2023
POLICY
ROADMAP

SHLB
SCHOOLS, HEALTH & LIBRARIES
BROADBAND COALITION

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

Policy Roadmap

The Schools, Health & Libraries Broadband (SHLB) Coalition promotes open, affordable, high-quality broadband for community anchor institutions and their communities. To advance its mission and promote strategies to help close the digital divide, SHLB issues a policy roadmap each year to outline opportunities to advocate for anchor institutions at the Federal and State level. While the priorities highlighted in this roadmap serve as guideposts, SHLB remains flexible in its efforts and adapts to the dynamic policy landscape.

What is a CAI?

A Community Anchor Institution (CAI) is a nonprofit community organization such as a school, library, hospital, health clinic, community center, higher education institution, public housing facility, house of worship, or other community-based organization that promotes broadband deployment and adoption. CAIs often provide essential digital services for vulnerable populations including low-income residents, minority groups, students, the unemployed, and the aged.

Why Is Broadband Critical for CAIs?

CAIs deserve a prominent place in the nation's broadband policy framework. With digital resources, these institutions provide education, healthcare, research, and general information access to anyone visiting their facility. They are also increasingly connecting their patrons to services outside of the CAI building, such as helping a patient connect with his or her doctor online or connecting students and other learners with online educational material.

CAIs may also play a critical role in extending broadband network services beyond the institution's four walls. SHLB supports providing broadband "to and through" anchor institutions to the surrounding community. For instance: a school or library or community organization can place antennas on the roof to transmit low-cost (often free) wireless signals (using Wi-Fi, CBRS or TV White Spaces spectrum) to the surrounding homes and businesses. In 2022, SHLB and the Open Technology Institute of New America released an economic study by Dr. Raul Katz demonstrating the economic feasibility of extending wireless signals from the CAI to the home.

Additionally, CAIs often offer digital inclusion services such as device lending and digital navigation skills training. They are often viewed as trusted members of the community, providing a safe environment for those requiring assistance to advance their digital understanding and needs.

To continue their efforts, all anchor institutions need robust, multi-gigabit internet connectivity. The nation has made great progress over the last 13 years since the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) issued the National Broadband Plan in March of 2010, but we have not yet reached our goals. For instance, the National Broadband Plan called for CAIs to have gigabit connectivity by the year 2020, a target the nation did not meet. In fact, we do not even know how much progress we have made to connect CAIs because government agencies have not collected the data to determine the level of broadband available to them. As we look to connect the unserved and underserved in the next five years, we cannot lose sight of the valuable role CAIs have played (especially throughout the pandemic) in helping to connect those unserved and underserved households.

#1   Broadband Infrastructure

The Infrastructure, Investment, and Jobs Act (IIJA) passed by Congress in late 2021 provided an unprecedented $65 billion in funding for broadband, most of it for broadband infrastructure. The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) will allocate $42.5 billion to the states through the Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment (BEAD) Program.

The states will then award broadband grants to connect the unserved, underserved, and anchor institutions. We are pleased that the IIJA mentions CAIs twenty-nine times, and that the BEAD program specifically calls for anchor institutions to receive gigabit-capacity service. In addition, the IIJA provided funding to the Rural Utility Service (RUS) for the ReConnect program, $1 billion to NTIA for the Middle Mile program, and $2 billion to NTIA for Tribal broadband.

The SHLB Coalition is working with state broadband offices on anchor-related broadband needs as they plan for and implement these new infrastructure projects. We will also continue to discuss anchor-related issues and concerns with the NTIA, the FCC, the Treasury Department and Congress to ensure CAIs are fully eligible for broadband funding opportunities. For example, SHLB will:

- Engage with state broadband offices and other leaders regarding the role of CAIs under BEAD and digital equity projects, including funding those institutions that lack gigabit-level connectivity.
- Advocate for mapping the availability of broadband for CAIs on the FCC's National Broadband Map and maps generated individually by the states.
- Continue to promote long-lasting open access broadband infrastructure that is available for interconnection and shared use. SHLB believes these funding programs should adopt the approach of deploying broadband "to and through" anchor institutions to reach surrounding homes and businesses.
- Promote the success of the Capital Projects Fund (CPF) administered by the U.S. Treasury.

#2   Digital Equity

To bridge the digital divide, every American should have access to reliable and affordable high-speed broadband. To achieve true digital equity, however, every American must also have the resources to use it, including low-cost devices, tech support, and digital literacy training. Fortunately, Congress also recognized that ensuring access to broadband must include efforts that go beyond network deployment. The IIJA legislation specifically set aside $2.75 billion under the Digital Equity Act (DEA) to be administered by the NTIA for various digital equity programs.

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

CAIs like libraries, community centers, and schools are already champions of digital equity. They assist people with web-based research, offer training in digital literacy, conduct outreach to the community, and lend devices and equipment to students and other patrons. But they need funding and other resources to carry out these essential public services. With this in mind, SHLB will:

1. Support digital equity efforts at the local level, and highlight the amazing work CAIs do to connect all patrons in need. We believe that, if provided with the right resources, CAIs can provide the local leadership and expertise to build a strong "digital inclusion ecosystem" in every community.

2. Support digital equity efforts at the federal level for marginalized groups, including long-term funding solutions to maintain the Affordable Connectivity Program, which provides subsidies to bring down the cost of broadband access to people in need.

3. Advocate for the smart implementation and planning of digital inclusion work by participating in the NTIA's Digital Equity Act comment proceeding.

4. Support passage of the Digital Equity Foundation Act, which would establish a trust fund to promote long-term digital equity.

#3 E-rate and Emergency Connectivity Fund Programs

The E-rate program continues to provide valuable federal financial support so that schools and libraries can obtain low-cost, high-capacity broadband services. The FCC has adopted progressive reforms to the E-rate program since its inception. But there is more that can be done to ensure that E-rate embraces the most cost-efficient and innovative technologies. Accordingly, SHLB will:

1. Advocate to make cybersecurity products and services eligible under the E-rate program. In December of 2022, as SHLB and others requested, the FCC sought comment on whether and how to make cybersecurity an eligible expense. SHLB will urge the FCC to allow schools and libraries to incorporate cybersecurity needs into their 2024 E-rate funding year applications.

2. Advocate for E-rate support for Wi-Fi on school buses. By making E-rate funding available for school bus Wi-Fi, students that have long commutes to and from school (such as those in rural markets) will have an additional opportunity to do homework and enhance their learning.

3. Oppose the E-rate competitive bidding portal. The proposed federal E-rate competitive bidding portal would undermine local decision-making and impose unnecessary burdens on E-rate applicants.

4. Waive the E-rate cost allocation rule. Fiber networks connecting schools and libraries often have capacity available after school hours that could be used to provide backhaul for community broadband networks. But the E-rate rules discourage communities from tapping into this enormously valuable asset. Waiving the cost allocation rule would make it easier to deploy networks "to and through" the anchor institution and provide low-cost broadband service to communities in need.

Regarding the FCC's Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF), SHLB plans to:

1. Ask the FCC to extend the current service delivery dates for applications submitted in the first, second, and third filing windows to June 30, 2024.
2. Continue to advocate for long-term funding solutions to take the place of ECF after it expires in June of 2024.

#4 Rural Healthcare

The FCC's Rural Health Care (RHC) program provides needed financial support for reliable, robust broadband to serve patients in rural markets. The healthcare marketplace changed dramatically and permanently due to the COVID pandemic, and the RHC program needs systematic improvements to accommodate the surge in telemedicine. To address these concerns, and more, SHLB will:

1. Continue to advocate for improvements to the RHC program by holding regular meetings with USAC as well as meetings with the FCC.
2. File comments in the FCC's upcoming Promoting Telehealth and Telemedicine in Rural America proceeding.
3. Highlight developments in the healthcare industry related to telehealth best practices and the interplay of digital equity and cybersecurity considerations.

#5 Higher Education

Higher education is often at the forefront of developing innovative online technologies that enhance workforce development, research and education for all learners, including K-12, higher education, faculty and staff, and adult learners. The state-based research and education networks (RENs), which grew out of the higher ed community, specialize in providing a suite of technology services for anchor institutions. SHLB will continue to highlight the vitally important role that institutions of higher education and RENs play in the broadband ecosystem. SHLB will:

1. Continue to advocate for greater federal broadband funding for college students, such as the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP).
2. Support the Connecting Minority Communities (CMC) program by advocating for increased federal funding and encouraging HBCUs and other Minority-serving Institutions (MSIs) to collaborate and partner with other non-profit and commercial organizations.
3. Promote digital inclusion initiatives for learners of all ages and faculty, including promoting federal programs such as the Digital Equity Act. Highlight lessons learned from institutions of higher education and their community partners that help facilitate college student broadband inclusion and access.

4. Raise awareness of the critical and foundational work of Research and Education Networks (RENs) and Internet2 member institutions in serving higher education and other community anchor institutions. Ensure that RENs are eligible to participate in broadband funding programs such as the BEAD, Middle Mile, Tribal and Capital Projects Fund programs.

5. Encourage state broadband leaders to engage and collaborate with institutions of higher education to address the broadband needs of higher education learners. Institutions of higher education should be allowed to participate in a state's broadband advisory group, if one is established.

#6 Broadband Mapping

The Broadband DATA Act (DATA Act) passed by Congress in March of 2021 directs the FCC to publish a national broadband map to identify areas that need additional broadband funding. Unfortunately, the first version of the FCC's National Broadband Map (Map) issued in November 2022 effectively excludes most CAIs, which could mean that CAIs are not eligible to receive upgrades to gigabit connectivity. To help ensure that broadband availability at CAIs is adequately mapped, SHLB will:

1. Continue to meet with the FCC and Congressional leaders to find ways to include CAIs that purchase mass-market internet service on the Map.

2. Meet with the NTIA and encourage state broadband leaders to develop their own maps (including CAIs) so that they can challenge and correct the FCC's Map.

3. Encourage states to conduct an inventory of assets that includes CAIs to build connectivity to those lacking gigabit broadband service into their BEAD project planning.

#7 Pole Attachments

Broadband providers that attempt to deploy networks in rural markets often find that the costs of attaching to existing telephone or electric poles are excessively high, making the region uneconomic to serve. The FCC has made progress by adopting policies to promote one-touch-make-ready for wireline and wireless networks, but has not yet adopted guidelines to govern pole replacement costs. Adopting SHLB's proposed guidelines would reduce the costs and expedite the process of approving pole attachments or pole replacements to address this digital disparity. SHLB will:

1. Urge the FCC to issue an order in its current pole replacement proceeding to reduce costs and streamline application processing. SHLB has already filed comments with the FCC asking it to adopt pole attachment principles, fairly allocate pole replacement costs, and speed up the resolution of pole complaints.

2. Recommend that states implement a working group whereby various stakeholders can discuss deployment plans, investigate pole attachment issues, and resolve disputes under strict time limits.

| #8 | **Wireless and Spectrum** |

Because CAIs are both users and providers of wireless broadband services, SHLB will continue to promote rules that help CAIs take advantage of spectrum opportunities for both licensed (including both shared and exclusive) and unlicensed spectrum in 2023. Specifically, SHLB will:

1. Support Federal policies that promote competition and make more spectrum available for schools, higher education, libraries, and other anchor institutions.
2. Share the economic research by Dr. Raul Katz and case studies of wireless projects with Congressional policymakers and encourage them to embrace and strengthen funding support for "To and Through" broadband projects.
3. Encourage states to consider using CAIs as a catalyst for extending wireless broadband to the unserved and underserved populations of the surrounding community as they develop their state broadband plans.

| #9 | **The Universal Service Fund** |

The Universal Service Fund (USF) provides essential financial support for schools and libraries (E-rate), for Rural Health Care providers, for low-income consumers (Lifeline) and for broadband companies in rural and high-cost areas. This $9 billion annual program was created by Congress in the 1996 Telecommunications Act and is administered by the FCC and the Universal Service Administrative Company (USAC). Unfortunately, the entire USF is under duress in two ways.

First, the current funding mechanism (a fee on interstate/international phone services) has not been modernized in 25 years. Even though the USF supports the availability and affordability of broadband services, broadband services do not contribute to the Fund (the fee applies only to certain telecommunications services). Due to the decline in telecommunications services revenues, the fee has risen from 5% to over 30%, and is projected to go even higher. This funding mechanism is not sustainable. SHLB collaborated with other public interest and industry groups to create the USForward Coalition, which believes that the base of USF funding should be broadened to include broadband internet access service.

Second, a libertarian group has filed constitutional challenges to the USF funding mechanism in three different federal appeals courts. SHLB has intervened to oppose the three court challenges, arguing that Congress provided sufficient guidance to the FCC in section 254 of the Communications Act.

In 2023, SHLB plans to:

1. Work with our public interest and commercial allies and the USForward Coalition to convince Congress and the FCC to expand the contribution base, which would lower the fee to less than 4% and stabilize the Fund for the future.
2. Continue to participate in the appellate courts to uphold the constitutionality of the USF funding mechanism.
3. Work with SHLB Members and other allies to devise a legislative fix to continue the operation of the USF in case a federal appeals court finds the USF funding mechanism is unconstitutional.

About SHLB

The SHLB Coalition is a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) public interest 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 330 members and to our corporate sponsors:

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