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Panelists Oppose Pitting Urban, Rural Interests Over Digital Divide

Participants in an online panel discussion yesterday afternoon agreed that “there’s no reason to pit urban against rural” when it comes to closing the digital divide.

Lack of home broadband access — which has become an even greater challenge with the increase in remote learning and working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic — in all areas is costing the U.S. economy trillions, Next Century Cities Executive Director Francella Ochillo said during an event titled “Digital Divide in Era of COVID-19,” cohosted by the Multicultural Media, Telecom and Internet Council (MMTC), ALLvanza, and OCA–Asian Pacific American Advocates. She cited a recent Citibank report pegging that cost at \$16 trillion.

Doug Brake, director–broadband and spectrum policy at the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, said that it is “tragic that we’re having partisan bickering” over how to address the digital divide during a pandemic emergency that has only made broadband access more vital. He agreed that “we don’t want to pit urban against rural,” adding that, instead, “we need to start figuring out where this money is going to come from. Is it going to come from general funding?”

As for the homework gap specifically, Mr. Brake said, “It’s shameful we’re not doing more on that. The FCC should be leaning more on the E-rate program,” which FCC Chairman Ajit Pai has argued cannot, by statute, be used to support services outside the classroom.

Mr. Brake called for doing “whatever it takes to get pressure put on the FCC to get the money flowing.”

Clint Odom, senior vice president–policy and advocacy and executive director of the Washington bureau of the National Urban League, noted from his remote location during the online event, that he was sharing a home network “with five people and about 17 devices. ... Imagine trying to weather that with kids and one Internet Essentials line. God bless Comcast for doing what they do, but we can’t rely on the private sector to deal with this. We really can’t.”

Anna Gomez, a partner in the law firm of Wiley Rein LLP and a former deputy administrator of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, also participated in the panel discussion, which was moderated by Maurita Coley, president and chief executive officer of MMTC.

FCC Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel also spoke at the event, reiterating her beliefs that the FCC needs to “get creative about the E-rate” and that it’s time to expect that 100% of American homes should have broadband service, just as they are expected to have water and electricity. —Lynn Stanton, lynn.stanton@wolterskluwer.com

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