Illinois Department of **Commerce** & Economic Opportunity

Office of Broadband

Federal Broadband Response to COVID-19
A Summary + Ideas for Immediate Action

April 2020 | DRAFT

FEDERAL BROADBAND EFFORT
THE COVID-19 CONTEXT

COVID-19 reality: Significant increase in broadband demand

- OpenVault, which tracks home internet usage, has reported "soaring" broadband consumption, with "actual usage up across the board, and by more than 40 percent during 9-to-5 business hours"

- Ookla shows a dip in the mean download speed over broadband in March

- Increased demand for more upload relative to download

- The FCC should be issuing a weekly broadband status report, updating America on what is working about our broadband networks and what, if anything, is not. https://undark.org/2020/03/30/covid-19-internet/

NOTE: Information compiled from Benton Institute on Broadband & Society; https://www.benton.org/

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INITIAL RESPONSE

Through April 2020, the federal response to COVID-19 included:

- Education: $13.5 billion for formula-grants to states, which will distribute funds to local educational agencies to use for coronavirus-response activities, including purchasing educational technology to support online learning

- Telehealth:
    - $200 million for the FCC to fund at-home telehealth programs for hospitals and health care providers
    - $180 million for the Department of Health and Human Services' Public Health and Social Services Emergency Fund to expand services and capacity for rural hospitals, including telehealth
    - Department of Veteran's Affairs allowed to enter into agreements with telecommunications companies to provide broadband for veterans in support of telehealth

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INITIAL RESPONSE

Through April 2020, the federal response to COVID-19 included:

- Infrastructure:
  - $100 million for additional grants under the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Rural Utility Service for its ReConnect Grant Program, which provides loans and **grants for the costs of construction** to provide broadband service in eligible rural areas
  - $25 million for the Distance Learning & Telemedicine Grant Program, which supports **rural communities' access to telecommunications-enabled information, audio, and video equipment**, as well as related advanced technologies for students, teachers, and medical professionals

- Libraries: $50 million for the **Institute of Museum and Library Services**, which can be used for grants to states, territories, and tribes to expand digital network access, purchase internet-accessible devices, and provide technical support services

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IDEAS FOR IMMEDIATE ACTION

Broadband Infrastructure / Access
- Federal Programs
- Matching Funds
- State Block Funding

Broadband Adoption
- Lifeline
- State Pilots

Broadband Utilization / Devices
- Telehealth
- Distance Learning & E-rate
- Telework

Broadband Policy
- Scalability, data caps, broadband defns, etc.
- E-Justice, e-Government, e-Democracy

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IDEAS: INFRASTRUCTURE + ACCESS

More Funding for Existing Federal Programs
- USDA ReConnect Grant Program
- USDA Distance Learning & Telemedicine Grant Program

New State Block Grant Pilot Funding
- For states with broadband offices and/or existing broadband grant programs
- To add value to state investment in scalable broadband
- For accelerated deployment & efficiency
  - State programs typically operate on significantly shorter timelines
  - State programs have been very effective, but tend to have limited resources
  - Block grant pilot program would extend critical access faster and explore a promising state-federal approach to fast-track broadband ubiquity

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IDEAS: INFRASTRUCTURE + ACCESS

- Authorize emergency funding from the Universal Service Fund for **hotspot lending programs** through schools, libraries, and community organizations

- Provide funding to support **free or low-cost broadband to students at home and wireless broadband deployment in areas where schools have closed**

- **Allow schools and libraries to extend their networks** to the home, without jeopardizing their E-rate funds

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IDEAS: AFFORDABILTY + ADOPTION

- **The Lifeline broadband program**
  - Administered by Federal Communication Commission
  - Current $10/month subsidy is too small to offset price of many programs

- An **emergency Lifeline broadband program**
  - $50/month to cover great share of subsidize robust speeds
  - Supported by 250+ public-minded groups

- Encourage internet service providers (ISPs) to **expand their low-cost broadband programs**
  - Require such programs of all ISPs receiving federal funding
  - Impose fees on those ISPs that do not

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IDEAS: UTILIZATION + DEVICES

- Education:
  - Additional formula-driven grants to states, which will distribute funds to local educational agencies to use for COVID-19 response activities, including purchasing **educational technology to support online learning**
  - USDA Distance Learning & Telemedicine Grant Program

- Telehealth:
  - Additional funding for at-home **telehealth** via hospitals and health care providers (FCC, etc.)
  - Additional funding for the Department of Health and Human Services' Public Health and Social Services Emergency Fund **to expand services and capacity for rural hospitals**, including telehealth

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RURAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES FUND

Petition for Reconsideration to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC):

- FCC should reconsider its decision to forego federal-state partnership on broadband deployment issues
  - Current FCC approach requires states to pause their programs or remove large swaths or unserved area from consideration for funding
  - Current FCC approach could fund projects that are not scalable, and that could fail to meet basic state broadband standards upon initial deployment
  - Current FCC approach does not attempt to forge state-federal broadband partnership necessary for funding efficiency and effectiveness

- FCC should reconsider its approach to the minimum performance tier and the eligibility of census blocks served with 25/3 Mbps broadband
  - The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting demand for distance learning and telehealth confirm that consumers need increased bandwidth, particularly increased upload speeds
  - Petition proposes that FCC immediately adopt a 50/5 Mbps baseline standard for initial RDOF deployment

https://ecfsapi.fcc.gov/file/1040985549845/Illinois%20Office%20of%20Broadband%20Petition%20for%20Recon%20(2020-04-09%20Final).pdft

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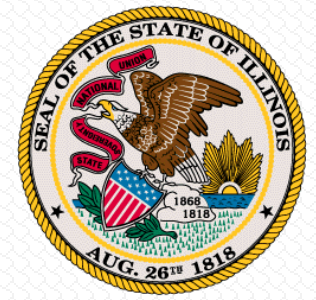## ADDITIONAL POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

1. Seek Congressional clarification that recognizes the tremendous effort states are putting forth on broadband access and direct federal agencies to provide support and partnership (e.g. RDOF).

2. Empower public health professionals to be part of the Lifeline network. Stakeholders such as social workers, home health workers, and WIC centers all work with populations that rely upon Lifeline.

3. Create a "Digital Americorp" as a 21st century CCC-style effort that coaches underrepresented populations, serves as classroom aides for K-12 teachers trying to adapt, engages vulnerable populations on telehealth, etc.

4. Determine if and to what extent the Small Business Administration is structured to be effective at helping small businesses make the transition to using online tools – to manage this crisis or the next.

5. Commission large studies that capture what we are learning from current efforts toward expanded telehealth, distance learning, and telework. Does public policy consider the burden on parents who are learning to telecommute at the same time they are trying to support distance learning for their young school-aged children? Does it consider that many households do not have a printer, let alone devices or basic broadband connectivity?

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