

RESOLUTION 4**Adapting to a Virtual World: Closing the Digital Divide and Expanding Broadband Access**

WHEREAS:

Access to the internet has become what access to electricity was in the early 1900s, a necessity for modern living. Yet equity gaps in accessing the internet remain. When the pandemic hit and all was shut down, 42 million Americans could not purchase broadband internet, either for lack of affordability or service providers; and

WHEREAS:

A report published by the Abell Foundation found that nearly 2 out of 5 Marylanders do not have broadband internet service at home, and nearly 1 in 3 Marylanders do not have a computer or laptop. Without internet service at home or a computer, too many Marylanders are struggling to access government services like education, unemployment assistance, SNAP, and social security or access to basic needs like grocery shopping and picking up prescriptions. Even for those who can access an internet connection in some fashion, the price remains a barrier. Nearly 35% of Maryland's population does not have access to affordable internet plans; and

WHEREAS:

In a telework survey AFSCME Council 3 distributed in October 2020, over 1000 state and higher education workers responded that they are struggling to telework and meet demand for many of these same reasons listed above; and

WHEREAS:

Annually, internet service providers combine for \$115 billion in profits with Comcast owning a total market share of almost 40%. These private companies make huge profits in part, by competing to provide broadband access at the lowest possible set up cost. If it is too expensive to establish networks in a particular area, or community, or neighborhood they can simply choose not to build there because broadband is not considered a public utility; and

WHEREAS:

The communities abandoned by broadband access often track along age, economic and racial inequity lines. Across America, 59% of households with an annual income of below \$20,000, 46% of African American households, 50% of Hispanic households, and 55% of individuals 65 and older lack internet access. These disparities carry consequences. Students miss out on performance. Vulnerable Marylanders miss out on vital services they depend on. Workers are shut out from job training and application materials that only exist in online form; and

WHEREAS:

In 2013, the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey ranked Baltimore City 261 out of 296 among American cities surveyed in the number of households with home internet connections. Outside

of Baltimore, approximately 324,000 Marylanders who live in rural communities don't have access to broadband.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED:

That AFSCME Council 3 will fight for affordable broadband access for all, including the expansion of publicly owned broadband networks in Maryland; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED:

That AFSCME Council 3 will urge for the additional distribution of computer equipment for workers and students, and for workplace and educational policies that increase digital literacy, knowledge about technology and data, and additional skills training for individuals of all ages; and

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED:

That AFSCME Council 3 will continue to join the Teachers in advocating during this pandemic that Internet Service Providers like Comcast offer families higher data caps, free WIFI hotspots, and faster internet service to make remote work and learning more accessible to help defeat the continued spread of the virus.

SUBMITTED BY:

Executive Board, AFSCME Council 3