COVID-19 has amplified the shift to online for many aspects of everyday life. From work to education to healthcare, access to broadband internet and reliable devices is more critical than ever. While U.S. broadband networks have shown their resiliency and capacity to meet the myriad challenges presented by COVID-19, the digital divide across socio-economic, racial and geographic communities is exacerbating gaps in educational achievement as students shift to distance learning, and in health outcomes as telehealth access becomes critical for many patients seeking care.

Business Roundtable members believe that COVID-19 has reinforced the need for policymakers to take urgent action to bridge the digital divide so that all Americans, both rural and urban, can stay connected to their communities, schools, workplaces and critical services. In September, Business Roundtable endorsed four policy principles “to improve accessibility, affordability and usability of broadband, especially for rural and lower income communities.”

To that end, Business Roundtable urges Congress and the federal government to take action on five priorities to extend and expand connectivity during the COVID-19 pandemic:

• As a transition to comprehensive Lifeline reform, establishing an emergency connectivity benefit to support broadband for low-income households;
• Clarifying and expanding the E-Rate program to support student and teacher connectivity needs;
• Funding the purchase of connected devices for e-learning;
• Accelerating broadband buildout in unserved areas; and
• Supporting access to online healthcare services.

1. As a transition to comprehensive Lifeline reform, establish an emergency connectivity benefit to support broadband for low-income households.

Congress should provide funding for an emergency connectivity benefit to expand financial support for households to access broadband services during the COVID-19 pandemic and then focus on longer-term modernization of Lifeline. The emergency mechanism should:

A. Provide eligible low-income households with a temporary monthly benefit to help offset the cost of broadband services, including related equipment, and provide a one-time benefit to subsidize connected devices for low-income households. Funding should be provided through direct appropriations.
B. Utilize criteria from existing low-income programs, such as Lifeline and other provider programs, to determine a household’s eligibility, and leverage existing programmatic infrastructure from Lifeline (e.g., the National Lifeline Eligibility Verifier) and providers’ existing low-income programs to streamline program administration and expedite distribution of benefits.

2. Clarify and expand the E-Rate program to provide critical resources for student and teacher connectivity needs for educational purposes outside of school premises.

Congress should clarify and expand the E-Rate program to ensure that students and teachers can fully participate in virtual classrooms and distance learning. To do so, Congress should:

A. Clarify that E-Rate can be used to reimburse the costs of internet service for e-learning to support student and teacher connectivity needs for educational purposes during the COVID-19 public health emergency.

B. Dedicate significant resources through direct appropriations to supplement the existing E-Rate funding stream to meet connectivity needs outside of school for the duration of the pandemic.

C. Clarify the FCC’s authority to expand its definition of a school campus in the context of distance learning throughout the COVID-19 public health emergency.

D. Direct the FCC to coordinate any E-Rate provisions with the Department of Education and any federal low-income broadband programs to ensure efficient use of funds.

E. Ensure that students and teachers can rapidly obtain broadband service by directing the FCC to streamline E-Rate administrative procedures.

3. Fund the purchase of connected devices for use in e-learning.

A. Congress should establish and fund a program to support purchases of devices such as laptops and tablets for students and teachers in low-income communities and households engaged in distance learning. Funding for such a program should be channeled through states to school districts by use of block grants or other grant-in-aid programs, while using existing eligibility criteria (e.g., from the E-Rate program).
4. Accelerate broadband buildout in unserved areas of the country.

*Congress should make substantial investments to bring high-speed internet to the remaining unserved parts of the country by taking the following actions:*

A. Make substantial, consistent and reliable funding available to the FCC to support the buildout of broadband infrastructure to help close broadband coverage gaps. Investments should be based on technology-neutral criteria to support a mix of solutions that can be rapidly deployed.

B. Invest in enhanced coverage mapping to better understand current coverage gaps, while more accurately measuring the availability of high-speed coverage.

C. Work with state and local governments to support adoption of uniform timeframes with streamlined permitting processes for reviewing broadband deployment applications.

D. Accelerate the distribution of FCC funding for high-speed internet projects.

*Business Roundtable’s policy recommendations for broadband buildout can be found here.*

5. Support access to online healthcare services.

A. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Congress should remove the geographic and site restrictions to Medicare telehealth benefits. Additionally, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services should maintain and expand its waiver authorities that expanded availability and flexibility of benefits during the pandemic.