

Free Press Action Priorities For COVID-19 Relief Legislation

As the Senate reportedly considers further, much-needed COVID-19 relief, it must do more to promote and support affordable communications and internet connections, considering how much of our economy, education system, and daily life has moved online during the pandemic.

Free Press Action fully supports broadband provisions passed by the House in the [HEROES Act](#) and the [Moving Forward Act](#), as well as the [Emergency Broadband Connections Act of 2020, S. 4095](#) introduced in the Senate in June. You must take up these key elements from those bills.

- **Offer low-income households and those impacted by COVID-19 a \$50 monthly benefit to put towards any broadband plan of their choosing.**

- Even before the pandemic, [22% of households](#) did not have home internet, and a lack of affordable options was the primary driver of this digital divide.
- The divide is [particularly acute](#) for low-income families and communities of color. Only 56% of households making less than \$20,000 have home broadband, and Black and Hispanic households lag white households in broadband adoption even when we control for the impacts of systemic racial disparities in income.
- During the pandemic, people need the internet more than ever to connect to jobs, schools, and health care, but they are even less likely to be able to afford those connections in the face of unprecedented job and income losses.
- Offering people in low-income and other impacted communities a \$50 monthly benefit helps bridge the affordability gap, and empowers families to choose the type of broadband plan that best meets their budget and communication needs.

Legislation: *Emergency Broadband Connections Act of 2020; HEROES Act; Moving Forward Act*

- **Institute a moratorium on internet providers terminating service for customers who cannot pay their bills due to COVID-19.**

- Like water and electricity, internet access is [critical](#) particularly during a pandemic. During a time of social distance, the internet connects people to life-saving care, employment, and education.
- Even with the Federal Communications Commission's voluntary moratorium on internet shutoffs in place, [nearly 500 people](#) filed heartbreaking complaints at the FCC, saying they were nonetheless disconnected by their internet providers. Now that the FCC's "pledge" has sunset, even more people will be disconnected.
- No one should lose access to necessary services during a crisis, even if they cannot currently afford to pay their bills.

Legislation: *HEROES Act*

- **Cap the high price of phone calls between incarcerated individuals and their families, and return authority to the FCC to oversee rates in the future.**
 - Prison phone companies have long charged exploitative and [predatory rates](#) for incarcerated individuals to connect with their families and communities.
 - Predatory prison phone rates target marginalized communities, particularly Black and brown people who are incarcerated at disproportionately high rates, and ultimately increase people's interactions with the penal system.
 - These exorbitant rates are especially harmful during the pandemic, when jails and prisons are ending in-person visitation as a social distancing measure, and open communications are a [civil rights and public health](#) issue.

Legislation: *COVID-19 Compassion and Martha Wright Prison Phone Justice Act; HEROES Act*

- **Require the FCC to collect data from internet providers regarding the prices they charge for service.**
 - Although the FCC regularly collects data from internet providers regarding their deployment and subscription numbers, the agency currently collects no meaningfully comprehensive data on actual [broadband prices](#).
 - Without pricing data it's impossible to thoroughly assess, let alone solve, the affordability problem that is the primary barrier to bridging the digital divide.
 - Pricing data can and should be collected and made available to policymakers and to independent researchers too, prioritizing public transparency while still providing reasonable protections for proprietary information.

Legislation: *Moving Forward Act*