

April 26, 2021

Dear Members of the House Energy and Technology and Senate Finance Committees:

AARP Vermont supports the affordability measures proposed in S.118. While Vermont has placed a great deal of focus on identifying locations where broadband is unavailable, there are many consumers who reside where broadband service is available but do not subscribe because they deem it unaffordable. Income is a highly predictive factor for broadband subscription.

Affordability is part of a broader digital equity and inclusion problem – it's important to ensure that low-income households can pay for broadband installation and monthly service charges, but they also need digital devices (computers) and digital literacy (an understanding of how to use computers to access the resources of the internet). If one hasn't had any access to computers or the internet, there's a learning curve just to identify what one doesn't know.

While the Emergency Broadband Benefit program (EBB program) will be available in the near term to help low-income consumers pay for broadband installation and monthly charges during the pandemic, it makes sense to focus on long-term supports for affordability and digital equity that this program doesn't cover (or fully cover). The EBB program:

- Does not cover digital literacy
- Does not directly address the risk of disconnection for accounts that accumulated large arrearages during the pandemic (although, going forward, support under the EBB program cannot be denied to accounts with unpaid balances)
- Is temporary, based on conditions that have arisen during the pandemic, though the underlying problems will not be expiring.

Consequently, AARP recommends prioritizing digital literacy and outreach, so that low-income consumers understand that programs are available to help them pay for broadband (and devices) and learn how to use their internet access effectively. Second, we recommend a fund to help low-income consumers with debt forgiveness related to broadband service charges deferred during the pandemic. In the longer term, affordability could be addressed by requiring providers to work out a payment plan with the consumer, something that Public Utility Commissions often require of traditional utilities.

The provision in S. 118 to establish and fund a Broadband Corps could also play an important role in plugging some of these gaps (as identified in the italicized text):

§ 8087. BROADBAND CORPS

- (a) The Authority shall establish a Broadband Corps to assist with infrastructure and service deployment, *perform outreach and direct technical support to Vermonters becoming familiar with their broadband connections and devices, and provide support for ensuring that Vermonters with low income can take advantage of broadband subsidies and other support programs.* In developing the Corps, the Authority shall seek opportunities for leveraging federal or private funding as well as national service programs such as the National Community Conservation Corps.

Another approach to support long-term affordability is some sort of regulatory mandate. This is the approach recently adopted in a law passed in New York that requires any Internet Service Provider (ISP) that operates in the state to offer a \$15/month plan to low-income households. Another example is a bill filed in Oregon which would prohibit government agencies from contracting with an ISP unless that ISP offers a low-income rate program.

Thank you for your work on this important matter.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Greg Marchildon". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Greg" being the most prominent part.

Greg Marchildon
State Director, AARP Vermont