

Written Testimony of Sara Nichols
Coordinator, Blue Ridge Broadband Alliance

Prepared for the Senate Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies

Testimony Regarding the Fiscal Year 2027 Appropriations for the Department of
Commerce National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA)

May 22, 2026

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Van Hollen, and members of the Subcommittee, the Blue Ridge Broadband Alliance¹ respectfully requests that you **maintain funding for the National Telecommunications and Information Administration's Digital Equity Act grant programs** and oppose attempts to impound, rescind, or otherwise cancel these funds.

The Need for Digital Skills, Affordable Broadband, and Affordable Devices

In today's economy, internet access is as essential as electricity or transportation infrastructure for participating in education, healthcare, employment, or emergency response. Bipartisan members of Congress acknowledged this fact when creating the \$2.75 billion Digital Equity Act, which is designed to ensure that all Americans can safely and effectively reap the benefits of modern, connected technology.

There is great need for this funding in North Carolina. According to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) "Internet Use Survey," over one in five North Carolinians ages 15 and over report that they do not use the internet. Nearly one in three reports that they do not use a desktop, laptop, or tablet computer. While some of this may be by choice, much of it, as found by North Carolina's Digital Equity Plan, is due to a lack of digital skills, technology support, and affordable internet service and devices.²

Lack of these skills, support services, and devices are a key barrier to someone's ability to finish education, get a new job, find needed healthcare, or many other resources broadband adoption provides. Without investments such as the Digital Equity Act, many Americans remain disconnected from education, employment, healthcare, and economic opportunity, increasing dependence on public assistance systems.

¹ The Blue Ridge Broadband Alliance is a coalition of community leaders, organizations, and advocates working together to build digital opportunity and access in Western North Carolina.

² N.C. Department of Information Technology, Division of Broadband and Digital Equity. *North Carolina Digital Equity Plan*. Raleigh, NC: N.C. Department of Information Technology, December 1, 2023.

What the Digital Equity Act Would Do for North Carolinians

In 2025, the Trump administration ceased implementing Digital Equity Act programs and terminated existing Digital Equity Act grants. At that point, North Carolina was set to receive roughly \$45 million from the Digital Equity Act.³ In anticipation of this funding, the North Carolina Department of Information Technology's Division of Broadband & Digital Opportunity developed a comprehensive plan through an extensive and community-driven process to determine the best way to use Digital Equity Act funds. A brief selection of what North Carolina planned to accomplish with these funds includes⁴:

- **Expanding digital navigator services statewide.** The state planned to significantly increase the number and geographic reach of programs that provide one-on-one assistance with internet adoption, digital skills, device support, and finding affordable internet options.
- **Building a statewide device distribution system.** The state planned to develop and sustain a high-volume refurbishment and distribution system to support the efficient movement of devices throughout the state. Research shows that ownership of larger-screen computing devices is associated with an increase in income and higher weekly employment rates.⁵
- **Improving the accessibility of public online services.** The state planned to identify and develop standards for online accessibility. Improving the accessibility of government service websites can reduce administrative costs by allowing more residents, including those with disabilities or limited digital skills, to independently access services rather than relying on phone or in-person assistance.⁶

The importance of the Digital Equity Act on Western North Carolina

Western North Carolina (WNC) faces connectivity challenges due to its rural communities, terrain, lower wages/high cost-of-living, and population density. Broadband adoption rates in WNC compared to other regions of North Carolina are lower, and Land of Sky Regional Council was announced as a recipient of the Digital Equity Act to help connectivity gaps in rural, veteran, aging, and low-income populations. In September 2024, this region's connectivity was compromised by Hurricane Helene, where lack of communications disproportionately challenged individuals who already suffered from the digital divide, as those with the ability to connect received resources ahead of others. Following Hurricane Helene many

³ This amount includes \$22,456,097 obligated to the state in the first tranche of funding, an estimated \$37,426,828 for the state in future tranches of funding, and a recommended award of \$7,700,000 for the Land of Sky Regional Council. See [NDIA Digital Equity Act: Funding Per State and Territory](#).

⁴ North Carolina Digital Equity Plan

⁵ Mihaylova, Teodora and Brian Whitacre. Large-Screen Computer Ownership: A Call to Action. Digitunity, October 2025. <https://digitunity.org/data-highlights-persistent-u-s-computer-ownership-gap-in-detail/>.

⁶ Accessibility of State and Local Government Websites to People with Disabilities, ADA.gov (last updated Feb. 28, 2020), <https://www.ada.gov/resources/accessibility-govt-websites/>.

residents lost access to WiFi and devices, and reliable communications making Digital Navigators critical community response members to help individuals get back on their feet. Maintaining the Digital Equity Act's funding and implementing its programs will help communities across the country become more resilient through access to online resources.

Maintain Funding for the Digital Equity Act

Congress has already recognized that broadband infrastructure alone is insufficient. Maintaining Digital Equity Act funding ensures that federal investments translate into real economic participation, workforce readiness, healthcare access, community resiliency, and emergency preparedness for all Americans.

North Carolina cannot afford for the BEAD program's investment to go unaccompanied by programs that would ensure all residents can experience its benefits. The Blue Ridge Broadband Alliance urges you to maintain funding for the Digital Equity Act and oppose any future attempts to impound, rescind, or cancel the program's funding.