Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

June 1, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
United States House of Representatives
H-232, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
S-230, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
H-204, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
S-221, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Leader McCarthy, Leader McConnell, and Leader Schumer,

Thank you for your leadership to provide relief for Americans during the coronavirus pandemic. As you consider legislative priorities in any upcoming stimulus packages to address this public health crisis, we ask that you include robust measures to expand broadband access in underserved areas and make it affordable for all. According to the latest broadband deployment report from the U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC), 18 million Americans lack basic broadband internet access, and experts agree the true number is far higher. These unserved Americans disproportionately live in rural areas.

During this pandemic, unconnected Americans are at more of a disadvantage than ever. Many facilities that previously provided free internet access, such as libraries and schools, are now closed in many states, and students without this access are likely to fall behind their peers. Patients may have difficulty receiving the appropriate health care if they are unable to interact with their provider through remote video communication. Americans without an internet connection are also unable to access information provided online by federal, state, and local public health officials, increasing their vulnerability to the virus.

These compelling reasons for expanding affordable broadband access only scratch the surface of the urgency of the need to connect all Americans. We are proud of the work South Carolina has done to expand access thus far. We have supported federal investments through the FCC's Universal Service Fund and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Rural Utility Service to expand broadband infrastructure and adoption for unserved households, businesses, and community institutions. This includes over $27 million in recent grants through the USDA's ReConnect program to develop high-speed internet in rural areas in Orangeburg, Kershaw, Berkeley, and Charleston counties. These funds will bring critical access to thousands of households, from farmers needing to connect to new markets to students needing to engage in remote learning.

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We need to build on these past achievements and provide substantial investments to close this "digital divide" once and for all. These investments should fund responsible, future-proof infrastructure projects, such as Mid-Carolina Electric Cooperative's Carolina Connect program, which is deploying a fiber-optic broadband network to provide affordable and reliable service for their customers.

In pursuing the goal of affordable access to high-speed Internet nationwide, we are advocating for an innovative approach that addresses access, affordability, and adoption to help bridge the broadband gap as expeditiously as possible. This virus has created an added urgency in ensuring our citizens have the necessary resources needed to adapt to our current circumstances. We look forward to working with you and our colleagues to ensure that we provide internet access for all of America, during this pandemic and in the future. Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Rep. James E. Clyburn
Member of Congress

Rep. Joe Wilson
Member of Congress

Sen. Lindsey O. Graham
Member of Congress

Sen. Tim Scott
Member of Congress

Rep. Jeff Duncan
Member of Congress

Rep. Tom Rice
Member of Congress

Rep. Ralph Norman
Member of Congress

Rep. William Timmons
Member of Congress

Rep. Joe Cunningham
Member of Congress