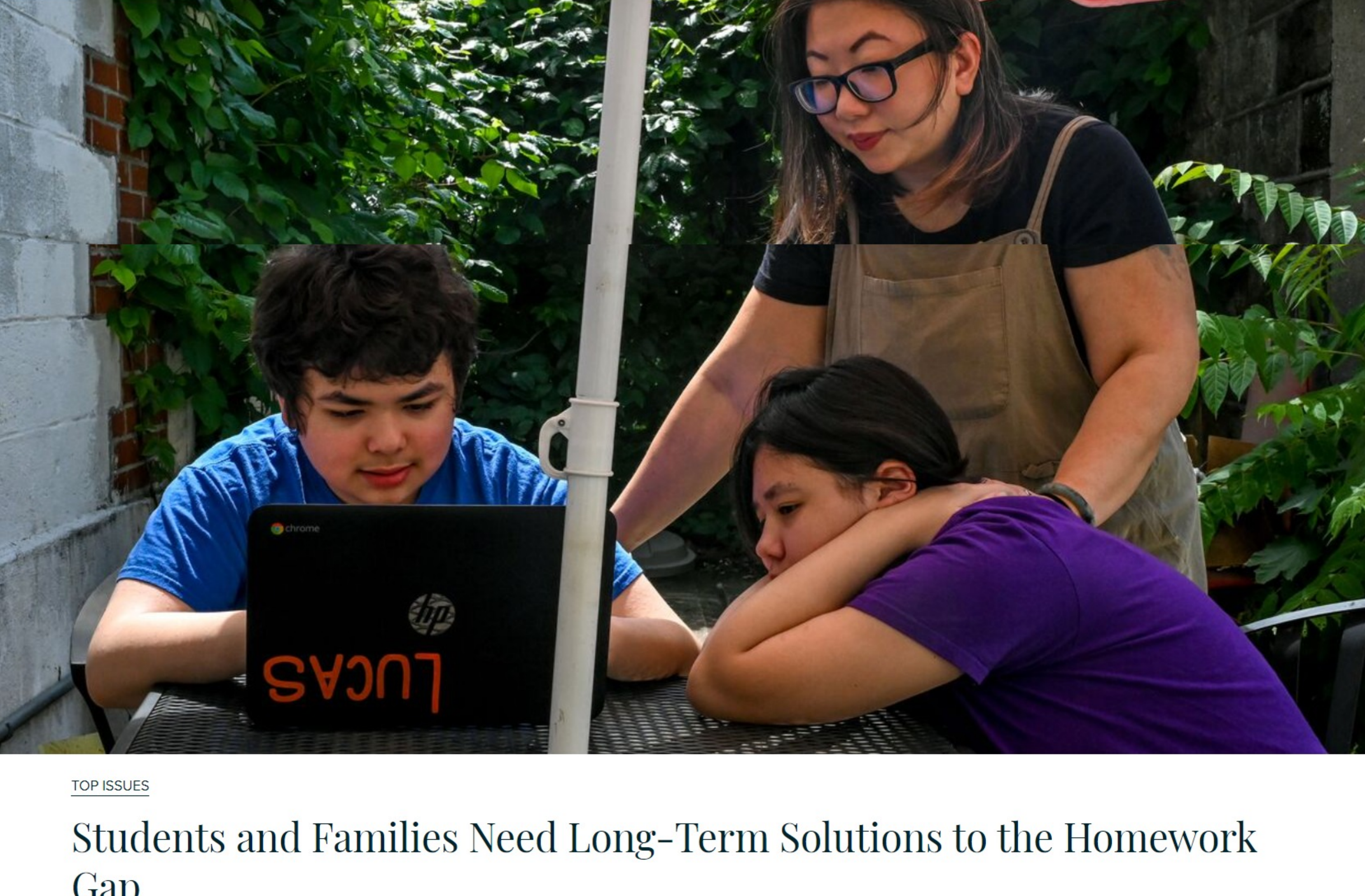




TOP ISSUES

## Students and Families Need Long-Term Solutions to the Homework Gap

COVID-19 aid helps millions of students access the internet outside of school. What happens when it's gone?

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To increase the internet bandwidth in their apartment, Paullette Ha-Healy and her husband bought multiple Wi-Fi boosters. They upgraded their broadband package at twice the original cost.

But connectivity problems still interrupt Ha-Healy's work as a local activist and member of the Citywide Council on Special Education in New York City. The connection frequently crashes while Ha-Healy's children, Lucas and Kira, are logged on for school, depriving them of live instruction and disrupting their special education services.

Despite these frustrations, Ha-Healy considers her family lucky. Many families—in New York and across the country—have had to rely on temporary fixes implemented during the pandemic, such as school-issued mobile hotspots and internet subsidies, so that their children could access remote learning.

In District 20—the southwestern Brooklyn home to a number of Title I schools, including one Ha-Healy's daughter attends—families had to wait weeks and even months to receive loaner computers from the New York City Department of Education.

"In Sunset Park, we have three schools that are within a five-block radius of each other, and they cumulatively had requested 300 devices," Ha-Healy said. "They didn't get them until almost April of this year."

Some families were surprised that some of the devices arrived with cracked screens and chargers that didn't work.

The district issued one mobile hotspot per household, each of which supported three devices at a time. That meant larger families with multiple students still lacked sufficient bandwidth. "The children would have to figure out the schedule, like, OK, if this particular pre-K child had live instruction at 9 a.m., then she would sign on and the other two children would have to go without," Ha-Healy said.

Ha-Healy also saw older students gathering outside of fast food restaurants to access free Wi-Fi so they could complete assignments and take tests.

City education department leaders knew internet access was a larger systemic problem, Ha-Healy said, but they only provided "quick little fixes." That was putting a Band-Aid on a complex problem, she said.



Paullette Ha-Healy in her backyard.  
Desiree Rios

## How Quick Fixes to Broadband Access Disparities Fall Short

Insufficient home broadband access is not just a New York City problem. During the pandemic, [the homework gap](#) became a full-blown crisis. Millions of students, particularly children of color and those in rural or low-income communities, couldn't access remote learning because their families [cannot access or afford](#) basic high-speed internet.

To address that digital divide, schools across the country distributed computers and mobile hotspots to students. Schools and districts also partnered with businesses to secure computers and broadband access for students and their families. Telecommunication companies donated thousands of hotspots to schools.

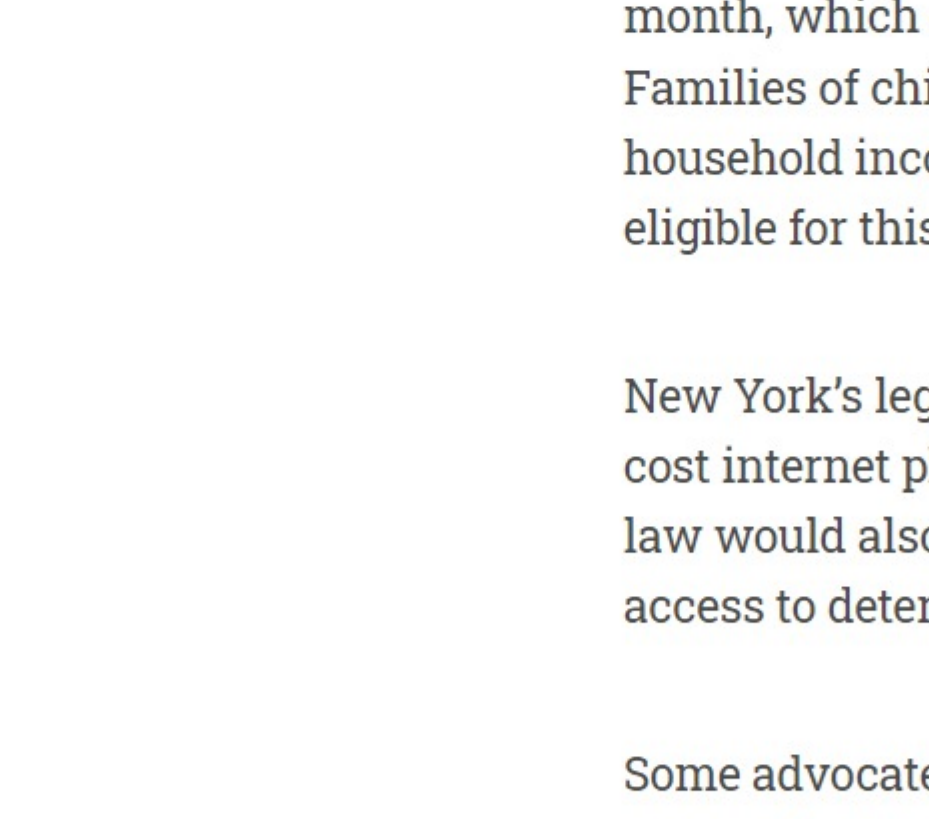
That response was never meant to be a long-term fix to inequitable broadband access.

"Even if we get students and teachers used to using these tools and resources, when that short-term money runs out there will be permanent costs," said Keith Krueger, CEO of the nonprofit [Consortium for School Networking](#).

Mobile hotspots can't support multiple users uploading content or simultaneous Zoom calls. "You also run into challenges where students max out the district-provided data plan, potentially in the middle of a school day," said Harrison Parker, vice president of operations at [NetRef](#). The educational technology company produces an [Internet Bandwidth Report](#) that allows districts to access accurate measurements of their students' average available bandwidth, which educators and administrators can use to modify classroom instruction and connect families to supports like hotspots or internet subsidies.

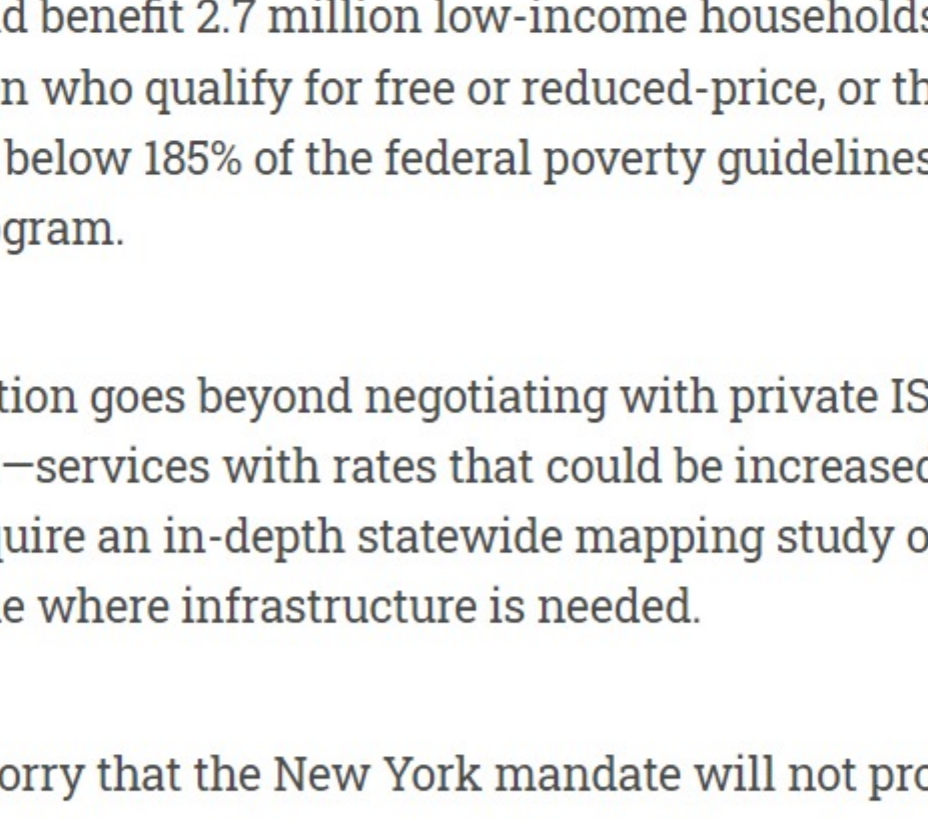
Some low-cost internet promotions and free trials ended with sticker shock: Families [received bills for internet services](#) that they could not afford.

### More On The Digital Divide



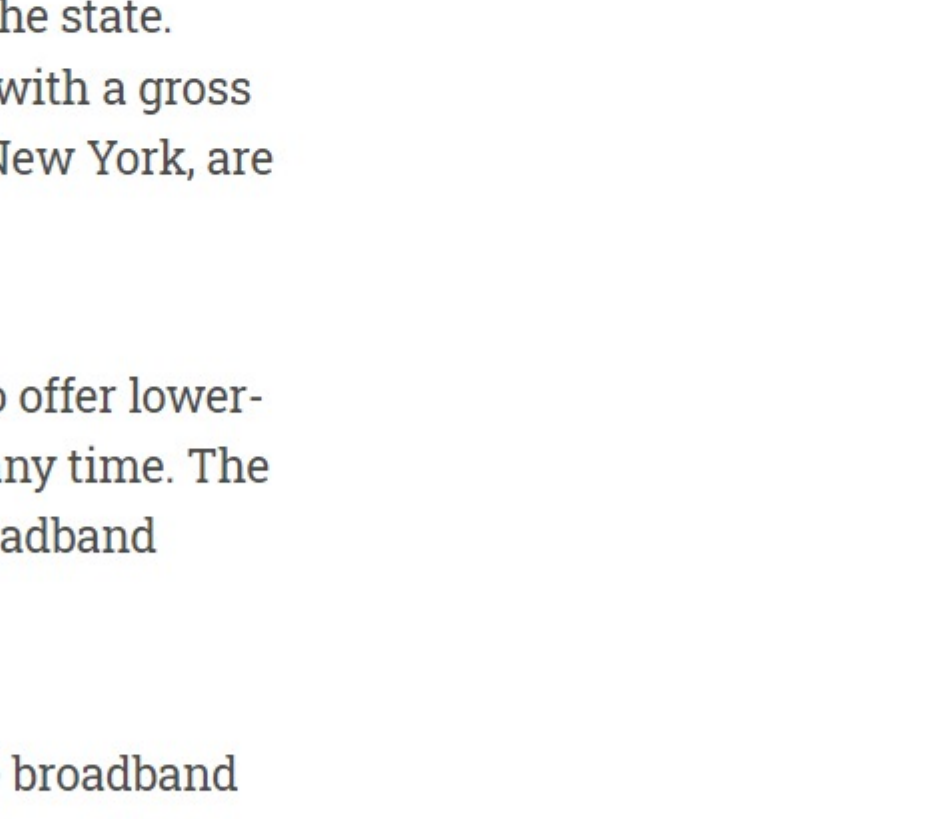
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There's a Digital Divide in Silicon Valley and It's Leaving Students Behind



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Slow Speeds, High Hopes: Exploring the Rural Broadband Gap



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What Homeless Students Lose When Schools Go Digital

## Could New State Laws Help Close the Broadband Gap?

Efforts are underway to find permanent solutions to broadband access disparities rather than pandemic-era triage.

Under the [Emergency Broadband Benefit program](#), eligible households can sign up to receive \$50 a month (or \$75 a month for households on tribal lands) to put toward internet service. They can also get a one-time stipend of up to \$100 to buy a laptop, tablet, or desktop computer. The program, which is administered by the Federal Communications Commission as part of the [\\$900 billion COVID relief bill](#) passed in late December, won't last forever. According to the program website, it is set to end "when the fund runs out of money, or six months after the Department of Health and Human Services declares an end to the COVID-19 health emergency, whichever is sooner."

Families benefiting from the emergency broadband program would eventually have to find another option for affordable internet.

That search for affordable internet could be easier for New Yorkers, who pay on average [more than \\$50 a month](#) for basic high-speed internet. In April, New York became the [first state to pass legislation](#) that requires ISPs to provide affordable service options. Under that law, providers have to supply a plan that costs \$15 a month, which could benefit 2.7 million low-income households in the state. Families of children who qualify for free or reduced-price, or those with a gross household income below 185% of the federal poverty guidelines in New York, are eligible for this program.

New York's legislation goes beyond negotiating with private ISPs to offer lower-cost internet plans—services with rates that could be increased at any time. The law would also require an in-depth statewide mapping study of broadband access to determine where infrastructure is needed.

Some advocates worry that the New York mandate will not provide broadband access that is sufficient enough to support the digital needs of remote students and larger households where multiple students need to be online at the same time.

New York's affordable internet requirements would meet the current FCC standard, but that is "far less than what most advocates and folks in the telecom industry believe is reasonably high-speed broadband," said Richard Berkley, the executive director of the [Public Utility Law Project of New York](#).

Eligible families would have to upgrade to a plan that costs \$20 a month to receive download speeds of at least 200 Mbps, which is what consumer advocate BroadbandNow considers [good for most households](#) where multiple users will be online and streaming content at the same time.

Ha-Healy is also skeptical that the plans offered under the New York law will be a cure-all for families in the state. She worries that families with outstanding balances or unpaid internet bills will not be eligible for the deal, which is what happened last year with some offers of temporarily free internet services. Internet service providers Optimum and Spectrum [refused to honor](#) their offer of free 60-day service for NYC families with outstanding bills.

Advocates will have to keep an eye on whether the download speeds of internet services offered under New York's new law are adequate for families, if the \$15-a-month price is truly affordable, and whether there are any data caps, Berkley said. But the law is a step in the right direction for low-income families in New York who need broadband access but are stuck "choosing between which bills they can pay right now," he said. "This \$15-a-month option will make that part of life more affordable, and just generally possible."



Paullette Ha-Healy and her two children.  
Desiree Rios

## Learning From the Past to Meet Broadband Needs

There also are efforts at the federal level for longterm ways to close the digital divide.

A top aim of President Joe Biden's \$2 trillion infrastructure bill is to deliver "affordable, reliable, high-speed broadband to every American." The bill includes a \$100 billion investment to expand broadband infrastructure and reach 100% coverage, promote pricing transparency and competition, and reduce the broadband costs. This plan would move away from relying on individual subsidies (such as the Emergency Broadband Benefit) to keep prices down for consumers by [potentially regulating](#) the prices ISPs can charge.

"While the president recognizes that individual subsidies to cover internet costs may be needed in the short term, he believes continually providing subsidies to cover the cost of overpriced internet service is not the right long-term solution for consumers or taxpayers," a White House [fact sheet](#) states.

The proposed American Jobs Plan has been mired by staunch opposition within Congress and among cable and telecom lobby groups. Negotiations between the White House and GOP lawmakers stalled earlier this month, marking an uncertain future for the bill.

The country faced similar challenges with electrification, Krueger of CoSN said. In the 1930s, electricity was ubiquitous in cities across the U.S., but only 10% of farms, ranches, and other rural homesteads had access to electrical power.

"Private power companies were either unwilling or unable to create an energy infrastructure in sparsely populated areas at a reasonable cost," according to [The Living New Deal](#), a research project and online public archive.

In 1936, Congress passed the [Rural Electrification Act](#) to provide low-cost loans to rural cooperatives. "The federal government made a commitment that regardless of where you live in the country, you're going to be able to get electricity," Krueger said.

By 1950, 90% of U.S. farms had electricity.

Fast-forward to today, and the nation's broadband access remains stratified along lines of income, ethnicity, and race, and many educators and other leaders say the consequences of maintaining this inequitable status quo loom large.