

# Eliminate the Digital Divide Act

*Senator John Cornyn (TX) and Senator Joe Manchin (WV)*

A bill to empower States to carry out their own broadband programs and provide awards to broadband service providers to deploy broadband to unserved areas within their States and ensure low-income individuals have access to low-cost broadband services.

## The Digital Divide

- Internet access is critical in today's evermore digital economy, especially in the current social-distant COVID-19 climate. Connectivity issues span education, telemedicine and healthcare, agriculture, and other vital business sectors. The adoption of broadband in a community is correlated with increased economic development.<sup>1</sup>
- Unfortunately, according to a 2020 FCC report on broadband access, there are 18 million Americans without any broadband connectivity and another 25 million without adequate, reliable internet access.<sup>2</sup>
- Further, due to limited mapping capabilities and current practices, some reports estimate there are closer to 42 million to 162 million unserved Americans. The FCC estimates connecting all Americans could cost up to \$80 billion.<sup>3</sup>
- Many existing federal broadband programs are nationwide competitions for the lowest bid to reach the most individuals. This leaves many rural and high-cost areas behind. The **Eliminate the Digital Divide Act** would solve this by empowering Governors to reach high-cost, rural unserved citizens who have gone decades without access to reliable broadband.
  - Under the Eliminate the Digital Divide Act, the communities of Laredo or Longview, Texas, or those in Elkin, West Virginia are not competing against towns in other states for limited federal funding in an FCC controlled reverse auction which lends itself towards lower cost deployments over more costly (mountainous/forested) deployments.
- In Texas, more than 2 million residents are unable to access reliable internet services. This is exacerbated in rural areas, where 31 percent of rural Texans being left on the wrong side of the digital divide.<sup>4</sup>

## The Eliminate the Digital Divide Act would:

- **Address the Rural Digital Divide** by creating a \$10 billion State Broadband Program where governors receive funds based on the number unserved individuals in their state. Governors will partner with broadband service providers to build out networks to their unserved individuals.
  - State programs must be technology neutral, with streamlined requirements and regulations to enable both small and large broadband partners to apply.
  - States will partner with broadband entities to build in unserved areas within 3 years of receiving awards.
  - Encourages swift build out by accelerating access to poles and rights of way in a timely and cost-efficient manner.
- **Address the Urban/ Low-Income Digital Divide** by providing a platform for consumers to access information on the broadband options available to them.
  - Amends the Broadband DATA Act to require the FCC to also collect data from broadband service providers on any low-income service options offered to their subscribers.
  - The platform would provide consumers with the capability to enter their own financial information and see if they qualify for any state or federal subsidy programs (like Lifeline) and how to apply for that program.

The Eliminate the Digital Divide Act is supported by: Connected Nation

<sup>1</sup> <https://cardi.cals.cornell.edu/publications/research-policy-briefs/broadband%e2%80%99s-contribution-economic-health-rural-areas/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/FCC-20-50A1.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.fcc.gov/document/improving-nations-digital-infrastructure>

<sup>4</sup> <https://comptroller.texas.gov/economy/fiscal-notes/2019/oct/divide.php>