2021
POLICY
ROADMAP

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SHLB
SCHOOLS, HEALTH & LIBRARIES
BROADBAND COALITION

The Schools, Health & Libraries Broadband Coalition
Promoting Open, Affordable, High-Quality Broadband for Anchor Institutions and Their Communities

As we begin 2021, the United States still grapples with the inequities laid bare by the coronavirus pandemic – especially the ever-present digital divide. The SHLB Coalition promotes open, affordable, high-quality broadband for anchor institutions and their communities because these institutions are key to connecting the estimated 42 million Americans without internet access.

Community Anchor Institution (CAI): A nonprofit community organization such as a school, library, hospital, health clinic, community center, higher education institution, public housing, house of worship etc. that needs high-capacity broadband and facilitates greater use of broadband by vulnerable populations, including low-income, the unemployed, and the aged.

CAIs deserve a prominent place in the nation's broadband policy framework because of their critical role in providing education, healthcare, research, and access to information. SHLB encourages the deployment of broadband networks "to and through" anchor institutions to reach surrounding residential communities.

To advance our mission and close the digital divide, SHLB has identified the following policy priorities for 2021.[1]

#1 Increase affordable broadband access and adoption through anchor institutions.

CAIs provide their communities with education, healthcare, information resources, and more. Many of these services are now available online – but only to digitally-literate residents with broadband and devices at home. Anchor institutions can help families take advantage of free and low-cost broadband programs, while also providing access to computers and digital literacy training. The SHLB Coalition strongly supports increasing affordable broadband access and adoption for all individuals and families, including through the following programs:

- The emergency broadband benefit program enacted by Congress in the December 2020 COVID-19 relief legislation.
- The Lifeline program administered by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).
- Private sector programs that offer discounted broadband services to low-income consumers.
- The Digital Equity Act, legislation that would allow CAIs and other community-based organizations to provide digital literacy training and low-cost devices.

[1] These topics are not in order of priority and are not exclusive.

#2 Develop more accurate and granular broadband mapping data that includes anchor institutions.

It is vital that the U.S. provide accurate and granular maps to target resources to areas most in need. Unfortunately, the FCC's existing broadband maps are flawed in that they overstate broadband availability, lack pricing information, and rely too heavily on industry-provided data. Furthermore, the maps do not contain data about CAI broadband. The Broadband Data Act enacted in 2020 directs the FCC to improve its broadband maps. Consequently, SHLB will pursue the following policy changes to the FCC's broadband maps in 2021:

- Maps should include all serviceable locations, including schools, libraries, healthcare providers, higher education institutions, public housing, community centers, and other CAIs.
- Maps should assess broadband market competition by listing the different types of broadband service available, such as fiber, wireless, or satellite, as well as the number of providers available to serve a given region.
- Maps should include pricing information to promote affordable broadband service for all.

#3 Strengthen the E-rate program.

The E-rate program has been extremely valuable since its inception in 1997 and especially since the 2014 FCC reforms that provided greater funding opportunities for internal connections (Category Two) and fiber deployment. Over 95 percent of schools can access fiber and are receiving lower prices than 7 years ago, according to EducationSuperHighway. The demand for E-rate support has stabilized well below the $4 billion cap, in part due to the 2014 reforms. Nonetheless, the program would benefit from several policy changes that SHLB will pursue in 2021:

- Expedite and streamline E-rate application processing by updating forms and enabling more accurate funding decisions.
- Expand the list of eligible services to include Wi-Fi on school buses and cybersecurity.
- Permit non-instructional facilities to receive Category Two funding.
- Allow the E-rate program to facilitate remote learning at home and other off-campus locations.

#4 Increase funding and improve administration of the FCC's Rural Health Care program.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the urgent need to strengthen the FCC's underfunded Rural Health Care (RHC) program. The spike in telemedicine demands more bandwidth for healthcare providers, and the RHC program's $605 million cap is not sufficient. SHLB analysis suggests that the RHC program needs $2 billion in additional funding each year to ensure that all healthcare providers have the connectivity they need.

As such, SHLB will pursue the following policy changes to support healthcare in 2021:

- Add $2 billion in yearly funding for the RHC program, potentially through legislation such as the "Healthcare Broadband Expansion During COVID-19 Act."
- Streamline the Universal Service Administrative Company's (USAC) application review process to reduce the delays and inefficiencies that burden RHC applicants.
- Ensure that the FCC administers the $250 million COVID-19 Telehealth Program efficiently and with greater transparency.

#5 Include higher education in broadband access initiatives.

Higher education students need affordable broadband access at home just as much as K-12 students. Yet much of the discourse around student broadband access neglects colleges and universities. In 2021, SHLB will take the following steps to address the digital divide for higher education students:

- Work with policymakers to implement the December 2020 COVID-19 relief legislation that provides funding to connect recipients of Pell grants and minority-serving institutions and their surrounding communities.
- Promote policies that leverage the expertise of research and education networks, which meet the unique scholarship needs of higher education with purpose-built high-capacity network infrastructure and technology solutions.

#6 Reform the USF funding mechanism.

The Universal Service Fund (USF) contribution percentage jumped from 21.2 percent in the first quarter of 2020 to 31.8 percent in the first quarter of 2021, an unprecedented increase. The contribution factor's rapid growth and quarterly fluctuation create uncertainty for contributors, burden lower-income Americans who subscribe to basic telephone service, and distort the market. The shrinking base of basic telecommunications revenues, which causes the funding percentage to rise, puts all four USF programs at risk. In 2021, SHLB will continue convening stakeholders to explore alternative funding mechanisms with the goal of developing a consensus proposal to present to Congress and the FCC in 2021.

#7 Promote greater spectrum availability for anchor institutions.

The exciting technology advances in mobile and fixed wireless services provide rich avenues for schools, libraries, and other anchors to connect their communities in new and innovative ways. In 2021, the SHLB Coalition will continue to pursue greater licensed and unlicensed spectrum availability for CAIs in the following ways:

- Support the rollout of Citizens Broadband Radio Service (CBRS) spectrum.
- Promote access to unlicensed TV White Spaces spectrum and 6 GHz Wi-Fi spectrum.
- Explore how 12 GHz spectrum can benefit CAIs while encouraging the growth of new satellite services.
- Develop a 5G policy to serve the needs of anchor institutions.

#8   Streamline pole attachments and rights-of-way processes.

The price of accessing poles and rights-of-way can often make up one-third of an entire network build cost. Reducing such fees and expediting the permitting process can positively change the economics of deploying broadband to unserved areas. At the same time, we respect the rights of localities to administer these assets. SHLB will explore how to facilitate greater understanding of these rules, as well as solutions to help broadband providers and local officials collaborate to promote greater investment in high-quality broadband networks across the country.

#9   Strengthen broadband infrastructure through anchor institutions.

Last year, the U.S. House passed the "Accessible, Affordable Internet for All Act," comprehensive broadband infrastructure legislation that would appropriate $100 billion for broadband build out and for digital equity. At SHLB's request, the bill included funding to bring gigabit capacity to every CAI – an overdue effort to achieve Goal #4 of the National Broadband Plan. The legislation's open-access approach also promoted deployment of broadband networks "to and through" CAIs. SHLB encourages the 117th Congress to re-introduce the "Internet for All Act," or to propose a similar package that does the following:

- Recognizes that anchor institutions can serve as the cornerstones of any broadband build effort by ensuring that they can acquire gigabit connectivity.
- Takes a technology-neutral approach that enables anchor institutions to access both wired and wireless technologies.
- Grants broadband funding eligibility to any broadband provider, including nonprofits, research and education networks, and CAIs themselves.
- Allows local communities to choose their own technologies and providers.
- Promotes deployment of middle-mile broadband infrastructure that is open to interconnection and shared use to promote last mile build-out.
- Encourages partnerships with private sector providers to ensure CAIs, businesses, and households in underserved areas can access robust and affordable broadband service.

About SHLB

The SHLB Coalition is a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) advocacy organization that supports open, affordable, high-quality broadband connections for anchor institutions and their surrounding communities. The SHLB Coalition is based in Washington, D.C. and has a diverse membership of commercial and non-commercial organizations from across the United States. To learn more, visit www.shlb.org.

The SHLB Coalition is grateful to our over 200 members and to our corporate sponsors: