

FCC Moves to Shrink Digital Divide

By Paul Lapointe

Most recently [depicted](#) by the *New York Times*, it's an all-too-often occurrence—two middle schoolers huddling outside of their closed school after dinner to try and latch on to the school's Wi-Fi network in order to download their homework. The reason? The family has had to cut back on everything—including internet service—at home.

Today, using the internet is not optional for most people, it is a necessity. The internet has permeated our schools, jobs, and personal lives. [Two-thirds](#) of Americans today use the internet in their jobs, a number that will only grow as our economy continues to evolve in the 21st century. The internet is also the most likely place people turn to [look for job openings](#). And for students, the internet has become an integral part of their in-school and out-of-school learning experiences. Beyond the necessities, the internet can open up a wide range of opportunities for individuals to learn from teachers around the world, earn income through online marketplaces, and become more informed and engaged citizens.

Yet despite all of this, a third of Americans still don't have access to the internet in their homes. This is even worse for low-income households, where more than half [do not have broadband](#). That means that the children in these households must complete homework while still at school, their parents have to travel to libraries to search for jobs, and these families are generally behind in the digital literacy skills that are necessary to succeed today.

To address this, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) approved [new rules](#) last week to modernize the Lifeline program by subsidizing the cost of broadband internet access for low-income Americans. Starting in December 2016 and ramping up over five years, the program will provide a \$9.25 per month subsidy to Americans within 135% of the federal poverty line (or qualifying for federal welfare programs) for standalone broadband service.

The steps taken by the FCC last week will not eliminate the digital divide between low-income households and everyone else in this country, but they will lower the cost of internet for millions of families and are an important acknowledgement that home internet access is fundamental to success in the 21st Century. As we called for in our [Ready for the New Economy](#) report, policymakers need to build off of this in order to deploy a wide variety of broadband technologies to areas that are not currently being served, while also continuing to confront barriers to adoption in order to connect individuals and drive local economic growth.