



JOEL ANDERSON

**SUPERVISOR, SECOND DISTRICT
SAN DIEGO COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS**

AGENDA ITEM

DATE: June 15, 2022

TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT

**EXPANDING ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE BROADBAND INTERNET SERVICE TO
LOW-INCOME AND TRIBAL CUSTOMERS (DISTRICTS: ALL)**

OVERVIEW

Federal, state and local governments have recognized the importance of bridging the nation's digital divide, recently committing unprecedented levels of funding to improve broadband internet access. Last year, the State of California launched a \$6 billion program to fund broadband internet infrastructure and programs. The federal government is providing \$65 billion for broadband programs through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act approved in November. County staff are currently working with consultants on the development of a comprehensive broadband plan, expected to be completed this summer.

The U.S. Department of Commerce launched its "Internet for All" initiative, committing more than \$42.5 billion for the new Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment (BEAD) program and setting aside \$14.2 billion for internet subsidies through the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP). The BEAD program will expand high-speed internet access by funding planning, infrastructure deployment and adoption programs throughout the nation. To access the minimum \$100 million level of BEAD funds, each state must first submit a letter of intent and a budget to the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration. The State of California has already submitted its letter of intent necessary to unlock these funds.

Twenty broadband internet providers recently committed to participating in the ACP which will provide monthly subsidies to low-income residents and households on tribal lands. The County provided funding to support and partner with the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) and 211 San Diego on the "Get Connected" campaign, an outreach effort to make residents aware of the discounts available through the ACP. The campaign began on June 1, 2022, with the introduction of a landing page and social media to direct interested residents to resources and 211 for more information. There is an opportunity for the County to expand its role by proactively notifying and educating additional eligible San Diego residents about the discounted internet service program through our frequent and varied interactions with community members.

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RECOMMENDATION(S)

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1. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to identify the most effective methods and County staff that should be involved in notifying our region's residents about the discounted broadband internet service opportunities available to them via the Affordable Connectivity Program.
2. Determine any additional costs related to the activities identified in Recommendation #1 and report back to the Board within 60 days with a plan to implement and fund the additional staff actions.

FISCAL IMPACT

There is no fiscal impact associated with today's actions. Additional appropriations or staff years will be requested in future Board meetings if needed based on any recommendations resulting from the recommendations included in this Board letter. There will be no change in net General Fund cost and no additional staff years.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

The digital divide between those in our communities who have reliable access to internet service and the underserved or unserved who cannot afford this service has a direct impact on the ability of individuals to have a meaningful level of participation in the 21st century economy. The results of this gap became more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic as remote communications required for employment, education, telehealth and other aspects of our daily lives were not available for a significant percentage of our region's residents, particularly for those with low-income levels and living in rural communities. County efforts to increase awareness about the availability of discounted broadband internet access will help to close the current gap and improve the lives of all San Diego residents.

BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT

San Diego businesses continue to struggle to fill vacant positions. Helping to connect more of our region's residents with affordable internet service could provide additional opportunities for potential employees to become aware of employment opportunities posted online, to allow them to participate in virtual job interviews both locally or for remote positions outside of our region, and to perform work virtually. Local internet service providers will be afforded an opportunity to introduce new customers to the services they offer and expand upon their current customer base.

ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT

N/A

BACKGROUND

Although it is commonly acknowledged that access to reliable and affordable high-speed internet is a necessity for our citizens to successfully participate in the 21st century economy, an estimated 30 million Americans do not have internet access. A study conducted during the pandemic by the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) showed that these access gaps also persist in San Diego, where many seniors, students and residents from several low-income communities

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cannot afford to connect. To begin addressing this challenge, the County partnered with SANDAG and the California Department of Transportation last year to provide up to \$1.4 million to help bridge the digital divide. These funds are being used to extend broadband infrastructure into underserved areas of the County where residents currently lack reliable internet service.

The U.S. Department of Commerce recently launched its new “Internet for All” initiative, to ensure universal internet access for all Americans by the end of the decade. This initiative will provide states with a minimum of \$100 million in funding to expand affordable internet access in our communities. To participate in this program, states and other eligible entities must first submit a letter of intent to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration. California is one of 34 states that submitted its letter of intent.

As part of the Administration’s initiative, \$14.2 billion was dedicated to the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), which provides internet service subsidies to low-income households. Under this program, eligible subscribers will receive monthly subsidies of \$30 (low-income customers) and \$75 (customers living on tribal lands) for high-speed internet service and a one-time discount of up to \$100 for a laptop, desktop computer, or tablet. Twenty internet providers have agreed to participate in this program. Those eligible to participate in the Affordable Connectivity Program, must have household incomes at or below 200% of the federal poverty level or have a member of the family participating in one of several assistance programs. These programs include: Medicaid; Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program; Federal Public Housing Assistance; Women, Infants and Children Program; Pell Grant tuition assistance; Veterans Pension and Survivors Benefit; Supplemental Security Income; Lifeline Program; and the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs.

The County provided funding to support and partner with SANDAG and 211 San Diego on the “Get Connected” campaign, which is an outreach effort to make residents aware of the discounts available through the ACP. The campaign began on June 1, 2022, with the introduction of a landing page and social media to direct interested residents to resources and 211 for more information. The campaign efforts are expected to be expanded later this summer.

Although those who currently enjoy access to internet services may quickly learn about this new opportunity to lower their internet service costs, it is more challenging to notify individuals without internet service about the Affordable Connectivity Program. Because County staff regularly communicate with the region’s residents through various channels and in-person contact, I am requesting Board support directing our County team to help assist in notifying our constituents of the internet service discounts now available to them.

Examples of the actions that County staff can explore using to notify residents about the Affordable Connectivity Program include:

- Health and Human Services Agency personnel, such as Self-Sufficiency, Housing and Community Development Services, Department of Homeless Solutions and Equitable Communities/Office of Equitable Communities, and Aging & Independence Services staff can provide information when individuals sign up for public benefits or other County programs

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- Information and materials can be distributed when staff and Live Well On Wheels vehicles are deployed to community outreach events, particularly in rural areas
- Offer information to older adults seeking services at County facilities such as Live Well Centers and Family Resource Centers
- Provide information at Senior Centers, and Parks and Recreation and Cool Zone partner facilities
- Amplify program information and eligibility criteria via the County's external communications mechanisms
- Partner with participating broadband internet service providers operating in our region
- Request that County contractors such as senior meal delivery services communicate program information to their customers
- Request that County and other jurisdictional emergency personnel be aware of and share the information
- Coordinate with local community groups and charitable organizations to share program information, including the 500+ *Live Well San Diego* partners that include community-based, faith, rural, education and business partners
- Partner with the region's schools and tribal nations to ensure they are aware of the program
- Include program details in available voting information materials provided to voters by the Registrar of Voters office

Any County outreach and education efforts and messaging about this program should also be tailored to ensure that individuals who use computers and tablets, as well as those who use only their cell phones to connect to the internet, receive the information relative to the type of service programs they need to connect. By proactively educating our constituents about these new affordable internet service opportunities, the County can continue to assist in closing the digital divide.

LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN

Today's proposed action supports the County's Equity Initiative by dismantling barriers to expanding opportunities in traditionally underserved communities and for low-income residents and advancing opportunities for economic growth and development to all individuals, regardless of their economic status.

Respectfully submitted,



JOEL ANDERSON
Supervisor, Second District

ATTACHMENT(S)

Affordable Connectivity Program Informational and Eligibility Flyers