witnesses: Mr. Steven Berry, President and Chief Executive Officer, Competitive Carriers Association, Ms. Shirley Bloomfield, Chief Executive Officer, NTCA - The Rural Broadband Association, Mr. Gene Kimmelman, Senior Advisor, Public Knowledge, Mr. Jonathan Spalter, President and Chief Executive Officer, USTelecom - The Broadband Association

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CANTWELL: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for holding this important hearing and thank you to our witnesses for appearing today, both in person and virtually to discuss solutions. The COVID crisis has made it crystal clear: functioning broadband is absolutely necessary for every American home. We've spent a lot of time in this committee over the last several years talking about the persistent digital divide and the harms that come to both our economy and society. But we have not done enough to close that divide. And now, we are in the middle of a crisis where people who are disconnected from school, work, healthcare, friends, and family need access urgently. Staying connected is as critical as ever, and as one of our witnesses will say today, Mr. Kimmelman, broadband is essential, but right now it's without universal access.

It's no wonder that, according to Pew Research, the majority of Americans now consider broadband connectivity to be essential in their lives. And yet millions of American families still do not have access to this essential service. The FCC reports that at least 18 million Americans lack access to broadband and support the number--suspect the number--is significantly higher. Millions of them have Internet connections that can support essential applications and software for remote learning, but there are many who cannot. And the glaring disparities between those who cannot now afford to deliver those services into the home because of cost is also something this committee should consider.

That is why we must address our short-term emergency needs, and also invest in closing the digital divide. To put it into perspective, the Pew Research nationally showed that 35 percent of households with school-aged children and annual incomes below \$30,000 do not have access to high-speed Internet at home. 25 percent of African American homes and 23 percent of Hispanic homes with school-aged children do not have access to high-speed Internet at home. And in the state of Washington, more than two thirds of our school districts responded to a recent survey showing that some of the families could just simply not afford broadband services.

Statewide, 16 percent of families with children have no access to broadband. And, the Spokane school district recently did a survey of 34 different schools and found varying degrees of connectivity and concerns by teachers about who could fully engage in distance learning. That's why I want to thank Senator Markey for his tireless efforts to close the homework gap. I'm proud to be a cosponsor of legislation that he has for emergency FCC E-rate funding to address this need and try to close the gap.

And also, COVID has demonstrated the importance of healthcare during this crisis. COVID-19 has changed the healthcare delivery system. Primary care physicians are closing their offices around the country to inpatient care. People are afraid to go to the hospital to seek out necessary care because of the infection. So telehealth has become the best way to protect the public during the COVID crisis. And

clinics in my state have transitioned to using telehealth as the first contact with each patient. In fact, some clinics in my state report around 90 percent of their initial contacts with patients now occur online. That is why it's so important to make sure that people have access to broadband if our healthcare delivery system in initial contacts are going to move in that direction.

The CDC recommends that health clinics throughout the country use remote contact with patients as their first line of defense for COVID-19. But that only works if those clinics and those patients have broadband. A recent Brookings report cited the lack of broadband or insufficient broadband service to support remote diagnostics as a key barrier to widespread use of telehealth. So I want to again thank some of our colleagues, Senator Schatz, who has been leading the charge to support a telehealth package as part of the COVID—next COVID round of packages. And we need to make sure that these services are widely available, allowing patients to access the care they need. The added benefit for doctors is they can actually care for more patients in a day, take the pressure off of their colleagues who are dealing with the COVID crisis.

So, broadband also can help the understanding of COVID-19. The FCC has already compared health outcomes like diabetes with broadband availability, and I want to thank Senator Rosen for her work pressing the FCC to study additional issues like maternal health outcomes and other issues related to broadband availability.

And lastly, Mr. Chairman, I wanted to bring up Indian Country. This represents a nearly 27 percent—point gap in non-tribal to tribal areas when it comes to broadband access. This gap only widens, according to a report by the FCC, that when 31 percent of households on tribal lands lack access to high-speed broadband compared to 7 percent in non-tribal areas. So, I want to thank my colleagues Senators Udall and Tester for their continued work in delivering broadband to Indian Country, and it's clear we have to make sure new tools are put in place to make up for the shortfalls that we currently see.

Broadband activity can be a great equalizer in this country. But, if access is not there, then we can see right here and now during the COVID crisis the challenges to our education system, our healthcare system, and just basic contact with family and loved ones.

So, I look forward to hearing from the witnesses today in what we can do to close this gap immediately. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.