Public Comments on California Broadband Plan
11/20/2020

Dear California Broadband Council Members,

On behalf of CITRIS Health, thank you for the opportunity to provide public comment as your Council begins development of the new Broadband Plan. As a University of California-based research center focused on finding technology solutions to society's most pressing health challenges, we believe broadband access is a lynchpin to leveraging technology to empower individuals and communities and we are excited about the positive implications of greater broadband access when it comes to increased access to health care, information, and connection for all Californians.

We believe the State Broadband Action Plan (SBAP) will increase equity across California's diverse communities – as stated in the Executive Order, more than two million Californians currently do not have access to high speed broadband service at benchmark speeds. This lack of access disproportionately affects some communities – despite the fact that digital connectivity is increasingly critical to access everything from news and information to health services, low-income, rural, African-American and Latino households in California are up to 20% less likely (54%) to have broadband subscriptions compared to all households (74%).

Amongst other outcomes, the SBAP will increase equity in health care access as it allows more Californians to use telehealth and digital health services. Especially in low-income communities, including rural farm workers and older adults living in affordable housing, broadband access represents an opportunity for more independent, informed, healthy, and socially connected lives. Evidence shows that telehealth access in particular has many benefits for patients, including lower costs and increased access to preventative and mental health care. And demand for telehealth has skyrocketed during the COVID-19 pandemic; a report from McKinsey and Company in May reveals that 76% of consumers are interested in receiving telehealth services, compared to only 11% the previous year, and telemedicine visits as a share of all doctor's visits rose from 1% in March to 14% by mid-April. But without broadband access, telehealth solutions cannot take hold in the communities who could benefit the most.

The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the fragility of our health care systems. Employer-connected health insurance disappeared for millions of Americans just as access to health care became more important than ever, and Californians were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic across race, geographic, and income lines. "Essential workers" – farm workers, food service employees, public transportation drivers, etc. – are largely low-income, Black, and/or Latinx, and their essential status combined with a lack of adequate safety measures put in place by employers increased their risk of contracting COVID-19. And these communities have been harder hit – data from the Center for Disease Control reveals that Black Americans are 2.6x more likely and Latinx Americans are 2.8x more likely to get COVID-19. These groups are also more likely to be hospitalized for the disease, at 4.6x and 4.7x, respectively.

In light of the pandemic, CITRIS Health has launched two pilot projects to support some of our most underserved communities with access to the care they need: low income older adults in affordable housing, and rural immigrant farm workers.

[Lighthouse for Older Adults](#), a public-private partnership led by University of California researchers and technologists at CITRIS and the Banatao Institute, aims to improve health and well-being by providing older adults with digital connectivity and telehealth technology so they can access the information, health services, and social connection they need. The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the health, safety, and wellness conditions of older adults, and affordable housing communities represent a critical opportunity to introduce broadband-enabled care and community services.

Lighthouse will develop and deploy a technology-enabled ecosystem to promote health and well-being that can serve as a model for replication. The program will include high-speed internet access, digital hardware and software, telehealth technology, and community-based, peer-to-peer digital literacy training in California affordable housing communities. In partnership with [CDW Healthcare](#), [Decimal.health](#), Build Healthy Places Network, and the [Healthy Aging in a Digital World](#) initiative at UC Davis Health, Lighthouse will address the two largest barriers to the successful adoption of telehealth and other technology tools: internet infrastructure and effective digital skills training.

The Lighthouse pilot program will serve more than 300 older adults in six communities in Northern and Southern California operated by [Front Porch](#) and [Eskaton](#), nonprofit senior living providers that manage a combined portfolio of 38 affordable housing communities. Upon the successful implementation at these pilot sites, Lighthouse aims to then expand to additional affordable housing communities. With an emphasis on robust evaluation and program refinement, Lighthouse will develop a strategy for replication and scaling for California and to other parts of the country.

ACTIVATE, a public-private partnership also led by CITRIS, aims to improve health and well-being by connecting rural residents in California's Central Valley with telehealth and digital health technology and the skills and tools they need to receive quality care. Through the expansion of telehealth services in community health centers, ACTIVATE is focused on reaching underserved and unserved individuals, with an emphasis on farmworkers and other at-risk groups. Our goal with these pilot projects is to empower the communities we serve to manage their own health care and improve their health and well-being, and to demonstrate programs that are sustainable and scalable across California and, ultimately, nationwide. To successfully scale these kinds of programs, access to broadband is a critical foundation.

We applaud and support the Governor and the California Broadband Council for your vision to deploy high speed broadband connectivity to communities. Indeed, some of the resources that the Governor's executive order brings to bear already exist and can be leveraged for a more coordinated effort for a more digitally inclusive California. The California Advanced Services Fund managed by the CPUC is an important example of how state funds can be used to bridge

the digital divide through broadband deployment, access, and adoption; however, when it comes to improving access, adoption, and affordability to residents living in affordable housing communities, the CASF Infrastructure Grant falls short of providing the funding necessary to deploy advanced infrastructure by limiting opportunities based on its definition of "unserved" and "underserved". The grant program's restrictions against underserved populations leaves out many communities in urban and densely populated areas and misses the opportunity for property managers and developers of these communities to provide their residents with the opportunity to benefit from broadband.

Broadband adoption is another critical factor in the deployment of technologies. We have seen time and time again that when equipment and other resources are poured into a community without sustained training and support, initiatives with good intentions that don't figure in the "high touch" approach with community involvement and involvement of all stakeholders tend to fail. Finally, it should be noted that providing universal access to broadband creates a major opportunity to improve economic development and address health equity for all Californians. For in addition to providing broadband to all,underserved populations will be empowered to enter or re-enter the workforce with enhanced digital literacy and enhanced access tohealthcare.

<u>Our long-standing work to address access to technology and learnings from our current projects provide the basis for the following recommendations to the SBAP:</u>

I.   Technical recommendations from the Lighthouse broadband committee and companies involved in that pilot.
II.   Incentives the Department of Housing might consider including in affordable housing guidelines/requirements from a broadband perspective, Including the ability to access community reserves to support broadband infrastructure, devices and adoption.
III.   Incentives and recommendations for the Department of Housing to consider when it comes to implementing guidelines for increasing broadband access in both rural and urban areas.
IV.   Expand the definition of populations targeted in California Public Utilities Commission's California Advanced Services Fund and other funding opportunities to support the broadband infrastructure needs of "underserved" individuals and communities, especially to residents living in publicly subsidized and other affordable housing communities.
V.   Sufficiently fund adoption strategies that include adequate user training (including multi-lingual training), technical support, and community involvement.

In conclusion, we thank the Council for your request for public comment and look forward to collaborating on this issue in the weeks and months to come.

Please direct any questions to:
Dr. David Lindeman
Dr. Gale Berkowitz

CITRIS and the Banatao Institute
University of California
dlindeman@citris-uc.org
gberkowtiz@berkeley.edu