



November 24, 2019

Ajit Pai  
Chairman  
Federal Communications Commission  
445 12th Street, SW  
Washington, DC 20554

**RE:** Block grant federal broadband funds to the Commonwealth of Virginia, through the VATI Program to increase efficient deployment and eliminate the digital divide.

Chairman Pai,

Thank you for your continued commitment to expanding rural broadband and your leadership in creating the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund. This program, along with the USDA ReConnect Program, will connect millions of currently un-served homes. As American life migrates more and more online, communities that remain disconnected will fall further and further behind. Governments at all levels must work in unison and with urgency to close the broadband gap.

Virginia PTA recognizes that digital learning and connectivity at school and at home enables students to be prepared for tomorrow's jobs and levels the playing field for students regardless of their affluence level or geographic location. Unfortunately, many schools across the Commonwealth are aging and lack scalable fiber-optic connections, sufficient affordable bandwidth, and robust Wi-Fi networks that can deliver information to student devices in the classroom. Additionally, many families lack access to affordable broadband at home and must travel to coffee shops or libraries to complete and electronically submit homework assignments. Twenty-first century learning requires sufficient high-speed digital infrastructure to close the skills gap and the rural divide.

The status quo for delivering universal broadband coverage has not moved fast enough and governments must think outside the box. We urge the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to block grant federal broadband funds to the Commonwealth of Virginia, as the Commonwealth has established both effective and efficient broadband grant programs, which can be deployed more quickly than can federal funds to the estimated 600,000 un-served Virginians.

Virginia has swiftly taken a leading role amongst the states in addressing the digital divide, starting with the 2018 announcement of Governor Ralph Northam's goal for universal broadband access within a decade. To support this objective, legislative leaders from across the aisle have increased broadband funding fivefold over the past two years with further increases anticipated this upcoming General Assembly session. Along with increased funding, state leaders have convened over 100 private companies, member organizations, trade associations, and broadband providers to create the Commonwealth Connect Coalition – all committed to the goal of universal coverage in Virginia.

The cornerstone of Virginia’s success is the Virginia Telecommunication Initiative (VATI). The program is centered on public/private partnerships between a unit of local government and private broadband provider coming together to bring service to un-served areas. Ensuring that localities are part of broadband build-outs guards against “cherry-picking” and allows local officials to frame each project in the larger goal of universal coverage. Since its creation in 2016, VATI has been consistently oversubscribed and enjoys broad support from stakeholders of all stripes.

By being closer to the ground, understanding local dynamics and geographies, and having established relationships with localities and providers throughout the state, Virginia’s grant programs have demonstrated impressive efficiency. Since 2017, the Commonwealth has awarded over \$25 million in funding, which has leveraged significant private funding and connected over 71,000 homes and businesses within two years of the award. By comparison, the FCC’s Connect America Funds (CAF) II program awarded \$84.5 million to providers in Virginia, which will connect 32,600 homes and businesses over the course of the next decade.

All Virginians and companies that do business in Virginia are deeply grateful to the FCC staff and leadership for this funding. Without these federal dollars, the Commonwealth will not meet its goal of universal service by 2028. More importantly, high-speed broadband will remain out of reach for hundreds of thousands of Virginians. That said, given the significantly more efficient deployment of funds through Virginia programs, as well as the further efficiency that could be gained by reducing the number of applications necessary to access state and federal funds, we ask that FCC broadband funding be block granted to Virginia with the requirement that such funds flow through the VATI program.

This is not without precedent. Similar to Community Development Block Grants, Community Services Block Grants, or the FCC’s previous block granting of CAF funds to the State of New York, block granting federal broadband funds to high performing states like Virginia can stretch precious resources further and speed connection of unserved communities.

Your leadership on this issue has been a hallmark of your chairmanship, and we urge you to continue to innovate in the deployment of federal funds. Please begin the process of block granting forthcoming FCC broadband funding to Virginia and such other states as can demonstrate similarly effective programs.

Thank you,

*Jenna Alexander*

Jenna Alexander  
Vice President of Advocacy  
Virginia PTA

*Donna Colombo*

Donna Colombo  
President  
Virginia PTA

CC: Senator Mark Warner  
Senator Tim Kaine  
Congressman Robert Wittman  
Congresswoman Elaine Luria  
Congressman Robert Scott  
Congressman Donald McEachin  
Congressman Denver Riggleman  
Congressman Ben Cline  
Congresswoman Abigail Spanberger  
Congressman Donald Beyer  
Congressman Morgan Griffith  
Congresswoman Jennifer Wexton  
Congressman Gerald Connolly

### **ABOUT VIRGINIA PTA**

*The Virginia PTA's twenty-one districts support 240,000 members at local PTAs in 1,025 schools across the Commonwealth. Hands-on, local support for PTAs in schools across the Commonwealth combined with robust training resources and a national advocacy platform, sets the PTA apart as the leader in supporting local school parent groups. Local PTAs play a crucial role in building strong partnerships between parents and administrators and creating a vibrant community of engaged parents which contributes to the educational success, health, and well-being of our children and communities. We speak with one voice for every child - not only in our local schools, but also in State Legislatures, the US Congress and in our State and National Departments of Education.*