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Progress being made on digital inequity — but more needed

In addition to devices, users also need training on how to use them

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THE COVID-19 pandemic brought education to computers and tablets, business to online marketplaces, and social activity to Zoom – all while bringing deep, systemic digital inequity fully to light. As education, jobs, and critical services moved increasingly online over the last two years, serious and persistent gaps in who has access to the internet, connected devices, and digital skills have become glaringly apparent.

Data from the ACLU show that today in Massachusetts, more than 500,000 residents either do not have a computer or access to the internet. Over a million residents don't have a fixed broadband internet connection. And even when devices and the internet are available, tens of thousands of people in Massachusetts still lack the digital skills they need to easily attend school, find employment, connect with loved ones, and participate in other essential activities online. These barriers disproportionately impact low-income communities, communities of color, immigrants, seniors, and people living with disabilities – deepening systemic inequities in education, health, and economic opportunity.

But the truth is that digital inequity isn't new, and policymakers, advocates, and community-based organizations have been working together to address the challenge for decades. Right now, in the context of COVID-19, we have a unique opportunity to create more robust funding streams and advance comprehensive, inclusive solutions that result in closing the digital divide once and for all.

Federal attention to digital inequity issues goes all the way back to the creation of the E-Rate program in 1996, which has since invested more than $54 billion nationwide to connect our physical schools and libraries to the internet, including nearly $770 million in Massachusetts. When the coronavirus pandemic began, we fought to expand the E-Rate to provide internet connectivity and devices to students who were now learning at home. These efforts resulted in the March 2020 American Rescue Plan including a new Emergency Connectivity Fund, which is now providing more than $7 billion in E-Rate home connectivity funding across the country. To date, the Emergency Connectivity Fund has delivered more than $63 million to Massachusetts during the pandemic to help students, families, and other school community members get online. In Boston, Mayor Michelle Wu has announced a $12 million investment to bring digital equity and inclusion to nearly 23,000 Boston public housing residents, library users, and school-age families.

But we know this emergency funding won't last forever, and that's why we're advocating for additional legislation like the *Securing Universal Communications Connectivity to Ensure Students Succeed (SUCCESS) Act*, which would provide schools and libraries with $8 billion a year over five years – for a total of $40 billion – to continue to connect students to the internet and to digital opportunities well after the coronavirus pandemic. We're committed to advancing permanent and sustainable funding for digital equity.

Hand-in-hand with the critical need for these government programs is the vital importance of supporting community-led resources and programs that address all three legs of the digital inequity stool – internet, devices, and the skills to use those tools. We must ensure that once we get devices into the hands of our community members, they have the training, skills, and support to be connected to an increasingly online society and economy.

The solutions to persistent digital inequity must be thoughtful and co-created in deep partnership with the individuals and communities that are most impacted. We've seen the impact of community-based approaches firsthand – in 2021, thousands of learners who participated in the Tech Goes Home program, which combines access to the internet and devices with digital skills training and is tailored specifically by community-based partners to the needs of the people they serve, reported using newfound access to communicate via email, access telehealth, participate in online learning, and more. Expanding and sustaining this impact starts with delivering critical resources, and then, working with people and organizations on the ground, who've built deep trust and relationships in the community, to meet individuals and families where they are.

That's why it's critical that policymakers, advocates, and community-based organizations continue to work closely together and are intentional about seeking out and uplifting the voices of students, workers, elders, and others in our community who are still grappling with digital inequity.

Working together, we've made important progress – delivering billions of dollars and identifying effective strategies for narrowing the digital divide. Our priority now, when the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened existing gaps and drawn unprecedented attention to issues of digital inequity, is to seize this moment to expand effective, community-level efforts to connect individuals and families with the internet services, devices, and digital skills they need to fully participate in our increasingly online world.

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