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Broadband Communities (ISSN 0745-8711) (USPS 679-050) (Publication Mail Agreement #1271091) is published 7 times a year at a rate of \$24 per year by Broadband Properties LLC, 1909 Avenue G, Rosenberg, TX 77471. Periodical postage paid at Rosenberg, TX, and additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Please send address changes to **Broadband Communities**, PO Box 303, Congers, NY 10920-9852.

CANADA POST: Publications Mail Agreement #40612608. Canada Returns to be sent to Bleuchip International, PO Box 25542, London, ON N6C 6B2. Copyright © 2020 Broadband Properties LLC. All rights reserved.



The Deadly Divide

In its economic response to the coronavirus pandemic, Congress missed the chance to address the digital divide.

In this column, I had planned to tell you about the exciting sessions you could attend at the **BROADBAND COMMUNITIES** Summit. That news will have to wait until this summer, as the Summit, like so many other conferences, has been postponed until such gatherings are safer than they are today.

However, this issue and future issues of **BROADBAND COMMUNITIES** magazine will continue to appear on schedule. Our editorial and production staffers all work from home offices around the United States. True to our mission, we've run a virtual operation for more than 15 years. Like others who can work, study, shop and even consult with doctors from home, we are grateful that broadband allows us to maintain social distancing in the new world of COVID-19 without putting our lives and livelihoods on hold. Never before has broadband been so essential to maintaining life and economic activity.

And never before have the consequences of the lack of broadband – the digital divide – been so severe. A horrifying report from Phoenix described three students found sitting under a blanket outside their high school, on a cold and rainy day in March, trying to access school Wi-Fi to complete their assignments. Other students without broadband are missing school. Children with mediocre broadband are squabbling with siblings over access to online classes. Adults are needlessly exposing themselves to illness if they can't perform work or necessary tasks online. As FCC Commissioner Starks wrote recently

in a New York Times opinion piece, "When public health requires social distancing and even quarantine, closing the digital divide becomes central to our safety and economic security."

Regulators and more than 650 ISPs have stepped up with quick fixes to make broadband more accessible and affordable in the short term. They also are beefing up wireline and wireless systems to handle the unprecedented load. All that is commendable and important. Every one of these steps will increase public safety. But most are temporary, and none address the underlying problems.

As I write this, a bipartisan stimulus package has just been announced to shore up the economy against the damage the pandemic is causing. This \$2 trillion program contains very little to improve broadband connectivity in either the long term or the short term. There is no extra funding for Lifeline or other subsidies for low-income households. There are small amounts in allowances for telehealth (some of which may help subsidize patients' broadband connections) and about \$100 million – a drop in the bucket – in grants for rural broadband construction.

Passing the stimulus bill is a great achievement by a Congress that doesn't have many achievements to boast about. But failing to meaningfully address the digital divide at such a critical time is a terrible missed opportunity. ❖

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