

Emergency Broadband Connections Act of 2020

Americans are facing unprecedented challenges during the COVID-19 economic and public health emergency. The Emergency Broadband Connections Act will ensure that a reliable, quality broadband connection does not become a barrier to recovery by expanding access for low-income Americans during the pandemic.

Background:

Millions of American families are stuck at home because of COVID-19, and reliable, high-speed broadband access is necessary for folks to continue to study, work, and obtain critical health services. For the 30 million Americans out of work, broadband is often required to access unemployment insurance and other federal benefits, find jobs, and rejoin the workforce. It is clear that every American must have access to reliable, high-quality broadband during this pandemic. Yet for too many in rural and low-income communities — which disproportionately include Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) — affordability remains a major hurdle to getting online and bridging this country's digital divide. The Emergency Broadband Connections Act would break down this barrier by ensuring this critically-important service is offered at free or reduced cost to low-income individuals or those who have recently been laid off or furloughed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

What the Bill Does:

The Emergency Broadband Connections Act would create an Emergency Benefit for Broadband Service to provide free or low-cost broadband service to low-income families or those who have been recently laid off or furloughed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, enhance the FCC's existing Lifeline subsidy program for qualified low-income Americans, and help the states improve the National Lifeline Eligibility Verifier. Specifically, it would:

- Entitle households in which a member has been laid off or furloughed to a \$50 benefit (or \$75 on tribal lands) to put toward the monthly price of internet service and require ISPs to serve eligible households at a price reduced by an amount up to the emergency benefit;
- Trigger eligibility based on qualification for the Lifeline program, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), or Federal Pell Grants;
- Provide devices such as laptop or desktop computers or tablets to eligible households to ensure these families have the devices they need to look for a job, complete online homework assignments, or receive telehealth service;
- Require Lifeline service providers to make unlimited minutes and data available to those that currently rely on the Lifeline program to stay connected to phone or internet service, and provide additional support; and
- Provide funding to states to facilitate the linking of their SNAP databases with the FCC's National Lifeline Verifier database, which will allow recipients of that program to automatically qualify for Lifeline.

Support: Access Now; American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU); Asians Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC; Breakthrough Central Texas; Center for Democracy and Technology (CDT); Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP); Center for Rural Strategies; Citizens for Educational Excellence; Chemeketa Community College; Child Welfare League of America (CWLA); Coastal Compass Education and Career Resource Center; Common Cause; Communications

Workers of America (CWA); Consumer Reports; ED2WORK; EDUCAUSE; Education to Employment Partners; Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF); Engine; Free Press Action; Gigi Sohn, Distinguished Fellow at the Georgetown Law Institute for Technology Law and Policy, Benton Institute for Broadband & Society Senior Fellow and Public Advocate; Greater Spokane Inc. (GSI); Higher Learning Advocates; Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice; Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP); Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights; LeadMN - College Students Connecting for Change; NAACP; Nashville State Community College Foundation; National Association of College and University Business Officers; National Center for Learning Disabilities; National Consumer Law Center (NCLC); National Hispanic Media Coalition (NHMC); New America; Northwestern Health Sciences University; Open Technology Institute (OTI); Oregon Alliance of Independent Colleges & Universities; Public Knowledge; Rebuilding America's Middle Class (RAMC); Reed College; Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (RVCC); Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC); State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO); The Graduate! Network; United Church of Christ, OC Inc.; and Young Invincibles.

Key provisions of the legislation are included in the HEROES Act, which passed the House of Representatives in May. Rep. Veasey (TX-33) has introduced companion legislation in the House.