



**Statement of
Angela Siefer
Executive Director
of the National Digital Inclusion Alliance
Hearing Titled
“Ensuring Solutions to Meet America’s Broadband Needs”**

**before the Subcommittee on Communications, Media, and Broadband
Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
United States Senate**

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Chairman Luján, Ranking Member Thune and Members of the Subcommittee, it’s an honor and privilege to join you today to talk about how critical digital equity is to our nation’s future. Thank you for having me.

I’m Angela Siefer, the executive director of NDIA - the National Digital Inclusion Alliance. We are a nonprofit that advances digital equity by supporting community programs and equipping policymakers to act. We envision a country where everyone has the opportunity to use technology to live, learn, work, and thrive.

Digital inequities are not new. But the pandemic made them painfully clear. That clarity caused action.

Communities came together, scaled up existing digital inclusion programs, set up new programs, and took risks on innovative solutions. They are our country’s digital equity heroes. They would not have made such progress without the swift actions of Congress during the pandemic. Representing the digital equity community, I thank you.

Local digital equity efforts were strengthened with support from the CARES Act, ARPA, and the Consolidated Appropriations Act, particularly the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program and the Emergency Connectivity Fund. Then last year you passed the Bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which prioritizes digital equity in the BEAD Program and funds a historic \$2.75 billion for the Digital Equity Act, with an additional \$14.2 billion for the Affordable Connectivity Program. It’s an amazing step forward. NDIA and our community are working to make the most of these digital equity investments.

NDIA's community includes over 1,000 local organizations running digital inclusion programs, plus national advocates, researchers, and public servants. These are the folks guiding ACP sign-ups; providing appropriate devices; teaching digital skills; building digital equity coalitions; and offering digital equity advice to their states, territories, and the District of Columbia.

NDIA sits in a unique position – we facilitate the nation's largest digital equity community of practice, learning from these local experts, and relaying their lessons learned and community needs to policymakers. I am here to tell you – these heroes need you. The historic investment in digital equity is amazing but will not fully bridge the digital divide. As long as technology keeps changing, the work of bridging the digital divide will keep changing. There are many digital divides – the availability of affordable, robust broadband; the availability of affordable devices that meet user needs; and access to ongoing digital skills training and tech support in multiple languages.

What your historic investment in digital equity SHOULD do, and WILL do, is create systems-level change and strong local digital inclusion ecosystems that allow us to continually adapt as technology changes. We should call the investments a success when:

1. Government agencies integrate broadband adoption programming and device ownership into their programs.
2. Industries who benefit from their customers being online prioritize digital equity in their corporate giving and community partnerships.
3. Philanthropy prioritizes digital equity in their giving because it strengthens their missions.
4. Local digital inclusion ecosystems are so robust that when people can't get online for any reason, they can readily find the support and resources they need.

If all of that happens, we will still need federal support. Long-term solutions to bridge the digital divide require all hands on deck.

As of December 5, over 15 million households are enrolled in the Affordable Connectivity Program. Given that a year ago, rules for this program didn't exist, this is a monumental feat. We're thrilled that the FCC will soon fund outreach activities in trusted community-based organizations, who are already investing their own resources in raising awareness and deploying digital navigators to sit with their neighbors and guide them through ACP enrollment.

But unless Congress takes action, this vital program will go away in just a few short years. Internet service providers' low-cost programs are helpful, but they all have participation limitations. Representing the digital equity community today, I ask you for sustained funding for the Affordable Connectivity Program.

Most communities won't see affordable home internet service anytime soon. Long-term solutions include increasing the availability of middle mile. So, I ask you for additional funding to expand middle mile networks.

We also need sustained federal funding for digital navigator programs, digital skills training, broadband adoption, and devices (not just for students). Representing the digital equity community, I ask you to make the Digital Equity Foundation a reality. Funded by future spectrum auctions, this will provide a reliable long-term support mechanism with the ability to flex to new needs.

Another request – we sorely need a full FCC. They have a big job. Consider the new maps, the broadband consumer labels, ACP, ECF, and many other responsibilities. They cannot do this without Gigi Sohn. Representing the digital equity community, I urge the Senate to confirm her nomination before the holiday recess.

Finally, we need to increase the amount of digital equity funds dedicated to Tribes and territories. The needs in Indian Country and in the territories are great, and there are simply not enough funds in the Digital Equity Act to fully cover these needs.

As states, territories, DC, and Tribes embark on their BEAD and digital equity planning it will be important to tie the two plans together. We cannot work under the theory “build it and they will come.” Our strategies must be holistic, addressing broadband adoption while building networks, not after.

I know I'm asking for a lot. Access to the internet and the skills to use it are essential to not only survive but to thrive. And thriving is essential to America's promise, to the wellbeing of its people, and to the country's ability to compete globally.

Thank you for having me, and I welcome the Committee's comments and questions.