

**REMARKS OF
FCC ACTING CHAIRWOMAN JESSICA ROSENWORCEL
OPEN TECHNOLOGY INSTITUTE WEBINAR
“INSIDE THE FCC’S NEW PROGRAM TO HELP PELL GRANT STUDENTS PAY
FOR INTERNET”
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Hello, everyone. It’s great to be with the Open Technology Institute and New America’s Higher Education program.

Last week, the team at New America released a really big survey about what this pandemic has meant for education—and specifically learning at home. If you haven’t seen it, I recommend you take a look. Because if you dig into the research, you’ll see the kind of numbers that explain precisely why we’re having this discussion today. What the team found about who is connected and who is under-connected during the pandemic is striking. They determined that cost is really one of the biggest reasons why families lack internet service where they live. In fact, the data show that 18 percent of families who have home broadband say their service has been cut off at least once in the past 12 months because they had problems paying for it. Among those families that rely on a mobile subscription to get online with a smartphone, one in six had their service cut off at some point during the past year.

What that tells us is that a significant number of Americans who need to be online are making month-to-month decisions about whether or not they can afford to pay for internet access. Faced with the burden of having to decide whether to pay for essentials like housing, transportation, or medicine, they can let their internet service lapse.

We can all agree that, with all the things to worry about during the pandemic, nobody should have to choose between putting food on the table or paying their broadband bill. But the data show very clearly it’s happening. But now change is happening, too. Because help has arrived for millions of American families.

And that’s because at the close of last year, Congress approved a COVID-relief package that included \$3.2 billion to establish the Emergency Broadband Benefit. This is a big deal. It’s our nation’s largest-ever program to help Americans afford internet service. And that includes college students and Pell recipients too.

With this program in place, eligible households can now receive discounts of up to \$50 a month for broadband service, or up to \$75 a month if they reside on Tribal lands. Participants can also receive a one-time, \$100 discount off of a computer or tablet.

Congress gave us only 60 days to write rules for the program. So the FCC staff burned the midnight oil, staying up late nights and weekends to stand this program up in record time.

We decided to put consumers first and established guiding principles for the Emergency Broadband Benefit. We determined that it must be expansive, inclusive, and transparent and

because this program is funded with appropriated funds, we sought to use the resources we have fairly, smartly, and efficiently.

We hit all the deadlines, and, on May 12, the Commission opened the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program to the public. Since that time, households across the country that are eligible—including those who struggled with job loss during the last year, who have a child in the free and reduced school lunch program, or who received a Pell grant—have benefited from the broadband supported by this program. We've also learned a lot during the six weeks that the program has been up and running. Even though it has only been open for a short time, I want to talk today about lessons learned that we can apply to our ongoing effort and any future initiative to help Americans afford broadband.

To me, the first topline takeaway from the past few weeks is that there is consumer demand and consumer need for a broadband affordability program.

In the first week after launching the Emergency Broadband Benefit, more than one million households signed up. For months, we pointed to surveys to show that too many Americans are worried about how to pay their broadband bill. But more than one million enrollees in one week proves beyond any doubt that too many households are struggling to afford to get online.

As of this week, that number exceeds three million and continues to grow. While the Emergency Broadband Benefit was established to help families get through the pandemic, with these enrollment numbers at this stage in the crisis, I think it's clear that the need for the Emergency Broadband Benefit or something similar will outlast COVID-19.

Now, the second key lesson I would draw from the program rollout so far is that trusted voices are the lifeblood of successful outreach and enrollment campaigns.

We are working with organizations and officials at the national, state, and local level. I have personally participated in outreach events with multiple members of Congress, Tribal leaders, and a diverse group of local and national advocates. We've done national press appearances and local news stories. We've joined HBCUs to discuss the importance of this program. We've held over 30 Spanish-language presentations, briefings, and interviews. We even got the NFL on board with a player on the Arizona Cardinals joining me for an editorial and the Miami Dolphins Foundation developing a video to promote the program—and stay tuned because there is more to come.

The FCC staff has done over 200 virtual public presentations on the program since April. They have ranged from small, local events for community groups and libraries to larger train-the-trainer style events with national non-profit organizations. We partnered across government, too. We worked with the Department of Labor to provide information to state unemployment offices and workforce associations across the country. We hosted webinars with the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Housing and Urban Development. And the Department of Education sent e-mails to every single Pell grant recipient to tell them about this opportunity. And as you know, that's more than six million students nationwide.

Since February, we have enlisted over 24,000 partners ranging from local Boys and Girls clubs, school districts, libraries, YMCAs, food banks, Meals on Wheels, and grass roots organizers to national non-profits and key individuals who focus on digital inclusion to help us spread the word. We've empowered those partners with a customizable [toolkit](#) that includes a wide variety of materials to use when spreading the word about this important program. Those materials are available in English and Spanish along with 13 other languages.

So you add it up, and by leveraging the power of trusted voices and earned media opportunities, we've raised enough awareness about this program to enroll millions of Americans. And looking at the data, we've noticed a real increase in traffic to our website and enrollments when there are news broadcasts and local reports about the program. But of course, we're not done yet.

The third lesson to take away from the past few months is the importance of being nimble. The Emergency Broadband Benefit is not like a wind-up doll that we can send on its way. It needs monitoring and regular care. Before the start of this program, the FCC hosted a series of roundtable events to hear from our partners. My staff has continued to hold those conversations after the program got underway. And today, I'm announcing that we are going to start a new round of listening sessions with stakeholders to learn best practices. I want to know what worked, what didn't, and what ideas our partners have for next steps on outreach. You've got a good idea? Bring it. Our virtual door is open.

Part of being nimble also involves looking at the data and seeing what we can learn. In the spirit of greater transparency around the program, I'm pleased to announce today that we are making more granular enrollment data public—down to the local level. For the information experts out there, that means figures at the three-digit zip code level. This is more granular than the statewide data we've issued to date and we are hoping it can be used to help improve our understanding of where the program is reaching consumers.

I hope everyone can take a look at this new data, slice and dice it different ways to identify what changes would benefit the program under existing law—and in any subsequent legislative effort that follows.

The last lesson that I'd like to close with is this. Even though the Emergency Broadband Benefit is a national program, it is important to remember that this program is successful household-by-household. It's not state-by-state or county-by-county. That is why it is so important to develop local pathways to reach those who need this program the most.

Let me talk about one of those households we were able to reach. Amanda Schermerhorn is a Mom. In fact, she's a mother to four kids. She lives in rural Minnesota, where thanks to a Pell grant, she is getting a degree. But it hasn't been easy. She has struggled without a reliable internet connection—and her kids have struggled, too, especially her son with autism. To do her classwork, Amanda would sometimes sit in her car in the parking lot of Minnesota State Community and Technical College, just to use the free Wi-Fi signal. Other times she would rise

at 4 am, just to get her online homework done before her children would wake for the day and exhaust the limited home connection with their virtual school.

Amanda was determined to not let her lack of reliable and consistent internet access stop her from getting her education. That grit really matters. Because as New America has found, nearly one in five community college students reported stopping their education during this pandemic because they lacked sufficient internet access.

So Amanda has both incredible drive and very long days. But with the Emergency Broadband Benefit we can make it a bit easier for her, and for her children. And that's just one household. One household we can help with broadband. One household that can now keep up with school and so much more in modern life that has moved online. One household we can prevent from being consigned to the wrong side of the digital divide.

Now imagine doing that again and again and again, household after household after household. That's what the Emergency Broadband Benefit looks like. And while we think nationally about this program, its benefits may be best counted one by one, household by household. Because the stories they tell are powerful.

This program is powerful. Demand for it is out there. Local efforts to get out the word about its benefits are key. And that's especially true for Pell grant recipients. Being nimble and data driven is essential because we have to meet consumers where they are. It's also important that we recognize that our success comes down to reaching individual households, so that everyone, no matter who they are or where they live, has a fair shot at opportunity in the digital age.

Thank you.