

## **Building Stronger Communities Through Budget Reconciliation**

### **Congress Must Promote Help Low-Income Consumers Get a Device To Connect**

Barriers to broadband affordability go beyond the monthly service price. Owning a computer, laptop or tablet is essential to using the service and too many families just cannot afford these devices. Across the country, approximately [14 million households](#) don't have a computer, and more than 6.5 million households have only a smartphone (which isn't suitable for remote schooling or work). Many more households, including [32% of Latinx families](#) home-schooling during the pandemic, do not have enough computers or tablets, forcing families to make difficult decisions about who gets access to complete vital online activities -- and who doesn't. That's why:

- Congress should create a \$5 billion **voucher program** to support low-income individuals in purchasing a **computer or tablet** directly from a retail outlet or refurbisher. This program should ensure that eligibility is on an individual basis so family members can connect simultaneously.
- Congress has previously provided funding for families to purchase devices so they could continue to receive television signals in their homes and this program can build on the lessons learned from that effort.

### **Congress Must Ensure That All Eligible Consumers can Easily Enroll in Broadband Subsidies**

Ensuring that those who are eligible for the broadband support Congress has provided to low-income families requires outreach and an enrollment system that does not include unnecessary barriers. Broadband affordability is the leading reason people cite for not connecting at home, with [30 million](#) households not subscribing to broadband when it is available, [including](#) 29% of rural homes and 28% of non-rural homes. Congress and the FCC have sought to solve the affordability barrier by providing a subsidy through the Emergency Broadband Benefit and Lifeline programs. However, just a fraction of eligible consumers have enrolled (for example, [only 19%](#) of eligible Lifeline households are enrolled). In order to get eligible consumers enrolled in these programs, Congress should:

- Authorize funding for **advertising the availability** of these subsidies to eligible consumers, and funding for the **FCC** and **Digital Navigators** at community-based organizations to help eligible consumers enroll.
- Require relevant state, federal and tribal agencies to enter into data matching agreements with the Universal Service Administrative Company and clarify that doing so will not violate privacy laws to enable **automatic verification** of eligibility. [Studies show](#) approximately 2/3 of consumers who can't be automatically verified abandon their applications and never enroll.

### **Congress Must Promote Network Resiliency**

Consumers and businesses expect a reliable communications network. In fact, our economy and often our very lives depend on it, as when natural disasters strike. Unfortunately, our nation's networks experience frequent outages, with more than [18,000 wireless network outages](#) reported to the FCC from 2009-2016. Because of poor reporting, this figure likely undercounts the true number of outages. To ensure that all Americans can access communications networks when they need them most, Congress must:

- Require the FCC to collect **granular network performance and outage information**
- Fund **network upgrades** that promote reliability and 72-hour **on site backup power**.

## **Congress Must Act to Save the Free Press and Build It Back Better for All Americans**

Over the past few decades, newsroom employment in the United States has [dropped by 26%](#), a loss of 30,000 jobs. [News deserts and “ghost newspapers”](#) litter the country, and the information vacuum has been filled by partisan hyperbole and harmful disinformation on social media. [Studies show](#) that citizens without access to local journalism feel less of a sense of cohesion and community, vote less, are less informed, are less likely to run for office, and experience higher local government corruption and corporate malfeasance in their communities.

Congress should adopt the tax credit proposals that make up the [Local Journalism Sustainability Act](#), which now has sponsorship in the Senate and bipartisan sponsorship in the House. The bills provide:

- A five-year tax credit of up to \$250 annually to encourage Americans to subscribe to local newspapers or donate to local nonprofit news publishers.
- A five-year tax credit of up to \$25,000 per journalist (in the first year, \$15,000 thereafter) to provide local newsrooms the ability to retain and hire more journalists.
- A five-year tax credit of up to \$5,000 (in the first year, \$2,500 thereafter) to encourage small, local businesses to advertise in local news.

Public Knowledge would encourage lawmakers to include language defining eligibility to ensure credits go to diverse media organizations and not only legacy news organizations, which have sustained if not furthered the marginalization of communities of color.