Legislation Text

File #: 200402, **Version:** 0

Authorizing the Committee on Education to hold hearings to consider a program that provides broadband internet for Philadelphians to access quality schools and quality jobs.

WHEREAS, Broadband is a modern-day essential service needed to conduct personal and professional affairs including; education, career development, and health care. In 2014, President Barack Obama called for the Federal Communications Commission to reclassify internet services as a utility as it has become an "essential part of everyday communication and everyday life." In 2016, the United Nations amended the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to include "freedom of expression… through any media and regardless of frontiers," and affirmed a resolution for the "promotion, protection, and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet"; and

WHEREAS, Bridging the digital divide is indispensable to City Council's anti-poverty plan to close the skills gap in the City of Philadelphia, where more than 27% of households lack access to broadband service. The digital divide spans across race and income levels such that communities of color and low-income communities are less likely to have access to traditional home broadband services. For example, 22% of Latinxs and 15% of Blacks access the internet solely with a smartphone, compared to 9% of whites who do so. Within the School District of Philadelphia, only 45% of students in grades 3-5, 56% of students in grades 6-8, and 58% of students in grades 9-12 have access to the internet from a home computer; and

WHEREAS, The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated the digital divide among Philadelphians. In response, the School District of Philadelphia issued 50,000 Chromebooks for students lacking access to technology during the pandemic. The City and School District further announced that certain commercial providers are waiving monthly fees or termination for a short-term period. Comcast, for example, agreed to provide two free months of service for customers enrolled in Internet Essentials, a program created under the City's 2015 Cable Franchise Agreement to provide discounted service, computer access, and digital skills training for low-income customers, subject to certain restrictions on existing customers and cell phone data usage; and

WHEREAS, The City needs to establish a long-term public-private partnership with broadband and cell phone providers, and extend coverage to specifically include cell phone data plans, through a surcharge or fund that offsets costs of broadband access for workers, students and their families, to close the widening digital divide across Philadelphia; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, That the City of Philadelphia's Committee on Education is authorized to hold hearings to consider a fund, surcharge, or other cost-sharing program that provides broadband internet for Philadelphians to access quality schools and quality jobs.