

“Thank you, Senator Leahy, for your leadership and for the opportunity to share what I’ve been hearing from Vermonters about broadband and the path forward.

For the roughly 60,000 Vermont homes and businesses without access to broadband, each day of this pandemic has been a day without equity in access to online learning, remote work, tele-health, mental health and support services, government resources, civic engagement and much more.

As we now take on the task of deploying broadband resources, I see three opportunities:

First, we have an opportunity to ‘reboot’ the broadband conversation in a way that puts the accessibility and affordability needs of Vermonters at the center of our planning— home by home and community by community.

Second, we have an opportunity to expand the conversation to be more inclusive. In reality, Vermont faces not one, but three divides or gaps in addressing broadband: Not only a digital or technological divide, but also an affordability divide and a knowledge divide. Each of these divides need to be solved in tandem as one system.

If we agree, for example, that broadband is the electricity of our time, we must address affordability as a barrier for roughly 50,000 low-income Vermont families.

If we agree that broadband is the highway to all of the services and activities needed to thrive in a viable and healthy 21st century Vermont economy and society then we must include in closing the knowledge divide those stakeholders who have provided services through digital means throughout this pandemic—educators, business leaders and employers, healthcare and support service providers, interest groups and more.

Third, we have an opportunity to act in such a way that does not promote one technology over another in meeting emergency broadband needs.

While I agree with the long-term proposals put forward to build-out permanent broadband infrastructure, these proposals cannot come at the expense of delaying access for those who continue to go without. I encourage an immediate, short-term companion plan to rapidly and urgently identify all the tools at our disposal to offer emergency broadband access now to those in need.

I’d like to end today, with a small anecdote from a family in Worcester.

When COVID-19 struck Matt and Megan, two education professionals, were required to remote work. Their sons, Noah and Rory, both in high school at U-32, were required to remote learn.

This family lives just 13 miles from the State House here in Montpelier where I’m sitting today.

Like many parents, because of poor internet access at their home, Matt and Megan, took matters into their own hands to meet their professional obligations and the needs of their children.

For Noah and Rory, they 'chainsawed off' some legs from a chair and used a toddler table as a 'classroom' in the back of a 2007 Honda Element that they parked in front of the Doty Elementary School. During colder days they had to keep the engine idling to stay warm.

Matt, Megan, Noah and Rory's story is one of many across rural Vermont. Matt shared with me, '[O]ur family splintered in search of internet access for work and education and it has been taxing and damaging to our children's education, our family's well-being and to the professional work of educating children in Washington County in a virtual context.'

Thanking you, Senator Leahy, for the opportunity to speak today. I hope today's roundtable serves as the first of many conversations to come as we work together, united to meet the urgent broadband needs of Vermonters like Matt, Megan, Noah and Rory.

I look forward to working with all of you to meet this moment."