

THE LEGISLATURE  
STATE OF NEW YORK  
ALBANY

January 25, 2022

Mr. Robert F. Mujica  
Director, Division of the Budget  
State Capitol Building  
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Mr. Mujica,

We write to you regarding the \$15 million in funding for a Statewide Digital Inclusion Grant program that was appropriated in the FY2021-22 State Budget.

In the modern age, almost every aspect of our lives is being conducted through digital platforms. The persistence of the COVID-19 pandemic has compounded disparities in digital access across all communities in New York. These disparities have stymied the prosperity of individuals across a wide spectrum, with a particular detriment toward those with disabilities, poor and disadvantaged, children and young adults, elderly, and rural families. These challenges were especially damaging to students, as schools and libraries were forced to quickly pivot and expand digital-based learning systems. We still have a long way to go, but we still have momentum from last year's legislative session at our disposal to deconstruct and address the digital equity problem.

New York's 2021-22 budget included \$15 million for a Statewide Digital Inclusion Grant program to fund digital inclusion programs at the local level by providing affordable access to home broadband devices, tech support, and training courses for schools, libraries, and not-for-profits. I'm proud that we have taken steps to ensure that New Yorkers are not left behind as we continue develop into a more integrated and equitable digital world.

As the chairs and ranking members of the Senate and Assembly Committees on Libraries, we are thrilled about the 2022-23 Executive Budget's inclusion of the ConnectALL initiative, which would provide \$1.6 billion for a new office to provide grants and affordability subsidies and overhaul regulatory hurdles. These funds will help address the scope and intent of last year's Digital Inclusion program. However, the funding for that program has still not been released and has merely become re-appropriated in this year's executive budget proposal at the full \$15 million.

Because of the vital need for these funds to go towards their desired use, and to avoid giving the perception that this re-appropriation represents new, additional funding, we are respectfully requesting that these funds be disbursed in a timely manner so that we can follow through with the commitments we made over a year ago.

It is our duty as New York State lawmakers to ensure that these funds are being handled responsibly while being conscientious of time sensitive needs. Closing this digital divide is especially critical now as the pandemic continues into another year, further exacerbating inequities around broadband access. "The internet is not a luxury—it is a necessity," as former President Barack Obama once noted. This was a simple yet powerful declaration which underscores how integral digital access is for Americans to live and learn in the modern age.

We look forward to continuing the important work on this year's budget as we push forward into the 2022 legislative session. Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,



Sean M. Ryan  
Member of the Senate, 60<sup>th</sup> District  
Chair, Committee on Libraries



Kimberly Jean-Pierre  
Member of Assembly, 11<sup>th</sup> District  
Chair, Committee on Libraries & Education Technology



Daphne Jordan  
Member of the Senate, 43<sup>rd</sup> District  
Ranking Member, Committee on Libraries



Josh Jensen  
Member of Assembly, 134<sup>th</sup> District  
Ranking Member, Committee on Libraries & Education Technology

Cc: The Hon. Kathy Hochul, Governor of the State of New York  
Dr. Betty A. Rosa, Commissioner, Department of Education  
Daniel Fuller, Deputy Secretary for Education, Executive Chamber  
Jennifer Trowbridge, Office of Governmental Relations, NYS Education Department  
The Hon. Andrea-Stewart Cousins, Majority Leader, NYS Senate  
The Hon. Carl E. Heastie, Speaker, NYS Assembly