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Achieving Digital Inclusion:
Now More Possible Due to New Federal Programs and Supports

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law of 2021 (also called the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), provided a record **$65 billion dollar** multi-year investment to encourage universal deployment and adoption of broadband internet.

The funding was the first of its kind and is critical to create progress in bridging the longstanding digital divide. The money can address physical infrastructure gaps, support digital inclusion and readiness programs, and help lower the cost home internet plans.

While broadband deployment has grown, home broadband access for communities of color continues to lag: 35% of Latinos and 29% of African Americans lack access to home broadband compared with just 20% of Whites.[1] Lower income levels and education attainment also impact disconnected populations, making a lack of broadband a source of stagnation.[2] And significant disparities in broadband access also exist for communities of color living in rural areas, including in nearly 1,000 rural Latino communities,[3]—totaling some 4.1 million Latinos, who are live in states like California and Texas.[4]

Three internet connectivity programs (described in Figure 1) will now make targeted, complementary investments to narrow the digital divide and promote digital inclusion. Federal agencies, like the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) (a sub-agency within the Department of Commerce), are directed to work with industry partners and states to deploy physical infrastructure, alongside digital equity programming like digital skills training, device access initiatives, and the creation of an unprecedented public benefit to alleviate some of the cost of home internet.

NTIA is responsible for administering two of the three programs. But meaningful progress can only be achieved if these investments are made in strategic and culturally competent ways that specifically target and eliminate long-standing and compounding barriers that keep Latinos disconnected.

" Access to the Internet...
Is the Civil Rights issue of the 21st century."

–Congressman John Lewis

FIGURE 1:

Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program	Digital Equity Act (DEA) Program	Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP)
To work with industry partners and the states to engage in physical infrastructure deployment. **$42.5B in funding for:** • Building Infrastructure • Broadband Access Planning • Internet Adoption Programs Administered by the NTIA	Three funding streams designed to deploy digital equity programming. **$2.75B in funding for:** • Digital skills education and enhancement • Public digital access initiatives • High-speed internet adoption Administered by the NTIA	A groundbreaking new public benefit to alleviate some of the cost burden of home and high-speed internet. **$12.2B in funding for:** • Service discount up to $30/month • Device discount up to $100 for qualified devices Administered by the FCC

Below, we discuss each program in turn, highlighting the opportunities it presents and the specific challenges it will need to address to achieve its goals.

First, the **Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD)** is designed to make targeted investments in areas that lack access to, or require updated, physical infrastructure needed to support stable home broadband. BEAD also expands economic opportunity by creating good jobs supported by equitable hiring, fair compensation, safe workplaces, and the tools and training needed for advancement. This program provides $42.5 billion in funding to support:

- Block grants to all 50 states for broadband infrastructure deployment and other digital inclusion activities, which can include programs promoting broadband adoption, device access, and other activities to be approved by the NTIA. Each state in the country will receive at least $100 million.

- Investment in high-need areas, including:

    o Unserved areas (*i.e.*, locations lacking access to 25/3 Mbps, low-latency broadband service),

    o Underserved areas (*i.e.*, locations lacking access to 100/20 Mbps, low-latency broadband service), and

    o Community anchor institutions (*i.e.*, schools, hospitals, and public safety entities).

    o States also will prioritize funding to high-poverty areas and projects that provide higher-speed broadband services than currently available.

Each state's final funding allotment will be based on how many unserved locations a state has, as determined by broadband data maps that Congress required the FCC to redraw and reissue under the law.

The BEAD Program can help bridge the digital divide by deploying physical internet infrastructure to unserved or last-mile areas, which typically include rural regions or other areas without the necessary physical infrastructure to support stable internet access. Importantly, Latinos represent the largest share of the non-white rural population, and the Latino community is the largest contributor to of diversity in rural areas.

BEAD Program funds can also offer significant workforce opportunities for Latinos by creating between [100,000 to 2000,000](#) skilled, fairly compensated jobs to build and sustain these projects. The [Workforce Planning Guide](#) issued by NTIA directs states to prioritize BEAD subgrant awards to Internet Service Providers or network operators that commit to advancing equitable workforce development.

To ensure that these investments increase employment equity and diversity, states are required to develop "a workforce plan to achieve a diverse, skilled, and sufficient workforce for building and maintaining high-speed Internet infrastructure, including both specialized telecommunications and construction jobs."
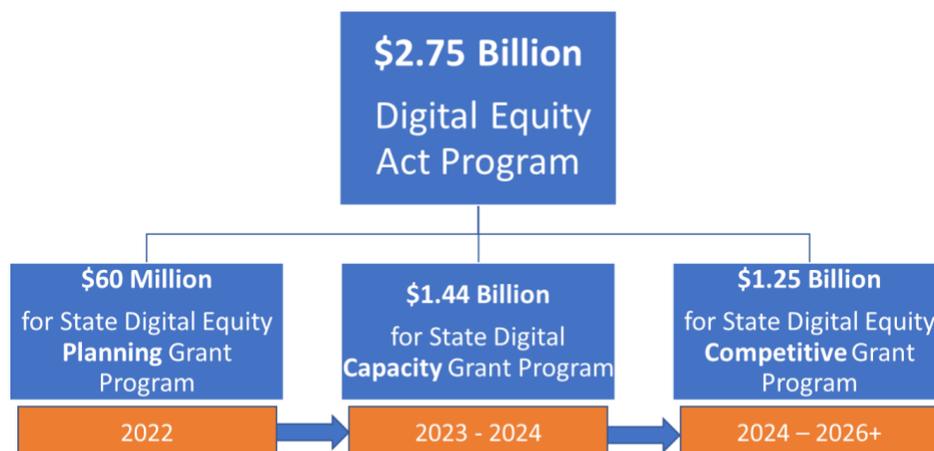
Second, the **Digital Equity Act (DEA)** provides $2.75 billion across three complementary funding streams for states and eligible entities to participate in. Connecting the physical infrastructure-focused investments of BEAD to the hands-on capacity development of communities overrepresented in the digital divide through the DEA, will be essential to the success of both BEAD and the three DEA programs:

- **State Digital Equity Planning Program:** States are instructed to develop "digital equity plans" to improve broadband access, affordability, and adoption among underserved "covered populations,"* including rural area residents.

- **State Digital Equity Capacity Grant Program:** In consultation with the NTIA, states are instructed to develop their own rules and procedures for awarding subgrants to diverse applicants for digital equity projects approved in their state digital equity plans.

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* Covered Populations include: 1) Individuals who live in covered households: a household, the income of which for the most recently completed year is not more than 150 percent of an amount equal to the poverty level, as determined by using criteria of poverty established by the Bureau of the Census. 2) Aging individuals (60 and above). 3) Incarcerated individuals, other than individuals who are incarcerated in a Federal correctional facility. 4) Veterans. 5) Individuals with disabilities. 6) Individuals with a language barrier, including individuals who are English learners; and have low levels of literacy. 7) Individuals who are members of a racial or ethnic minority group. 8) Individuals who primarily reside in a rural area.

- **State Digital Equity Competitive Grant Program:** An open application grant program to support efforts to achieve digital equity, promote digital inclusion activities, and spur greater access to the internet among covered populations. Successful applicants will be overseen by NTIA oversight and comply with reporting, accounting, and nondiscrimination obligations.

FIGURE 2:

The three programs under the DEA complement the physical infrastructure buildout targeted by BEAD by addressing some of the most complex barriers to digital equity. They work synergistically: while the BEAD Program addresses the need for an infrastructure framework and provides quality workforce opportunities, the DEA programs commit states to develop a comprehensive and inclusive state digital equity plan to identify and tackle system barriers resulting in lack of home internet connection and low levels of digital skills, trainings and adoption.

For state plans under the DEA to be truly equitable and reflect the lived realities of disconnected communities, on-the-ground community engagement is crucial. State broadband offices must connect with local stakeholders and networks to gather first-hand information and feedback from disconnected communities. However, historically excluded communities are often difficult to reach and engage. To bridge this gap, states should partner with national intermediaries with their own local networks as stakeholders in development and implementation of these programs.

For example, UnidosUS's national network of nearly 300 community-based organizations (CBOs) offers rich opportunities to connect with groups that maintain connections to hard-to-reach households. CBOs maintain relationships with covered populations, including Latinos and immigrants, by serving as trusted messengers and direct service providers in their communities. UnidosUS outlined best practices for strategic community engagement, and other needs of Latino communities, in its written comments submitted to NTIA in May 2023.

Third, the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) is a monthly benefit program that eligible low-income households can apply for and use to pay their internet bill from a participating Internet Service Provider. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) administers this program.

The ACP provides $14.2 billion funding to:

- Expand the Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB), a program that was previously established to help low-income families afford landline or mobile broadband services during the COVID-19 pandemic emergency.

- Provide eligible low-income households a $30 per month discount toward a broadband service plan from a participating provider. Importantly, a social security number is not required and in addition to alternative eligibility requirements outlined below, an Individual Tax Identification Number (ITIN) is accepted. Allowing access for ITIN users is a crucial step in closing the digital divide by allowing immigrant and mixed status households to participate in this government program.

- Provide eligible households can a one-time discount of $100 to purchase a laptop, desktop computer or tablet.

ACP is a complement to the BEAD and DEA Programs because it addresses the central barrier to digital inclusion: the high cost of home internet plans. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, among 35 countries studied, the United States has the second highest broadband costs.[5] With median annual income for Hispanic households around $51,811[6] and about 61% of Latinos reporting job or wage loss due to COVID-19,[7] affordability will continue to be a central barrier for access to and adoption of home broadband for Latinos.

Importantly, the program permits multiple ways for individuals and families to demonstrate program eligibility, including participation in:

- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which provides food benefits to low-income families to supplement their grocery budget so they can afford the nutritious food essential to health and well-being.

- Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), which provides federal grants to states for supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, and to infants and children up to age 5 who are found to be at nutritional risk.

- Medicaid, which provides health coverage to millions of Americans, including eligible low-income adults, children, pregnant women, elderly adults, and people with disabilities.

- Federal Public Housing Assistance, which provides rental housing for eligible low-income families, the elderly, and persons with disabilities.

- Federal Pell Grant, which provides educational grants to undergraduate students who display exceptional financial need and have not earned a bachelor's, graduate, or professional degree.

- The Lifeline program, which provides a discount on phone service for qualifying low-income consumers to ensure that all Americans have the opportunities and security that phone service brings, including being able to connect to jobs, family and emergency services.

Approximately 40% of households, or 48 million households,
are eligible for the ACP monthly broadband benefit.

By ensuring that digital equity remains a core civil rights priority for Latino and immigrant communities, UnidosUS supports full and equitable implementation of all three programs because they address the multifaceted barriers Latinos face in accessing stable, affordable home broadband connection. **Taken together, these three programs offer the opportunity to bridge the digital divide by investing in physical buildout, workforce, digital adoption programs, and addressing affordability.**

[1] Sara Atske and Andrew Perrin, Home broadband adoption, computer ownership vary by race, ethnicity in the U.S., Pew Research Center (July 16, 2021), https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/07/16/home-broadband-adoption-computer-ownership-vary-by-race-ethnicity-in-the-u-s/.

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[3] Sindy Benavides, Rural Latino communities need internet access, The Hill, (November 20, 2020), https://thehill.com/opinion/technology/526878-rural-latino-communities-need-internet-access/?rl=1.

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[6] Gloria Guzman, Household Income by Race and Hispanic Origin: 2005-2009 and 2015–2019, U.S. Census Bureau, (December 2020), https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/acs/acsbr19-07.pdf.

[7] National League of Cities, State of the Digital Divide in Hispanic Communities, HELO-POLICY-BRIEF-FNL.pdf (nlc.org).