



ASIAN AMERICANS  
**ADVANCING  
JUSTICE**  
AAJC



**Written Statement For the Hearing Entitled, “Broadband Equity: Addressing Disparities in Access and Affordability” on May 6, 2021 at 11:30 AM  
Testimony from Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC , OCA – Asian Pacific Advocates (OCA), and National Council of Asian Pacific Americans (NCAPA)**

Dear Chairman Doyle, Ranking Member Latta, and Members of the Subcommittee on Communications and Technology of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce,

On behalf of Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC, OCA – Asian Pacific American Advocates, and the National Council of Asian Pacific Americans, we submit this written statement ahead of the Committee’s hearing to urge Congress to do more to ensure families and communities continue to have access to an essential service beyond the pandemic. Fast and reliable internet is critical to providing economic opportunities, connecting communities, and giving access to educational, health, and other indispensable programs. Communities will continue to rely on broadband access. A permanent broadband subsidy that is as inclusive and targeted towards communities in most critical need is necessary to bridge the digital divide.

Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC (“Advancing Justice | AAJC”) is dedicated to civil and human rights for Asian Americans and to promoting a fair and equitable society for all. We provide the growing Asian American community with multilingual resources, culturally appropriate community education, and public policy and civil rights advocacy. In the communications field, Advancing Justice | AAJC works to promote access to critical technology, services, and media for our communities.

OCA – Asian Pacific American Advocates (“OCA”) is a national membership-driven organization of community advocates dedicated to advancing the social, political, and economic well-being of AAPIs. OCA strongly believes that as our country continues to digitize and create modern communications networks, it is pivotal that Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders shape the policies and regulations that create the framework for that innovation.

The National Council of Asian Pacific Americans (“NCAPA”) is a coalition of 37 national Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) organizations around the country. Based in Washington D.C., NCAPA serves to represent the interests of the greater AAPI communities, the fastest growing

racial group in the nation, and to provide a national voice for Asian American and Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander issues.

Our organizations are also members of the Asian American Tech Table, which was created to facilitate a more unified voice and presence in national tech and telecom policy debates. The Table, which is co-chaired by Asian Americans Advancing Justice |AAJC and OCA – Asian Pacific American Advocates (OCA), convenes regularly with its members to discuss relevant policy concerns, while also engaging with industry and other stakeholders to raise the visibility of the Asian American community in tech policy and digital civil rights issues. We thank the subcommittee for holding this hearing on systemic barriers that many low-income communities and people of color face in broadband accessibility and affordability, and we welcome the opportunity to share how the digital divide still needs to be bridged for Asian Americans as well.

### **Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and the Digital Divide**

Although studies have shown that 95% of English-speaking Asian Americans use the Internet, suggesting high levels of digital access and literacy, these studies are often limited in scope and obscure key inequities within our communities. Surveys that are conducted in English and online and that aggregate data of over 20 different ethnicities select for people who are likely already connected and provide a skewed perspective on broadband access in our communities.

Despite the lack of disaggregated and inclusive data, digital divide indicators—educational attainment, income level, and English proficiency—suggest that a gap in access exists among different ethnic groups in the AAPI community:

- For example, 4.6% of Japanese Americans have less than a high school diploma, compared with 53.6% of Burmese Americans.
- The median household income of Indian Americans is \$114,261, that of Samoan Americans and Burmese Americans is \$54,193 and \$39,730, respectively.
- In 2015, 2.6% of SNAP recipients were categorized as Asian American. However, the divide between certain ethnic groups was stark: 2.38% of Thai Americans were enrolled in the program, compared with 67.3% of Bhutanese Americans.
- In 2016, 26% of Asian Americans and 37% of Pacific Islanders were enrolled in Medicaid or some other public insurance program.<sup>1</sup>

These indicators suggest that there are likely millions of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders for whom the digital divide has yet to be bridged, and more work needs to be done. Many members of our communities could benefit from services like Lifeline, E-Rate, or the Emergency

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.advancingjustice-aaajc.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/Lifeline%20Backgrounder.pdf>

Broadband Benefit (EBB) program, but misleading studies that portray our communities as already-connected obscure the need for dedicated and targeted outreach to low-income AAPIs.

For Asian American and Pacific Islanders, accurate data is one of the first and primary challenges to broadband access. Few studies on broadband access specifically focus on Asian Americans, fewer still disaggregate their data, and even less data exists for Pacific Islanders.

### **Digital Literacy and Skills Among Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders**

Another dimension to the challenge of getting Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders connected is cultivating digital literacy and skills in a population where approximately 34% of individuals have limited English proficiency (LEP). Disaggregated data shows that LEP rates among Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders also vary significantly:

- Among Asian Americans, nearly 80% of Bhutanese Americans have LEP while 27% of Indian Americans have LEP.<sup>2</sup>
- The average LEP rate among Pacific Islanders is 8.5%, but these numbers also vary among different ethnic groups, from 41% of Marshallese Americans to 2% of Native Hawaiians.<sup>3</sup>

Language access and accessibility is critical to ensuring that Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, once connected to broadband, can get the most out of their experience online. This is especially important when it comes to accessing government services and relief programs. For example, none of the financial relief services offered by the Small Business Association provide translations into Asian or Pacific Islander languages on their websites.

In addition to this, the FCC has acknowledged the need for language access in preparation for the EBB program by offering outreach materials in 14 different languages, including multiple Asian languages. This is an important first step in ensuring that everyone who is eligible for the EBB program can receive its benefits. More work needs to be done in continuing to expand translated materials and language support for all Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

Furthermore, some languages do not have written alphabets, posing unique challenges for groups like Rohingya refugees who do not have a universally accepted script and who require additional in-language audiovisual support. Expansive and robust language access can make a world of difference in getting everyone connected.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://aapidata.com/infographic-aa-limited-english-proficiency-2015/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://aapidata.com/infographic-nhpi-limited-english-proficiency-2015/>;  
[https://advancingjustice-la.org/sites/default/files/A\\_Community\\_of\\_Contrasts\\_NHPI\\_US\\_2014.pdf](https://advancingjustice-la.org/sites/default/files/A_Community_of_Contrasts_NHPI_US_2014.pdf)

Digital literacy and skills training are increasingly necessary to assist people with navigating technology as it rapidly develops and changes. In-language training will be even more necessary to ensure that AAPIs are adequately equipped to adapt to the digital age.

### **Infrastructure and Other Barriers to Access**

Communities of color are disproportionately negatively impacted by lack of or insufficient access to broadband. A permanent broadband subsidy must be inclusive and equitable to provide service to the communities that need it most. An updated broadband access plan must consider and address more than just affordability issues. Congress must also consider how federal funding and companies can begin investing in overcoming other barriers such as infrastructure issues that exist because of historical redlining and other profit-driven decisions, ensuring there is access in non-English languages for those who are not English proficient, working closely with trusted messengers and community groups to adequately publicize the program, providing necessary equipment and trainings, and expanding benefits to immigrant populations, including those that may be differently documented.

For example, in San Francisco's Chinatown, racial, economic, and environmental inequalities contribute to digital inequality and redlining for the largely working class and immigrant population. 2015 data found that only 56% of San Francisco Chinatown residents had Internet access at home, compared to the city-wide average of 88%. Historic Chinatowns and other ethnic enclaves all over the United States were born out of housing and labor discrimination and racially motivated exclusionary policies. This history of neglect, disinvestment, and displacement made its mark on the very physical landscape and infrastructure of areas like Chinatown, impacting residents to this day.<sup>4</sup>

40% of housing in San Francisco's Chinatown is single-room occupancy, meaning that many only have a general address and not one that pointed to their specific room, disqualifying them from getting Wi-Fi access if someone else already has an account using that same general address. The decades-old concrete flooring and walls in many buildings in the area also make the penetration and transmission of Wi-Fi signals through the building almost physically impossible. Moreover, these residences lack the infrastructure to install hard-wired internet or other connections. Residents' only option is lower quality and speed hotspot devices.

Redlined neighborhoods and urban areas that are home to predominantly low-income communities of color also frequently face the threat of gentrification and redevelopment. This presents another challenge for getting these communities connected as the potential of infrastructural renovations needed for broadband connectivity must be weighed against the danger of increasingly unaffordable housing and displacement.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/6196/5187>

Affordability is just one of the barriers between communities and adequate broadband access. While a permanent subsidy will go a long way to remediate the digital divide, internet service provider companies and other stakeholders must continue to do more to invest in adequate infrastructure for underserved communities and provide equitable and high-quality services to beneficiaries.

For individuals and families to benefit from a subsidy, they should have a variety of services and plans that they can choose to best meet their unique internet needs; thus, companies should ensure a diversity of high-quality plans made available at price-points that beneficiaries are able to afford. Moreover, beneficiaries must be protected from unexpected fees and costs. The benefit is meant to assist families that cannot afford adequate broadband access; unexpected costs or increased rates would create financial stress on communities that are already under strain. Internet service providers must commit to transparent pricing, consumer awareness, and fair notice and choice.

### **Challenges to Connecting the Pacific Islands**

As the Federal Communications Commission prepares to launch the Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) program later this month, the lead-up to EBB rollout has also revealed barriers to broadband connectivity on the Pacific Islands. As of Wednesday, May 5, 2021 the American Samoa, Guam, and the Northern Mariana Islands have the fewest participating providers of any state or territory—with two, three, and two providers respectively. Of these limited options, only one provider offers a connected device for American Samoans, leaving households on Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands entirely unable to take advantage of the \$100 discount towards a device that the program offers.

Broadband access and affordability in the Pacific Islands has long been a challenge. In 2012, the American Samoa had the dubious distinction of having America's most expensive Internet.<sup>5</sup> Since then, broadband connectivity has improved in the Pacific Islands but costs remain among the highest in the nation. Thousands of miles away from the continental U.S., internet connections are especially slow and prices are often unaffordable in the American Samoa and Northern Mariana Islands. An undersea cable linking the American Samoa to Hawaii was laid in 2009, but BlueSky, the telecommunications company that bore costs along with the American Samoa government, charges \$115 a month for speeds of 383 kilobytes per second.<sup>6</sup>

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<https://slate.com/technology/2012/05/internet-access-and-cost-in-american-samoa-northern-marianas-islands-guam.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://pacificbasindevelopment.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2019-U.S.-Pacific-Islands-CEDS.pdf>

Greater infrastructure investment in the region is necessary to ensure that everyone can access the internet and fully participate in our society as more and more of our lives, work, and essential services move online. In 2015, the only undersea fiber-optic cable servicing the Northern Mariana Islands was damaged in a storm, disconnecting nearly 60,000 residents from telephone, internet, banking, and other services for a couple of days. This prompted the construction of a second fiber-optic cable, but such vulnerabilities reveal the challenges to getting Pacific Islanders connected to the rest of the world.<sup>7</sup>

### **Establishing a Permanent Broadband Subsidy**

A permanent broadband subsidy must persist beyond the pandemic to assist historically marginalized and vulnerable populations. A subsidy should be as inclusive, straightforward, and easy to qualify for and access as possible to service those who need it most.

The pandemic has demonstrated how critical internet access is for communities to be able to survive and thrive. Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC found that many community organizations and programs relied on and will continue to rely on access to the internet. High quality reliable broadband is necessary to keep immigrant families connected to their in-language communities both in the U.S. and abroad, providing the elderly with more accessible health care, for ESL homework assistance programs, job training programs for refugee populations, and connecting community members to essential federal, state, and local services and benefits. These services were essential before the pandemic and communities expect to rely even more heavily on tech and remote solutions even after the pandemic subsides.

For a permanent broadband subsidy program to successfully reach the communities that are in greatest need of and can benefit most from better internet access, the program must be designed to be easily accessible, well-publicized, and simple to qualify and sign up for. Communities that are eligible for the program may struggle with navigating complicated forms, have English-access issues, only have a mobile device with low internet connection, and/or have low digital literacy. Communities may already harbor mistrust of federal programs and may fail to complete the process if it is overly complex or qualification requirements are excessively onerous.

For example, the EBB program allows for multiple forms of government issued identification (driver's license, ITIN, passport, social security number, tribal ID number, etc.) for an individual's identity verification. Those who already receive Lifeline benefits are also able to easily opt-in to EBB benefits. Flexible qualification requirements can lower unnecessary barriers for participation and make the registration process more straightforward. The FCC is also

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<https://www.guampdn.com/story/news/2015/07/07/thousands-ite-telecommunications-cnmi-guam-customers-lose-service/29844973/>

currently preparing EBB informational materials, tutorials, and PSAs in multiple non-English languages and working directly with trusted community partners to publicize the program. A permanent broadband subsidy must emulate these elements of the EBB program to make the process as seamless as possible to maximize participation and uplift the communities who need these benefits most. A program that fails to consider the experiences and needs of and design intentionally for the elderly, immigrants, communities of color, non-English speaking individuals, and other marginalized communities will inevitably fail to uplift communities that need broadband access most.

## **Conclusion**

This past year has proved to all of us that broadband access is essential for school, work, and life—but millions are still being left behind, including AAPI communities. Limited studies portray our communities as having already bridged the digital divide, but deeper analysis demonstrates that AAPIs still experience disparities and inequalities in broadband access.

We urge Congress to do more to ensure families and communities continue to have access to an essential service beyond the pandemic—by disaggregated data, investing in infrastructure, committing to language access, and implementing a permanent broadband subsidy.

Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC, OCA – Asian Pacific Advocates (OCA), and National Council of Asian Pacific Americans (NCAPA) thank you for your attention to and examination of this critical issue, and urge you to support a permanent broadband subsidy that is equitable and beneficial to families and communities.

Please contact Emily Chi, Assistant Director for Telecommunications, Technology and Media at Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC at [echi@advancingjustice-aaajc.org](mailto:echi@advancingjustice-aaajc.org); Michael Nguyen, Senior Policy & Advocacy Associate at OCA - Asian Pacific American Advocate at [michael.nguyen@ocanational.org](mailto:michael.nguyen@ocanational.org); or Annie Yang, Policy and Communications Associate at [annie@ncapaonline.org](mailto:annie@ncapaonline.org) for any inquiries.

Sincerely,

Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC

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