

DAILY REPUBLIC

Commentary: Bill a way to close digital divide

By Lori Wilson and Debbie Toth
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The Affordable Internet and Net Equality Act of 2024 (AB1588) was introduced by Assemblywoman Lori Wilson last year and sponsored by the California Emerging Technology Fund to ensure that all low-income households have the opportunity to subscribe to home Internet service at an affordable cost.

It will require that all Internet service providers offer their own affordable home Internet subscription as well as participate in and promote the federal Affordable Connectivity Program. AB1588 also sets standards for quality of service in those ISP affordable offers.

This is a common-sense idea. The Affordable Internet and Net Equality Act depends on the sound principles of contract law. It is the companion to “Net Neutrality” adopted by the Legislature in 2018. Surely, “net equality” for the 5.8 million low-income digitally-disadvantaged residents is as important as “net neutrality.”

Further, shouldn't ISPs paid with taxpayer or ratepayer dollars be required to help California meet its official goal of closing the digital divide?

Wilson and CETF are to be commended for their trailblazing policy and courageous leadership because AB1588 is fiercely opposed by the Internet Service Providers (ISPs).

More than 50 community and consumer organizations have endorsed AB1588 — the only opposition is three industry groups. Yet, that imbalance of power caused the chair of the Assembly Communications and Conveyance Committee to try to gut the bill last year.

Fortunately, Wilson didn't cave and the Legislature has another opportunity in 2024 to live up to the state's commitment to digital equity. Gov. Newsom also can once again be a digital-equity policy pioneer by including the provisions of the Affordable Internet and Net Equality Act in his state budget.

AB1588 is not only needed to achieve digital equity, but it also will keep the ISPs from kicking 3 million California households and more than 55,000 families in Solano and Contra Costa Counties off of ACP should the federal government not continue the program.

Today, there are almost 200,000 low-income households in Solano and Contra Costa Counties eligible for affordable home Internet service — including many aging residents who need Internet access to remain independent, able to access essential health and medical services, and connected to their loved ones.

Importantly, we saw during the pandemic that elders can and do use technology when given the opportunity, which prevents social isolation – one of the leading causes of health deterioration in older adults.

The Internet is vital to giving all of us “choice in aging” so that we have the best possible quality of life.

We urge all Legislators and the governor to make the Affordable Internet and Net Equality Act the law of the land in California. Net Equality cannot be achieved as promised by our State Elected Officials without it.

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