National Association of State Directors of Adult Education

Why care? The COVID pandemic has illuminated the deep inequities of the existing digital divide and digital inclusion gaps in America. We now know that this is not a problem at the margins of our society, impacting only rural or deeply impoverished urban communities, but rather a challenge affecting a great number of individuals and families in all of our communities. We see more clearly that high-speed broadband is the infrastructure that connects people to education, training, employment, small businesses and entrepreneurs, municipal services, e-commerce, and health care. Without reliable, affordable access to broadband Internet, personal devices, and the digital literacy with which to use them, too many individuals and families are unable to participate fully in opportunities to improve their skills and knowledge.

Legislation to watch: There are initiatives proposed at the federal, state, and local levels across the country to address this time-sensitive issue. NASDAE is releasing this Issue Brief so that practitioners, advocates, and stakeholders of adult education and workforce development can participate in these policy discussions and represent the unique needs of adult learners.

At the federal level, the _Moving America Forward Act_, passed with bipartisan support by the House on July 1, 2020, is the latest in a series of federal efforts to bring attention and investment to the issue of expanding reliable, affordable, high-speed Internet to underserved communities both urban and rural. The Act is fundamentally an investment in traditional hardscape projects like transportation infrastructure but also includes the _Accessible, Affordable Internet for All Act_ in recognition of broadband as an essential type of infrastructure in the 21st century. It calls for expanding investment in underserved communities as well as redefining what "high-speed" means and how it is measured by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). In September, the bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus released a $1.5 trillion plan, which includes $12 billion for the creation of broadband hot spots in underserved communities as part of a COVID relief plan.

Important Issues to consider:

- Broadband expansion funding has been issued through dozens of federal agencies. Navigating the multiple opportunities can fragment the efforts of states and communities as the various programs have different goals and objectives. In June 2019, the National Telecommunication and Information Administration (NTIA) published a searchable database of the 50 federal broadband expansion grant programs.
- It's important to be clear on what is considered "high-speed" or sufficient bandwidth and how accurate the maps of actual broadband speeds are. For years, advocates have decried the FCC's reliance on industry-provided data on Internet speeds, saying that the actual service provided is much lower than claimed. A recent study conducted for the Pennsylvania General Assembly

found just this: that actual speeds did not match reported speeds or coverage in many communities.

- As the economy improves, a great number of unemployed and underemployed Americans will need to reskill or upskill to find new employment. Many jobs have been lost permanently and others are changing fundamentally as the economy changes. Online training and digital literacy will be key to ensuring that these workers can access and benefit from the education and training needed to develop the skills that will allow them to contribute to the economy of the near future (National Skills Coalition, 2020).

- Broadband expansion is an issue for economic developers and realtors. New businesses have long considered how well potential sites are served by high-speed Internet, but in the new economy, with so many teleworkers, the availability of high-speed Internet to workers' homes and the digital and technical skills of the local workforce are also of concern. For realtors, the trend toward online learning and telework means the quality of Internet service is a key metric buyers are considering.

- As schools move to new models of learning, from all remote to variations of hybrid schedules, they are relying on parents and guardians to be connected through online sites and by email to receive instructions and communications. A single computer per household and low bandwidth is no longer sufficient when multiple children and parents are required to be online. And while schools are working to procure and distribute personal devices and hot spots to students, school-based Acceptable Use policies that accompany these devices may exclude use by parents and others for their own learning and employment.

Questions to ask:

- Is there a current assessment of high-speed broadband penetration to homes in your state? Are the data speeds objectively measured across the state? Is there a current assessment on the penetration rate of personal computing devices per *user* in the home?

- Are there policy and investment initiatives underway in your state or within localities? Are voices representing adult learners in the discussions?

- What efforts to expand broadband, distribute devices, or advance digital literacy are happening locally? Could these be coordinated regionally or statewide for greater impact? What steps can be taken to ensure sustainability of these efforts, such as offering technical assistance or planning for refreshes or replacement devices?

- Are there new allies to be found in this policy discussion, such as realtors or economic development agencies, who share a keen interest in broadband expansion and a skilled workforce? Agencies promoting telehealth are also potential allies for home broadband and digital inclusion efforts.

- Which community partners can be leveraged to secure devices and mobile hot spots for learners right now? Adult education providers report partnering with food banks, libraries, One-Stops, Medicaid providers, and digital inclusion groups to get more devices and services to learners.

- Can Acceptable Use policies be amended to include use of the school-owned devices for adult learning? Are school divisions able to use their economies of scale to purchase and loan or lease additional devices for parents and older siblings?

- California: California has developed a Student Technology Intake Survey to assist both adult education providers and the state in gathering data related to student access and barriers related to distance learning. The data will be available to local adult education providers to assist and inform program development. The survey will provide information regarding the challenges adult education students experience with technology so that providers can respond right away to support students' needs. The survey will also provide trend data for state, regional, and local analysis.
- Virginia: A study, using American Community Survey data, of broadband Internet and personal devices in homes was published in August 2020 to inform educators and policymakers. Findings indicate that at least one in five students lacks access to the basic technologies required to participate fully in online learning. Stark equity gaps are evident along familiar and some unexpected dimensions. The findings are prompting municipalities, the state legislature, and schools and colleges to discuss targeted, local strategic technology investments.
- Delaware: In a recent USA Today Network Opinion, Delaware State Senator Nicole Poore compared the need for universal broadband to the call for rural electrification and universal telephone service in the past century. According to BroadbandNow, while Delaware ranks 14th in the U.S. in terms of broadband access with over 97 percent of Delawareans accessing broadband connections capable of 100 Mbps or faster, there is a clear digital divide. 26,000 people in Delaware do not have a wired connection capable of 25 Mbps or faster, a benchmark that has not changed since 2015. Another 11,000 residents do not have access to a wired home connection at all. The Delaware Chief Information Officer, James Collins, stated "we know that access to high speed broadband is as essential as any public utility and the COVID-19 pandemic made that need even more evident – the day of reckoning for broadband is here."