March 18, 2021

Dear Governor Abbott, Lieutenant Governor Patrick, Speaker Phelan, and legislators,

The COVID-19 pandemic has put a spotlight on the state’s broadband and digital connectivity challenges. It forced millions of Texans to rely on their internet connection for pediatric visits, virtual school, workforce training, job interviews, court hearings, mental health services, and more. In some cases, supports for children, families, and individuals were strengthened by the expansion of online services. However, individuals who did not already have broadband access, digital skills, or access to digital devices were left behind.

As we know, Texas is one of only six states with no state broadband plan. We appreciate Governor Abbott and state leaders making the creation of a broadband office and plan a priority this legislative session. We also applaud current efforts by the Texas legislature to address the infrastructure gap that has prevented many communities from accessing broadband internet. These efforts are important as part of a comprehensive effort to close the digital divide. In addition, we encourage state leaders to consider addressing issues such as digital access and readiness, which disproportionately impact vulnerable communities, as efforts to close the digital divide are pursued.

This session, we call on state leaders to go beyond infrastructure and ensure legislation addresses digital access, adoption, and readiness.

Digital access and readiness encompass a broad set of technology, infrastructure, skill building, and cost measures that ensure comprehensive and equitable access to the digital world. Unfortunately, many Texans - especially low-income and people of color - face significant barriers. Almost one million Texans currently do not have broadband access and only 68% of households who have access pay for service. With 1.4 million Texans citing lack of digital literacy as their primary barrier to digital connectivity, we appreciate that the Governor’s Broadband Development Council released a report recommending digital literacy training as a critical component to addressing the digital divide.

The pandemic has accelerated this transition to online systems, and state policies and practices must adapt. To bridge the digital divide and ensure that all Texans have the necessary tools to navigate a digital world, we urge lawmakers to:

- Invest in digital connectivity strategies, including literacy, training, and access to devices to help spur increased access to existing broadband networks for the most vulnerable populations: seniors, people with disabilities, English learners, families with low incomes, and Black and Latino families.
- Authorize the State Broadband Council and Broadband Development Office to research digital connectivity strategies, identify barriers to adoption and use, analyze how statewide access to broadband benefits workforce development, and engage in community outreach on affordability and use of broadband and connectivity strategies.
- Ensure the state broadband plan and program’s scope addresses the affordability and use of broadband services and technologies, including providing community grants.
- Strengthen telehealth by ensuring Medicaid, Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), and Texas Department of Insurance-regulated health plans continue to cover and

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reimburse telemedicine and telehealth services, including audio-only telephone services where clinically appropriate.

- Expand virtual access to prevention, early intervention, and support services for parents and children.

Thank you for your consideration of these recommendations.

Sincerely,

Texans Care for Children
United Ways of Texas
Digital Texas
Texas 2036
Greater Houston Partnership
Texas Rural Funders
Texas Library Association
Texas Black Caucus Foundation
Texas Association of Community Health Centers
Intel Corporation
IDRA (Intercultural Development Research Association)
Town of Shady Shores
Camp Fire First Texas
First3Years
Easterseals Central Texas
National Association of Social Workers – Texas Chapter
Texas Association of Goodwills
Methodist Healthcare Ministries of South Texas, Inc.
Digital Inclusion Alliance of San Antonio
Network of Behavioral Health Providers
Texas Counseling Association
SonShine Outreach Center
Texas Pediatric Society
Clarity Child Guidance Center
Upbring
National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Texas
Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Brazos Valley
Texas e-Health Alliance
Be Well Victoria
Texas Association for the Education of Young Children
Asian American Health Coalition-HOPE Clinic
Goodwill Industries Central Texas

The Meeting Squad
Family Service Center of Galveston County
Air Alliance Houston
Prevention Institute
Prosumers International
Reaching Richmond
Family to Family Network
Autism Society of Texas
East End Communities Collaborative
Tyler Area Chamber of Commerce
The Grand 1894 Opera House
City Education Partners
Variis Arches Navigation Services
Capland Speech Therapy Center
Mental Health America of Greater Dallas
Health For All, Inc
Guardianship Services, Inc.
Willie Carter Outreach Center
Excellence by Design Education Center
Twin City Mission, Inc
Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Tarrant County
Autism Speaks
Bastrop County Cares
The Senior Source
Texas Ramp Project B C/S
The San Antonio Chamber of Commerce
Dallas Innovation Alliance
Tarrant Literacy Coalition
Any Baby Can
Galveston County Continuum of Care Council
Southwestern Diabetic Foundation, Inc.
Revitalize South Dallas Coalition
YMCA of Metropolitan Fort Worth
AIDS Outreach Center
Zan Wesley Holmes, Jr. Community Outreach Center
Fort Bend Family Health Center, Inc. dba AccessHealth

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Girls Inc. of Tarrant County
TexProtects
Cancer Care Services
City of San Antonio
The Education Trust in Texas
San Antonio ISD
Southside ISD, San Antonio
Texas Silver-Haired Legislature
South San Antonio ISD
OnRamp
Center for Transforming Lives
Edgewood ISD
Restore Education
Teach Plus Texas
East Central ISD
Young Invincibles
Pre-K 4 SA
Brighton Center
Children’s Bereavement Center of South Texas
Rise Recovery
San Antonio Lifetime Recovery
San Antonio Sports
Texas Diaper Bank
Greater Randolph Area Service Programs
Children’s Defense Fund - Texas
Lozoya Consulting, LLC
Guardian House
Any Baby Can of San Antonio
Texas Psychological Association
YMCA of Greater San Antonio
Family Service Association of San Antonio
Southwest ISD
Mission Road Ministries
Urban Strategies, Inc.
Catholic Charities
Roy Maas Youth Alternatives
Texas Health Resources
South Dallas Employment Project
Boys & Girls Clubs of San Antonio
The Commit Partnership
Bynum School
Presa Community Center
Girl Scouts of Southwest Texas
Boys and Girls Clubs of the Permian Basin
AVANCE - San Antonio, Inc.
American Indians in Texas Spanish Colonial Missions
Meals on Wheels Victoria
Victoria Christian Assistance Ministry
Boys and Girls Club of DeWitt County
Communities in Schools of Greater Tarrant County
Vickery Meadow Youth Development Foundation
Madonna Center, Inc.
ChildSafe
Clarity Child Guidance Center
Educate Midland
The Springboard Center
The Salvation Army of Midland
Respite Care of San Antonio
Girl Scouts of the Desert Southwest
Centers for Children and Families
The Arc of San Antonio
The Children’s Shelter
Good Samaritan Center of San Antonio
ThriveWell Cancer Foundation
Lubbock Chamber of Commerce
Child Advocates San Antonio
Rohingya Society of Greater Houston
Alamo Colleges Foundation
Healy Murphy Center
The Women’s Center of Tarrant County
Alpha Home
Brazos Maternal & Child Health Clinic, Inc (The Prenatal Clinic)
Family Pathfinders of Tarrant County, Inc
Texas Midwest Community Network
Philanthropy Advocates, a Collaboration with Educate Texas
Texas Network of Youth Services
Girls Empowerment Network
Texas Health Resources
United Way of Williamson County
Lubbock Area United Way
United Way of West Ellis County
United Way of the Greater Fort Hood Area
United Way of the Crossroads
United Way of the Coastal Bend
United Way of the Brazos Valley, Inc.
United Way of Tarrant County
United Way of Southern Cameron County
United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County
United Way of Parker County
United Way of Odessa
United Way of Midland

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United Way of Mid & South Jefferson County
United Way of Metropolitan Dallas
United Way of Lamar County
United Way of Kaufman County
United Way of Johnson County, Inc.
United Way of Grayson County
United Way of Central Texas
United Way of Amarillo & Canyon

United Way Galveston County Mainland
United Way for Greater Austin
United Way of Greater Houston
United Way Abilene
United Way of Hays and Caldwell Counties
Nacogdoches Area United Way
Greater Longview United Way