



Legislature has to close digital divide, address inequities due to lack of internet access

BY BETTY YEE AND SUNNE WRIGHT MCPEAK *SPECIAL TO THE SACRAMENTO BEE*
AUGUST 20, 2020 05:00 AM , UPDATED 1 HOUR 44 MINUTES AGO



Even as millions of Californians use cutting-edge technology to manage the challenges brought on by COVID-19, more than 20% of us live in impoverished or remote areas that are [unconnected or under-connected](#) to the Internet.

For many of our neighbors, this means education, jobs, banking and health care are not accessible. To this, we say: shame on us.

In this fifth-largest economy in the world — home to innovators, inventors and investors setting the pace across multiple global sectors — the digital divide highlights a dangerous inequity that has haunted us long enough. It is a daunting obstacle in both rural and urban communities, for seniors on fixed incomes and for children with parents surviving on minimum wage or less.

California's current bandwidth and infrastructure is lacking, especially when it comes to accommodating the millions of school children who will continue distance learning for the foreseeable future and the many adults who need connectivity to perform their jobs remotely.

A shocking 35% of low-income U.S. households with children in Kindergarten through 12th grade [do not have access to broadband](#). In California, an estimated [one in five students lack access](#). Linda Darling-Hammond of the State Board of Education and the Learning Policy Institute has called out [closing the digital divide](#) as the number one policy priority for states in the "COVID 2.0 era," urging us all to think of school differently and equitably.



[Redacted text]

[Redacted text]

OPINION From kids who are falling behind in school to adults who cannot get timely health care, the lack of computers and Internet access is causing devastating ripple effects in the pandemic. Nationally, 73% of low-income elders [have no broadband](#) at home, compared with 13% of households earning \$75,000 or more annually.

Telemedicine certainly is helping improve physical and mental health care access and delivery, particularly in rural communities where the availability of both physicians and hospitals are dwindling. Yet for every Californian who has spotty or no Internet access, their physical and mental health is further at risk — as is the health of everyone around them.

The urgency to close the digital divide has never been more obvious, or more dire. Fortunately, systemic change is within the grasp of regulators and policymakers if they seize the moment. We recommend three critical actions that could immediately improve this situation.

First, Internet Service Providers must extend interim free offers, remove barriers to low-income households and increase advertising through CalFresh, Covered California and other safety-net programs. While ISPs have stepped up in response to the pandemic, many eligible Californians are not aware they qualify for assistance. ISPs also must stop the unacceptable policy of requiring existing customers who qualify for reduced-cost plans to drop their existing Internet service for 30 to 90 days before switching.

Local news has never been more important

Subscribe for unlimited digital access to the news that matters to your community.

#READLOCAL

Second, the Legislature must target funding, accelerate permitting and streamline reforms by passing Assembly Bill 570 by Assemblymember Cecilia Aguiar-Curry (D-Winters) as an urgency measure currently moving through the legislative process. AB 570 would expand the California Advanced Services Fund (CASF) to build infrastructure and establish a nonprofit health provider to optimize the delivery of telehealth to rural and urban medically underserved communities.

Third, the Legislature must push the California Public Utilities Commission to expedite its funding approval process for the CASF, particularly for underserved communities. With targeted funding from future revenues added to the CASF, infrastructure build outs could be accelerated with the issuance of revenue bonds. Though this action would not deliver immediate relief to consumers, it is an innovative way to jump-start the state's economic recovery.

Imagine the imbalances that could be addressed in meaningful ways by achieving digital equity once and for all, giving everyone a chance to thrive. Californians need not live with this shame any longer. Solutions are within reach, but swift action is needed before the Legislature recesses for the year at the end of August.

There is a way. Is there the will?

Betty Yee is the Controller and chief fiscal officer for the State of California and is responsible for accountability and disbursement of the state's financial resources. Sunne Wright McPeak is President and CEO of the California Emerging Tech.



RELATED STORIES FROM

EDITORIALS

AB 979 would put people of color on corporate boards in California. It deserves support

AUGUST 19, 2020 5:00 AM

Sacramento County must stop Capital Christian School's coronavirus 'day care' stunt

AUGUST 18, 2020 5:00 AM

EDITORIALS

Facing harassment and intimidation claims, does Elk Grove's mayor need a third term?

AUGUST 18, 2020 5:00 AM

CAPITOL-ALERT

California teacher unions won the fight over closing schools. What else do they want?

AUGUST 14, 2020 5:00 AM



Sacramento officials are sending Regional Transit buses equipped with Wi-Fi internet to neighborhoods with low access to internet to help students keep up in school amid coronavirus. *SACRAMENTO REGIONAL TRANSIT*

COMMENTS