

Opinion Editorial

By Dominic M. Calabro, President and CEO, Florida TaxWatch

**WORD COUNT:** 573

**SUGGESTED TITLE:** Unlocking Floridians' economic potential through the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP)

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the importance of access to reliable and affordable broadband Internet service in our daily lives, which makes available an almost limitless amount of information; provides a platform for education, health care, and commerce; and facilitates family connections, social communication, and idea sharing. What's more, public and private agencies alike offer critical services and regular updates for citizens through online programs.

It is difficult to imagine life without this connection. Yet, for many Floridians, Internet service, and the benefits associated with its use, are not available. For others, Internet service is an option, but out of reach due to such things as costs for computers or connections. These households and communities that currently lack access to affordable, reliable, high-quality Internet find it hard to fully participate in learning, work, healthcare, social services, government programs, and civic life.

Recently, access to broadband Internet has been made more accessible through the federal Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), which provides a subsidy to low- and middle-income families so they can access reliable Internet service at a more affordable price. Rather than providing a subsidy directly to companies, the ACP provides vouchers directly to eligible individuals. Households that meet the eligibility criteria receive a \$30 per month discount on Internet services (\$75 per month for households on tribal lands), and a one-time \$100 stipend to purchase electronic devices. More than 1.17 million Florida households, in every county across the state, have benefited from the ACP.

This market-driven approach allows families to choose the Internet provider that is best for them and spurs competition among providers to cater to ACP recipients. If a provider is not meeting the demands of the consumer, recipients can transfer their discount to a competing service. Some Internet providers have piggybacked the ACP onto other programs in ways that permit qualified customers to get free access to Internet.

The ACP has been a critical tool in helping bridge the "digital divide" that exists between those who have access to modern information and communications technology and those who do not. Florida leaders have done a great deal to make broadband service available to Florida households, but the availability of a high-speed Internet network in and of itself does not guarantee that it will be used. The ACP helps make Internet access more affordable by lowering the access price and making dollars available to purchase necessary electronic devices.

The ACP is popular with elected officials on both sides of the aisle; however, despite being an outright success, the ACP is at risk of running out of money. The need and demand is eating its way through the ACP's \$14.2 billion in funding. In fact, it is projected that funding to support the ACP will run out by mid-2024, but there is a very real possibility it will run out even before then.

The ACP represents an important investment in the lives of millions of Floridians, one that allows low-income families to participate in the digital marketplace. A considerable amount of time, energy, and money has been spent on efforts to close the digital divide and we cannot stop closing the gap now. We urge Congress to act now to continue funding the ACP so that low-income Florida households can continue to receive the support they need to remain connected. Failure to act will put low-income Americans and Floridians at risk of being unable to use the Internet to unlock their unlimited economic potential.

*Dominic M. Calabro has led Florida TaxWatch's world-class research team – the “eyes and ears” of taxpayers – as President and CEO for nearly all of the organization's 43-year existence.*

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