

MEDIA ADVISORY: How to bring low-income Americans online? Lessons from the Emergency Broadband Benefit

February 2, 2022

USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism is issuing a new policy brief assessing the impact of the Emergency Broadband Benefit program put into place during COVID-19.

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The Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) program began in May 2021 to help close the digital divide and boost broadband adoption among the most vulnerable households during the pandemic. As the program transitions into a longer-term broadband subsidy as the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), USC researchers examined the impact of the EBB subsidy on its target beneficiaries.

Key findings include a relatively modest impact in bringing unconnected households online, limited impact in rural and less populated areas, a partisan connectivity divide, and lower participation among households with undocumented members. According to USC researchers, the primary impact of the EBB program was to alleviate the cost burden for households that were already connected pre-pandemic, with only modest impact in bringing new households online. To enhance the impact of the new ACP subsidy, outreach efforts must be strengthened and targeted through participating providers, safety net service agencies and organizations with strong local community ties.

The policy brief is part of the Measuring the Effectiveness of Digital Inclusion Approaches (MEDIA) project, a research program that analyzes broadband inclusion models and offers evidence-based recommendations on how best to connect low-income households on a sustainable basis. The program is supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts and includes the California Emerging Technology Fund (CETF) as a research partner.

WHAT: Policy brief examining the impact of EBB, participation levels, disparities between regions and populations.

WHEN: Feb. 3

WHERE: Read the policy brief [here](#).

Experts who collaborated on the policy brief are available to discuss the assessment and recommendations for Congress to expand broadband access for disadvantaged Americans:

- **Hernan Galperin**, associate professor of communication, USC Annenberg School for Communication
- **Francois Bar**, professor of communication and spatial sciences, USC Annenberg School for Communication
- **Sunne Wright McPeak**, President and CEO, California Emerging Technology Fund

“It was not as diverse as it is now,” she said. “I was reading Voltaire aloud in class, and a student made a comment that I sounded more Mexican than French. There were other experiences, too, like the time a sorority girl invited me to visit. I walked in and felt like I was in a museum. There were fresh flowers. I couldn’t believe people lived that way. We became friends, and I stayed in touch with her even after I went to Georgetown Law. But we had very different experiences.”

Her experiences shaped her mission in the legislature. Her legislative victories included

affordable auto insurance for low-income drivers, limits on junk food in school cafeterias and a state-mandated study examining air pollution’s impact on children’s health.

Earlier this month, Escutia stopped by Liberty Plaza in Whittier, Calif., to visit one of her biggest achievements: a sky blue, 39-foot, 11-ton [mobile technology center](#). It pulls triple duty as a center for health education, job training and digital literacy.

“When I grew up, we had bookmobiles,” Escutia said. “I wanted a 21st-century version of that, with computer stations that are accessible to anybody.”

Built on a motorhome chassis, the mobile lab and school has logged about 30,000 miles over the past decade, mainly in L.A. County’s southeastern cities like Bell Gardens, Cudahy and Huntington Park.

“Families here are affected by the digital divide,” she said. “It’s not just about the kids. We’re also trying to teach parents the value of a computer, and we’re thinking about seniors who need access to telehealth. We can bring that access, that experience, that education, right to them.”

USC to lead study on internet access in California

Later this month, the California Emerging Technology Fund will complete its 11th statewide connectivity survey. Prior surveys were conducted by researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, but for the first time, USC is leading the study.

“I’m glad USC has decided to really get involved in this issue of the digital divide,” Escutia said. “People don’t deny that broadband is vital, that technology is vital. What it comes down to, though, is access and affordability.”



Martha Escutia stands in front of the Mobile Technology Center, which provides internet service to children. (USC Photo/Gus Ruelas).

Independently, Escutia is calling for a \$500 million investment in networks for low-income urban and rural areas to be funded by a telecommunications surcharge. She also wants to cut the regulatory red tape that hinders upgrade network connections for hospitals, schools, universities and assisted living facilities — resources she calls “lifelines in a time of crisis.” Escutia aims to expand access to affordable high-speed internet service and a “dig once” policy for laying down fiberoptic cable during road construction projects. Finally, she supports a thorough inventory of computing devices and connectivity to help the state identify and bridge gaps in education and telehealth.

“California is a state of great wealth and great poverty, and it is the cradle of technology,” she said. “It is frankly rather shameful that we have a digital divide here, but we still can overcome it.”