New COVID Relief Package
Includes $3.2B Emergency Broadband Benefit

By John Ferguson

Just before Christmas, Congress passed a new stimulus package, including $3.2 billion earmarked for broadband subsidies in a program managed by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). This package also includes a year-long extension for the expenditure of CARES Act funding through December 2021. This is critical as both internet connectivity and devices are appropriate uses of the CARES Act funding. This extension allows communities to take the time to ensure all funds are exhausted and leveraged effectively.

Specific to the new broadband benefit, it will cover up to $50 per month in broadband expenses for eligible households (up to $75 if on tribal lands) through reimbursements to approved internet service providers. There will be an application process, though the exact parameters of the program are still in development.

Eligible households include those already eligible for the Lifeline program, those eligible for existing discount broadband programs, children qualified for free or reduced school lunches, Pell Grant recipients, and households with newly unemployed individuals as a result of COVID-19.

This program by law has 60 days from the date of passage

Vaccine Access Leans on Digital Access. By Laurey T. Stryker

After health care workers and nursing home residents, Governor DeSantis prioritized people over 65 for the vaccine. In the four-county region, there are 250,000+ 65 and over residents. Non-residents visiting our area will also be eligible as long as they will be here for the second shot.

County Health Departments are administering the COVID-19 vaccine. Manatee and Sarasota counties initially used online only platforms to register and schedule vaccination appointments. Charlotte County uses COAD FLORIDA, which links to the county’s 211 public service referral website. Desoto uses a call center to schedule appointments in addition to first come, first serve events. All counties require downloading and completing a State Department of Health vaccine screening and consent form. Phone options have been added to increase access for those without technology access or skills. Statewide, Publix Supermarket locations are being added, which require online scheduling.

Technology access takes on high stakes for individuals...
This program by law has 60 days from the date of passage (December 21st, 2020) to be enacted. As such, it is currently in the process of accepting public comments through the FCC. To learn more or add your own comments, click here. The program will be designed and rolled out likely in mid to late February after the public comment phase concludes.

It is important to note that as an emergency relief program, it will continue until funds are exhausted, which most speculate will be around 7-8 months after it officially begins. This will be a welcome relief for many families in need but falls short of a sustainable long-term solution. The Biden administration has called out broadband as a priority, so additional proposed legislation is likely over the course of the next few years. This package is a great first step towards fulfilling the aspiration of digital access for all.

Technology access takes on high stakes for individuals without digital access. Governments are being pressured to include non-tech options in their vaccination plans. These issues have been prominently featured in Aspiration Journalism articles that seek to inform and engage.

Much more will be covered as clarity on vaccine access emerges...yes, there are more questions than answers.

Webversation 2: New Voices, More Insights
By Jake Hartvigsen

In our December newsletter, we reported on some of the key takeaways from our first-ever Digital Access for All “Where We Are Now & Where We Might Go” webversation that took place in late November. Thirty representatives from the local school districts, libraries, and nonprofit organizations attended that event to learn about our discoveries to date and to share their own insights and experiences related to digital access and bridging the digital divide for ALICE households in our region.

On Thursday, January 14, we held a second webversation for 36 more community partners, including leaders from the local philanthropic foundations; chambers of commerce; healthcare, food and housing assistance providers; regional United Way organizations; colleges and universities; and others to share insights and ideas with them as well.

Here are some of the highlights from our most recent January webversation.

Many Bright Spots

As we learned from the conversations that took place during our November session, there is plenty to be hopeful about when it comes to the issues of high-speed internet connectivity, availability and affordability of devices, and access to digital skills and literacy training for ALICE families and individuals in our region.

In addition to the diligent work being done by our local school districts and libraries to offer such items as hot spots, mobile access points, Chromebook computers for students, free or reduced-cost internet plans for families, and other services, both the City of Sarasota and City of Bradenton are seeking to extend free public WiFi into local parks.

Likewise, local social and human services providers like Boys & Girls Clubs of Charlotte County, Career Source, Turning Points, CenterPlace, The Glasser/Schoenbaum Center and others are beefing up computer labs and, in some cases, offering extended hours for individuals to come in and use machines at their locations. Many also either currently offer or plan to offer digital skills and literacy training for students, job seekers and older adults.
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All Faiths Food Bank is taking a hands-on approach, going door-to-door to offer their constituencies help in completing applications for food, housing, and medical assistance by using staff mobile phone hot spots in areas like DeSoto County, where digital coverage is often lacking or too expensive for low-income residents to afford. They are also working with Sarasota Memorial Hospital and others to streamline the application process for services available to asset-limited families and residents using an online program called Unite Us, which was funded locally by the Barancik Foundation.

Groups like the Charlotte Community Foundation, Community Foundation of Sarasota County, Gulf Coast Community Foundation, Manatee Community Foundation, William G. and Marie Selby Foundation and both area United Ways have also provided grants and funding for digital services and equipment benefitting our local school districts and community service providers.

Our local colleges and universities are playing a role as well. Both South Florida State College and State College of Florida (SCF) offer campus wide WiFi for students and the public, as well as computer labs with extended hours to help students who may not have digital access or devices at home.

They also each are aiming to better prepare graduates for the digital world. Even prior to the COVID pandemic, South Florida State College required all students to complete coursework to familiarize themselves with common software found in the workplace. SCF formed a creative partnership with FPL that enables students to gain expedited certification in key technology fields. They also sponsored a fundraising campaign that raised $100,000 to assist low-income students in purchasing high-speed internet plans and digital devices.

Likewise, our business leaders are working closely with civic, school and government leaders to help support digital access for families, individuals and small businesses. They are doing so by communicating about community needs with their partners and members and by sharing information about the availability of CARES Act funding for digital connectivity and devices. In the case of the Bradenton Area EDC and the EDC of Sarasota County, they also are creating forward-looking partnerships and initiatives, like Remote Coast Florida, that seek to make our region more competitive and better equipped to attract a new digital workforce.

**Challenges Remain**

Yet, despite all of these gains, many challenges related to digital access in our communities remain. Even for the successful initiatives mentioned above (and in our last newsletter), sustainability remains a critical concern.

Unequal access to and affordability of high-speed internet service and the high cost of devices continue to be a barrier for ALICE families and individuals in our region as well. While major Internet providers - like Comcast, Spectrum and Century Link - all offer discount plans for asset-limited households, awareness about those plans is limited as is the bandwidth provided through them.

Furthermore, while organizations like STUG, Goodwill Manasota, and our local school districts are attempting to fill community needs for low to no-cost devices, they are limited in their ability to meet all current and ongoing demands.

As we move toward Phase II of TPF’s Digital Access for All initiative, we will be examining all of these challenges and working with community partners to explore opportunities to address them. We are pleased to have you join us on the journey!

Download our updated Digital Access for All Resource Guide for a list of links, contacts, and other information shared during both of our recent “Where We Are Now & Where We Might Go” webversations.

Do you have a resource or idea to share with the community? Is there a national, regional, or local effort you’d like us to know about or feature in future publications? Contact DA4A at digitalaccess@thepattersonfoundation.org to be considered.