

MY TURN


COMMENTARY

EDUCATION

Bridge the digital divide with action on creating access to broadband for all

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By Martha M. Escutia, Special to CalMatters

The headlines underscore the massive challenges ahead of us: 1 in 5 California students lack computers and Wi-Fi. Coronavirus exposes L.A.'s economic and racial digital divide. Depression-era jobless rates loom.

None of us could have imagined when the governor laid out his visionary [Broadband for All](#) initiative in November how quickly we would be confronted with the stark reality that millions of Californians remain on the wrong side of the Digital Divide. This is the time

to act to create a fully digital state capable of educating our children, delivering health care and providing a pathway to economic recovery for all. For broadband access delayed is access denied.



Statewide, 12% of California households have no access to the internet and another 10% only have access with a mobile phone. While mobile phones are helpful, they are inadequate for distance learning, medical diagnoses and work from home. I have worked on [digital equity](#) issues for more than two decades, first as a leader in the state Assembly and Senate and now a director of the [California Emerging Technology Fund](#), a nonprofit created by the California Public Utilities Commission to close the digital divide.

Here's what we need to do to mobilize existing resources immediately, proposals that do not depend on the state's general fund but can jumpstart long overdue investments and future-proof California for emergencies to come.

Extend Legislative authorization for the California Public Utilities Commission to raise up to an additional \$500 million beginning in 2023 from a surcharge on revenues collected by telecommunications carriers, designated for building and upgrading networks in low-income urban and rural areas. Rules must be revised so the California Advanced Services Fund can be used to connect anchor institutions, including schools, universities, hospitals and assisted living/nursing home facilities, along main transmission lines and include fiber middle-mile and last-mile connections to unserved households. As we've learned, anchor institutions are lifelines in crises.

Incorporate broadband infrastructure into transportation projects with a consistent use of "dig once" for all major infrastructure systems. Caltrans oversees 50,000 miles of highway - as large as the entire U.S. Interstate network - and this presents a large opportunity to deploy broadband infrastructure during transportation construction.

Empower public agencies and schools to integrate digital equity strategies into their programs. In a time of financial woe, we must creatively leverage resources to directly address the threats to access and economic recovery. The Legislature should direct the California Department of Education in consultation with County Offices of Education to inventory the needs of computing devices and bandwidth for students and get health care agencies and providers to survey telehealth gaps.

Work for sustainable connections. Students in 900,000 households statewide without internet connectivity are expected to participate in distance learning. There is little awareness of available discount internet services for as low as \$10-\$23 a month for low-income households.

Broadband adoption is most effective when communicated by trustworthy messengers in touch with low-income households. State agencies and school districts should include affordable offer information in their outreach to those who qualify for the National School Lunch Program; CalFresh; Covered California; Complete Count Census; and CARE-ESA (energy-related subsidies).

I applaud the 11 big-city mayors - Los Angeles, San Jose, San Francisco, Sacramento, Fresno, Oakland, Long Beach, Santa Ana, Anaheim, Stockton and Riverside - who sent a letter to California internet service providers requesting that they extend free internet to qualified households until at least July 31, 2020, expand eligibility and remove barriers to involvement.

Important public and private initiatives are underway to make broadband ubiquitous in California. Success requires sustained focus and direction from the state Legislature and our government leaders. COVID-19 shines a harsh spotlight on California's lack of digital equity - and we need action now.

Former state Sen. Martha M. Escutia is vice president of Government Relations at the University of Southern California and a member of the board of the California Emerging Technology Fund, Escutia@usc.edu. She wrote this commentary for CalMatters.

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