



## Government of the District of Columbia Advisory Neighborhood Commission 4B

### **[DRAFT] RESOLUTION #4B-20-0502**

#### **Calling for Assessment and Plan to Broaden Municipal Internet Adopted May 26, 2020**

Advisory Neighborhood Commission 4B (Commission) takes note of the following:

- The District of Columbia is in the midst of an unprecedented public health emergency. Mayor Muriel Bowser has taken steps to slow community transmission of COVID-19 (coronavirus) by issuing a [Stay-at-Home Order](#) directing residents to stay at home except to perform essential activities. The public health emergency has highlighted the need for universal and reliable Internet to ensure all students are able to engage effectively in distance learning and workforce development training, as well as to ensure all District residents are able to find information about and access government benefits. Even once the declared public health emergency ends, its effects will be felt for a sustained period, requiring expansive and holistic considerations of how we address disparities in Internet access.
- Access to the Internet is a right, not a privilege, and reliable Internet is necessary to ensure access to education and public benefits. The District, like much of the country, faces a digital divide. As of 2015, the District has a broadband adoption rate of 74%, up from 57.9% in 2008, but there is a significant level of disparity among races. Only 59% of Black residents have a computer with broadband at home, compared to 71% of Hispanic residents, 83% of Asian residents, and 96% of White residents. The gap in broadband adoption is also apparent along socioeconomic lines. Residents earning over \$75,000 have a 92% adoption rate compared to 61% earning less than \$35,000. Gov't of the District of Columbia, Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning & Economic Dev., [Pathways to Inclusion](#) at 17 (2016). The public health emergency has heightened that divide and amplified the need for universal and reliable Internet. *See, e.g.,* Cecilia Kang, [“Parking Lots Have Become a Digital Lifeline,”](#) *New York Times* (May 5, 2020) (“One in four Americans has no high-speed internet access at home, according to the Pew Research Center, either because it’s too expensive or because the home is in a rural area with limited service. Some use their smartphone data plans for high-speed internet access, but

those plans are often insufficient to handle work from home and distance learning. That makes it harder for many people to work from home during the health crisis and for their children to keep up with their schoolwork away from the classroom.”). Universal and reliable Internet would help close the digital divide.

- The District has engaged in several efforts to close the digital divide, yet gaps and inequities persist.
  - “In 2010, the federal government provided the District with a \$17.4 million grant through the stimulus act, which the city government supplemented with \$7.5 million in matching funds, to build out the D.C. Community Access Network (DC-CAN), the country’s first 100-gigabit municipal fiber network—in other words, the most powerful city-run Internet infrastructure in America. The idea was to help bring the city’s existing fiber network, DC-NET, to underserved areas.” Aaron Wiener, “[Fiber-Optical Illusion](#),” *Washington City Paper* (May 1, 2013). While this funding has successfully provided Internet to “community anchor institutions” like libraries and schools, the District has not provided last-mile service to neighborhoods, indicating that the infrastructure is not being used to its full capacity and raising concerns regarding reliability in terms of bandwidth. *See id.*
  - The District’s Office of the Chief Technology Officer created Connect.DC in 2010 to work to bridge the digital divide by making technology easier to use, more accessible, more affordable, and more relevant to District residents. Connect.DC [recognizes](#) that “one in four District households does not have broadband service” and that “people who don’t have access to the Internet, can’t afford it, don’t know how to use it, or don’t see why it’s important, are at a great disadvantage in an increasingly digital age.” Connect.DC promotes affordable home Internet to low-income District residents and has continued to do so during the public health emergency. It is unclear whether any action has been taken to assess Connect.DC’s efforts, whether to expand those efforts, and whether they are sufficiently funded.
  - In 2016, the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development published a report entitled [Pathways to Inclusion](#), which provided several recommendations to close the digital divide, including “partner[ing] with telecommunications firms that are willing to support residents and entrepreneurs who currently lack adequate internet service” in an effort to “achieve universal and equitable adoption of high speed broadband.” It is unclear whether any action has been taken to determine implementation of these recommendations and any barriers that may exist.

- In 2017, Councilmember Brandon T. Todd (Ward 4), with support from Councilmembers Brianne K. Nadeau (Ward 1), Jack Evans (Ward 2), Anita Bonds (At-Large), Elissa Silverman (At-Large), and Robert C. White, Jr. (At-Large), introduced the Wi-Fi Task Force Act of 2017, [B22-0063](#). The draft legislation proposed a task force composed of governmental and nongovernmental representatives with a goal of researching how the District could efficiently provide free wireless Internet access throughout the District and construct and operate a municipal wireless network. The Committee on Government Operations held a hearing, but the proposed legislation ultimately stalled.
- During the public health emergency, District government entities, along with community organizations and businesses, have promoted existing Internet options for lower-income families, including free public hotspots and Comcast’s Internet Essentials program. There is little data on the success of these efforts before the public health emergency (or now), however, and none of these options serves as a substitute for reliable, free, high-speed home Internet access for lower-income residents. Comcast’s Internet Essentials program reverts to paid service after two months of free service. Having to travel to public hotspot locations for daily access to distance learning and online services is inconvenient for families who may also face transportation challenges. Until DC ensures that every resident has reliable Internet access at home, residents will continue to be left behind in accessing critical services and economic and educational opportunities.
- During the public health emergency, Mayor Bowser and education leaders promoted the “DC Education Equity Fund,” a private fundraising effort, as a way to solve technological and Internet access gaps for students engaged in remote learning. Private fundraising campaigns are not and cannot be a long-term substitute for comprehensive public solutions to the inequities that persist in our education system, especially when linked to entities that advance a political agenda and regularly lobby the DC Council but are not subject to Council oversight.
- Digital Equity in DC Education has provided [recommendations](#) for the ReOpen DC Advisory Group, “urg[ing] city leaders to look at more sustainable, long-term solutions for providing digital equity.” Their recommendations include “[p]ilot[ing] free Internet access at public housing” and “[c]onduct[ing] an immediate and comprehensive assessment for broadening municipal Internet that provides policymakers a menu of options, at various price points.” Other jurisdictions serve to provide best practices as to how to assess and implement expanding

municipal Internet. See, e.g., National Digital Inclusion Alliance, [Digital Inclusion Start-Up Manual](#) (2019).

- Efforts to assess gaps in Internet access and government programs, as well as a commitment to and assessment of options for broadening municipal Internet, honors Mayor Bowser’s dedication to a Resilient DC. The Mayor has defined “urban resilience” as “the capacity of individuals, communities, businesses, and systems within a city to survive, adapt, and thrive no matter what kinds of chronic stresses and acute shocks they experience.” “Shocks” are defined as “sudden, acute disasters, like storms, floods, heatwaves, or cyberattacks,” as well as “economic crises, like a government shutdown or relocation of a major employer.” See Mayor Muriel Bowser, [Resilient DC: A Strategy to Thrive in the Face of Change](#) (Apr. 29, 2019). The current public health emergency is a shock that requires strategies to ensure resiliency regarding the fundamental right to education and the sharing of important information and access to public benefits.

## **RESOLVED:**

- That Advisory Neighborhood Commission 4B calls on the District’s Deputy Mayor for Education’s Digital Divide Response Group, the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development’s Innovation and Technology Inclusion Council, and the Office of Chief Technology Officer, and any other relevant entities to immediately collect robust data regarding Internet access, including reliability metrics such as bandwidth, across the District and conduct an assessment regarding gaps in Internet access and government programs, including a review of the offerings, funding, and support for the District’s Office of the Chief Technology Officer’s Connect.DC – Digital Inclusion Initiative; a review of implementation of the Department of Planning and Economic Development’s 2016 [Pathways to Inclusion](#) report recommendations; and a citywide technology survey. In some cases, government programs exist to help lower-income residents but are not funded or supported at the scale needed to close the digital divide. The DC Council should exercise oversight authority regarding the aforementioned data and assessment, and the information should be shared with the public by fall 2020.
- That Advisory Neighborhood Commission 4B calls on the District’s Deputy Mayor for Education’s Digital Divide Response Group, the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development’s Innovation and Technology Inclusion Council, and the Office of Chief Technology Officer, and other relevant entities to conduct an immediate and comprehensive assessment of possibilities for broadening municipal Internet and ensuring its reliability that provides policymakers a menu of options, at various price points. This assessment should take full advantage of existing public infrastructure. In addition, this assessment should

consider a phased approach that prioritizes, as necessary, parts of the District with the lowest home broadband adoption rates (Wards 5, 7, and 8) and the possibility of piloting free Internet access low-income areas, including public housing. Finally, this assessment should consider all possible public funding streams, including from the federal government. Funding considerations should not be limited to private funding options or public-private partnerships, and effort should be taken to not concentrate offerings within a single private company. The DC Council should exercise oversight authority regarding the aforementioned assessment, and the information should be shared with the public by fall 2020.

**FURTHER RESOLVED:**

That the Commission designates Commissioner Erin Palmer, ANC 4B02, to represent the Commission in all matters relating to this Resolution.

**FURTHER RESOLVED:**

That, in the event the designated representative Commissioner cannot carry out their representative duties for any reason, the Commission authorizes the Chair to designate another Commissioner to represent the Commission in all matter relating to this Resolution.

**FURTHER RESOLVED:**

That, consistent with DC Code § 1-309, only actions of the full Commission voting in a properly noticed public meeting have standing and carry great weight. The actions, positions, and opinions of individual commissioners, insofar as they may be contradictory to or otherwise inconsistent with the expressed position of the full Commission in a properly adopted resolution or letter, have no standing and cannot be considered as in any way associated with the Commission.

**ADOPTED** by voice vote at a regular public meeting (notice of which was properly given, and at which a quorum of \_\_ of nine members was present) on May 26, 2020, by a vote of \_\_ yes, \_\_ no, \_\_ abstentions.