Thank you, Angie. I’m thrilled to return to the INCOMPAS’ Policy Summit again this year. We stand at a crossroad in the landscape of communications and digital equity. As we navigate the complexities of the 21st century, one thing has remained unchanged – our commitment to ensuring that every American, regardless of where you live or how much you make, has access to reliable, affordable, and high-speed Internet. Access to the Internet is not just a matter of convenience – it is a fundamental issue of fairness, and a necessity for participation in modern life.

In many ways, our journey towards a more connected, competitive, and equitable future is at a tipping point. Hard-fought gains are at risk of slipping backwards. I want to zero in on one place where this is more true than ever – that is re-funding the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) that is connecting millions of vulnerable households throughout America with free internet access.

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Nearly a year ago today, I stood on this stage to call for us to secure a funding path for ACP. The case has only grown stronger. It was clear then, and the ensuing months have only emphasized, that ACP is a once-in-a-lifetime catalyst to bridge the digital divide.

Since I first called for re-funding ACP, its growth has exploded. We went from 16 million enrolled households last year to over 23 million this year. We overcame numerous challenges – from spreading the word to gaining trust from communities, language barriers to enrollment execution. All in all, we created a program that is very effective nationwide.

To properly set the stage, let’s briefly travel back to August 2021. Congress was crafting legislation with the COVID-19 pandemic in mind as well as working to resolve the challenges that inequitable broadband deployment and access meant for millions of American households. Working together, a bipartisan Congress adopted the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, stepping up to the plate with a historic investment to connect all Americans with high-speed broadband. The IIJA made two complementary investments to ensure that no one got left behind. First, the $42.5 billion Broadband Equity Access and Deployment (BEAD) Program, to build broadband to unserved and then underserved locations. Second, the $14.2 billion Affordable Connectivity Program, to provide a $30 per month subsidy against the price of a broadband subscription ($75 dollars in Tribal communities), and a one-time discount against the price of a broadband device.
Congress wisely realized that there are two challenges when it comes to closing the digital divide – and that they are inter-related. First, we must build broadband to reach the doorstep of all Americans. Second, millions of households, quite simply, can’t afford broadband without assistance. According to the Government Accountability Office, nearly one-third of disconnected Americans say cost is an obstacle standing in their way of subscribing to broadband. That’s where the Affordable Connectivity Program comes in, ensuring that when high-quality high-speed broadband is both available and affordable, ISPs can deploy networks with less risk and more certainty that households will subscribe.

Importantly, it also means that network deployment is less expensive. In fact, because households enrolled in ACP lead to less churn for ISPs, they add significantly to both the potential, and realized, subscriber base of a network, which facilitates more deployment. Indeed, a landmark study concluded that ACP works hand-in-glove with BEAD, reducing the subsidy necessary to support ISP network deployment by 25 percent. That means that as NTIA approves state BEAD plans, and federal funds start flowing, those dollars will stretch further and reach more unserved and underserved households thanks to the existence of ACP.

But as you all know, due to a lack of funding, ACP is in jeopardy. In fact, we have already been forced to begin the wind down process. Shutting down the program would push subscribing households to make hard decisions: a skyrocketing monthly internet bill, or disconnecting from the internet. We cannot let that happen.

To put it plainly, ACP is the most effective program we’ve had in helping low-income Americans get online and stay online. In fact, it has been the most successful program ever in our decades-long, and bipartisan, effort to solve the digital divide.

ACP’s success lies in its universal appeal. Americans from all 50 states are enrolled. When the Commission was forced to freeze enrollment on February 8, over 130,000 households in my home state of Kansas were enrolled, over 270,000 in Nevada, 1.1 million in Ohio, 1.7 million in Florida, 558,000 in Louisiana, 552,000 in Arizona, and 470,000 in Virginia. Enrollment was growing steadily week over week, and notably the program surpassed expectations in rural enrollment.

No wonder the program was so popular. Nationwide, nearly 78 percent of residents surveyed by AARP say they support Congress continuing to fund the program. Indeed, AARP’s study found that ACP enables personal connections online, which combats loneliness, a well-documented concern for people as they age.

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1 In a separate study, AARP found that “nearly all the participants could not fathom a life without in-home Internet service.” See Brittné Kakulla, Older Adults Rely on Internet and the Affordable Connectivity Program, AARP Research, Feb. 8, 2024, <https://www.aarp.org/pri/topics/technology/broadband-telecommunications/affordable-connectivity-program-older-adults.html>.
There are lots of ways to look at the data, but it is clear that the Affordable Connectivity Program is making a real difference in certain communities that are historically underserved. Data shows that approximately 50% of households participating in the ACP are Black and Latino. Over 329,000 Tribal households have enrolled as well. ACP is also supporting elderly Americans, with over four million seniors and ten million Americans over the age of 50 benefiting from the program every month. And finally, looking at the overall data, nearly half of the families benefiting from ACP are military families.

Simply put, we are helping Americans in all walks of life, and I have seen firsthand the impact ACP has had on vulnerable households. As a champion of ACP, I have crisscrossed the country to increase enrollment and awareness of the program. And I have heard directly from people about how having access to affordable, high-quality broadband has impacted their lives, and what the risk of losing access could mean. So, don’t take my word for it. Let me share a few of their stories with you.

Like Jerry, a senior public housing resident living in Chicago and enrolled in ACP. He lived his whole life without ever owning a computer until ACP helped him. Through the program, he enrolled in digital literacy courses and received his first computer. But it's what he did with the computer that really matters. He took digital literacy classes virtually, and he was able to take important steps to improve his healthcare with access to the Internet, including reapplying for his health benefits online.

I also heard from Denise, a mother of four who could not afford to pay for Internet service. This was a real problem considering her children attended school remotely and relied on the Internet to access their textbooks. Without Internet access, her children were at risk of “falling behind.” But thanks to ACP, she was able to get her Internet subscription free. She looked at me with a combination of real worry and deep frustration that you could see on her face, and said she truly didn’t know what she was going to do for her family if ACP goes away.

I had the pleasure of meeting Tim in Lake County, Illinois. Tim is 80, but spry and active – and he was the best dressed senior in the entire room. He said he was “computer illiterate” – he had never even turned on a computer, least of all sent an email. So, when he first heard of ACP, he, like so many others, thought it was too good to be true. But, he enrolled and took digital literacy classes. Thanks to ACP, he sent his first text message to his daughter. Her reply: “welcome to the 21st century.” Like many seniors, Tim was able to take advantage of his broadband and computer skills to get connected to telehealth following a significant medical diagnosis.

I want to share one last story from a wonderful woman named Debra. She is currently receiving federal housing assistance and moved to Lake County, an hour away from her family and church community. She told me that, thanks to ACP, she’s “hooked” on the Internet. She goes to church online every Sunday and speaks to her grandchildren and family once a week. She is taking advantage of her Internet connection to use MapQuest and explore her new
community. She also started a knitting business online, and she told me when I met her just after Valentine’s Day last month, that she has joined an online dating site for seniors. I wished her luck. When we discussed the potential end of the program, she asked me, “what am I going to have to give up to keep what you’ve put in my life? Maybe eat less food?”

The time has to come to act. Without additional appropriations from Congress, we just announced that April will be the last fully funded month of the program. This means that in a few short weeks millions of Americans will no longer have access to connectivity that they need to support their healthcare, employment, education, and more. These are families that know what it means to try to stretch their budget, and they are struggling to figure out how to stay online if ACP ends.

Unfortunately, I predict the end result will be that many of them will be unable to stay connected. According to survey data collected by the FCC, 68 percent of ACP households said they had inconsistent or zero connectivity prior to ACP, with 80 percent citing affordability as the reason for this lack of connectivity. The same survey reported that 77 percent of respondents said that losing their ACP benefit would disrupt their service by making them change their plan or drop service entirely. Another study of unconnected households found that the mean price respondents said they could pay was $10, but a majority said zero. And, nationally, 49 percent of ACP households are “subscription vulnerable,” meaning that they find the Internet very difficult to fit into their monthly budgets and are constantly on the edge of disconnection.

Without ACP, there are limited other options for broadband support. Few states offer Internet affordability programs as a backstop, which leaves only the charity of Internet Service Providers. ISPs have agreed to create low-cost plans in partnership with ACP that allows eligible households in about 80 percent of the country to enroll in an ACP plan for free, but there is little business case for the ISPs to keep 23 million households connected for free in the absence of federal support. Were funding to lapse, the loss of trust from former subscribers could be substantial, and would make it more difficult to stand up an ACP replacement program in the future, or to keep these households online at all.

This could be devastating because the loss of a household’s connectivity could fundamentally change the destiny of these households. Nearly a quarter of teens living in households making less than $30,000 per year say that they sometimes cannot complete their homework due to a lack of reliable computer or Internet access. The Commission’s survey data shows that among students 18-24, 75 percent used their ACP service to complete schoolwork.

Access to the Internet also increases enrollment and earnings for low-income users, which benefits us all. Access to telehealth is a gamechanger, with data showing increasing access to care and decreasing costs, and 72 percent of ACP households report using their broadband service to schedule or attend healthcare appointments.
These studies also highlight that the times when broadband is most needed, such as during a job transition or health scare, are exactly the times that households struggle the most to pay for it. 48 percent of ACP households responding to the Commission’s survey reported using their broadband subscription to work or apply for jobs, and over 59 percent used their connection to learn about and access government services and benefits.

Now, I’m an optimist at heart, and there are reasons for hope. Because of the program’s widespread adoption, calls for ACP’s refunding have come from every part of the country. President Biden has urged Congress to fund the program as part of his budget, and recently again called on Congress to extend its funding. There is a bipartisan, bicameral effort to fund ACP -- the Affordable Connectivity Program Extension Act that I am proud to strongly support. Nearly 400 other government leaders, industry, and public interest groups support the effort as well. And, at the state and local level, 26 bipartisan governors and 174 mayors have urged Congress to act. I stand ready and willing to do whatever it takes to make sure that these Congressional proposals bear fruit. But, we need your help as well to keep the pressure and momentum going until we can see this through.

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Our journey towards a more connected and equitable future is fraught with challenges, but together we can continue to transform the digital landscape to empower communities and foster growth nationwide. We’ve made real progress and cannot slide backward. As President Biden said in North Carolina just last month, “[high]-speed Internet isn’t a luxury anymore, it’s an absolute necessity.”

I’m excited for the future, and for all Americans to continue to have access to high-speed, affordable broadband. ACP is essential to achieve that goal. Let’s keep on pushing. Thank you.