Statement of

Angela Siefer

Executive Director

of the National Digital Inclusion Alliance

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Chair Griffith, Vice Chair Lesko, Ranking Member Castor and Members of the Subcommittee, I'm honored to be here. Thank you for having me.

I'm Angela Siefer, the executive director of NDIA - the National Digital Inclusion Alliance. We are a 501(c)3 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.

NDIA launched early 2015 with an old MacBook, an address book of community tech practitioners and some big ideas. By July 2015 we had 100 Affiliates--mostly community-based organizations, libraries, local governments and housing authorities who were leading digital inclusion work in their communities, but didn't have a community of practice or a voice in Washington. Now they do. Today NDIA has over 1,200 Affiliates, including 18 Tribal entities and organizations in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands.

Achieving digital equity in the United States would mean that a senior citizen in North Dakota can access their doctor from the comfort of their home in the winter, that an entrepreneur in Florida has the digital skills to start their own business, and that school kids in Virginia never have to sit outside a Taco Bell again to do their school work.

The tragic global pandemic crystallized the consequences of being disconnected from the internet. Overnight, the digital divide—an issue NDIA and our affiliates had long worked to close, became a glaringly obvious, debilitating challenge as affordable internet access, meaningful devices, and digital skills became even more essential to work, education, health, and social connections.

To address these challenges, 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. But they would not have made such progress without the swift actions of Congress during the pandemic. Representing the NDIA community, I thank you.

The increased awareness led to increased attention, efforts, and capacity on the ground across the country. For example, in the past six months, NDIA trained 154 digital navigators, 30 percent of whom are serving rural areas. Of note, NDIA created the National Digital Navigator Corps[1], a program designed to build capacity in 18 rural and Tribal communities across the country. Digital navigators are trusted guides trained to assist individuals as they seek the affordable connectivity, appropriate devices, and digital skills they need to meet their goals.[2]

Prior to the pandemic, NDIA knew of roughly a dozen place based coalitions which gather together community-based organizations, local governments and corporations collaboratively addressing the digital divide. Now that number is over 60.

This year at NDIA's annual conference, we hosted 800 attendees--more than double our previous conferences. The Net Inclusion conference has been a staple in the digital inclusion community since 2016, bringing practitioners, advocates, academics, internet service providers, and policymakers together to share their knowledge and discuss. There were more than 4,700 streams and views on YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn. Secretary Raimondo joined Angela on the mainstage and chose Net Inclusion to announce that request for comment is open for Digital Equity Act grants.

[1] "National Digital Navigator Corps". 2022. https://www.digitalinclusion.org/digital-navigator-corps/
[2] "Digital Navigator Model." 2020. National Digital Inclusion Alliance. 2020. https://www.digitalinclusion.org/digital-navigator-model/.

States, territories, DC and Tribal entities are also adding capacity. Within the last year, over 20 states have hired dedicated staff to lead their digital equity planning and implementation efforts.[3]

Congress, in large part, is to thank for this growth. Your investments in COVID-relief packages, and the bi-partisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act have spurred momentum and capacity building even though the IIJA investments haven't been fully realized at the community level yet.

As part of the Digital Equity Act, Congress required each state, DC and the territories to create a Digital Equity Plan. This was a good idea and we commend Congress for rightly acknowledging the importance of community driven planning. The plans will provide the groundwork for understanding the current landscape, developing equitable, robust ecosystems, and providing a roadmap for achieving digital equity nationwide. Part of the beauty of the United States is the diversity of the states, territories, the District of Columbia, and Tribal lands. Each of their character attributes differ, and the ways in which the digital divide manifests itself reflect that diversity. In turn, their goals and strategies for achieving digital equity will also differ. Kentucky's path to digital equity will be different from Arizona's or even its neighbor, Ohio.

Meaningful community engagement, collaboration, and partnership is essential for the Digital Equity planning process and its implementation to be successful. Through workshops, a State Digital Equity Planning Toolkit, a State Digital Equity Cohort (comprised of 42 states, territories and DC), and one-on-one technical assistance, NDIA has supported the states, territories, DC and Tribal Entities throughout the planning process and thus has a unique view into the community engagement necessary to

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[3] Zack Quaintance, "Workforce and People: State Governments Continue to Add Digital Equity Staff", Government and Technology, April 18, 2023,
https://www.govtech.com/workforce/state-governments-continue-to-add-digital-equity-staff

craft the plans. Our team has participated in 12 of these community engagement events, and based on what we've seen, we're excited to report these community events provide digital inclusion practitioners with a space to contribute their expertise, residents to name the barriers that keep them from accessing the internet, and partners and stakeholders the opportunity to learn more about digital equity and how to meaningfully partner to support the implementation efforts.

I recently had the privilege to visit Alaska and attend Alaska's Digital Equity Summit. The Rasmuson Foundation[4] is coordinating their state digital equity plan. A working group of community based organizations including the Alaska Federation of Natives[5] and the Alaska Warrior Partnership[6] (which supports veterans) are conducting listening tours which will inform the plan. This work impacted the conversation at the Alaska Digital Equity Summit. I heard multiple table conversations discussing the benefits and dangers that broadband could bring to their cultures and communities. On one end of the conversation was excitement about jobs and healthcare and on the other was a fear of online scams and human trafficking. These are the kinds of conversations that prepare communities to participate meaningfully and safely online.

The need for affordable broadband is so essential that it unites people from across the geographic and political spectrum. From Alabama to New Jersey, governors have voiced the critical role of broadband connectivity and acknowledged the Affordable Connectivity Program (otherwise known as ACP) as an important tool to help close the digital divide.[7]

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[4] Rasmuson Foundation website. https://rasmuson.org/
[5] Alaska Federation of Natives website. https://www.nativefederation.org/about-afn/
[6] Alaska Warrior Partnership website. https://www.alaskawarriorpartnership.org/
[7] *See* Blair Levin, "Washington may be about to take a giant step backward in closing the digital divide" (blog), Brookings Institution, March 13, 2023, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2023/03/13/washington-may-be-about-to-take-a-giant-step-backward-in-closing-the-digital-divide/ citing EducationSuperHighway "No Home Left Offline: Governors In 28 States Have

ACP addresses one of the main barriers to broadband adoption[8]-- cost, and helps make broadband more affordable for over 17 million households in both rural and urban communities[9]. The success of the federal broadband investments including BEAD and the Capital Project Fund are inextricably linked to the ACP program. ACP improves the business case for investing in rural areas,[10] reduces broadband service cancellations, and increases the likelihood that service providers will achieve a reliable return on investment from networks deployed through BEAD.[11]

An NDIA affiliate in Ohio recently calculated the ACP household penetration rates -- i.e., USAC's reported ACP enrollment totals as percentages of total households -- for all 88 Ohio counties, grouping those counties by their rural population shares according to the U.S. Census' "County-level Urban and Rural information for the 2020 Census". In the state's 22 most rural counties, with rural populations between 71 percent and 100 percent, 14 percent of all households were enrolled in ACP as of April 1, 2023. The comparable rate for the state's 22 least rural counties was 19 percent.

In the report under discussion at this hearing, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) recommended the Federal government create a national broadband strategy.[12] We second this

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Already Made Affordable Connectivity Program Adoption A Priority", accessed May 8, 2023, https://www.educationsuperhighway.org/no-home-left-offline/governors/

[8] Broadband adoption is sustained access to robust broadband service that meets the needs of the entire household. This means the ability to subscribe to broadband plans that can serve everyone in the house–not just through an individual's mobile phone–and provide the speeds that support a variety of online activities.

[9] *See* "ACP Enrollment and Claims Tracker", Universal Service Administrative Company, accessed May 7, 2023, https://www.usac.org/about/affordable-connectivity-program/acp-enrollment-and-claims-tracker/

[10] *See* Blair Levin, "Washington may be about to take a giant step backward in closing the digital divide" (blog), Brookings Institution, March 13, 2023, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2023/03/13/washington-may-be-about-to-take-a-giant-step-backward-in-closing-the-digital-divide/

[11] *See* Common Sense Media, *Closing the Digital Divide Benefits Everyone, Not Just the Disconnected: An analysis of how universal connectivity benefits education, health care, government services, and employment* (Common Sense Media; Boston Consulting Group, 2022) at 29-32, available at https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/research/report/2022-cs-bcg-closing-digital-divide_final-release-3-for-web.pdf

[12] *See* United States Government Accountability Office, *Broadband: National Strategy Needed to Guide Federal Efforts to Reduce Digital Divide* (GAO, May 2022), https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-22-104611.pdf

recommendation and also recommend the Federal government create a national digital inclusion strategy to capture and leverage the momentum we are experiencing.

Digital Inclusion refers to the activities necessary to ensure that all individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, have access to and use of Information and Communication Technologies.

This includes five elements:

    1. Affordable, robust broadband internet service;

    2. Internet-enabled devices that meet the needs of the user;

    3. Access to digital literacy training;

    4. Quality technical support; and

    5. Applications and online content designed to enable and encourage self-sufficiency, participation and collaboration.

A national digital inclusion strategy should:

1. Strengthen and support local, state, territory and Tribal digital inclusion ecosystems.
2. Designate a coordinating body to facilitate digital inclusion work across all the federal agencies.
3. Identify federal programs that could support (through existing funding) digital skills, affordability of internet service and access to appropriate devices.
4. Designate a portion of the cost savings federal government agencies realize through the conversion of manual services to digital for digital inclusion programs.

5. Support the creation of public-private-partnerships across industries and geographies to support local digital inclusion programs.

6. Ensure the federal government continues to address all barriers to digital equity holistically and comprehensively.

In closing, I'd like to thank you for your time and attention to closing the digital divide. 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 economic future of its people, and our nation's ability to compete globally.

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