

ASSEMBLY HOMELAND SECURITY AND STATE
PREPAREDNESS COMMITTEE

STATEMENT TO

ASSEMBLY JOINT RESOLUTION No. 158

STATE OF NEW JERSEY

DATED: MARCH 16, 2020

The Assembly Homeland Security and State Preparedness Committee reports favorably Assembly Joint Resolution No. 158.

As reported by the committee, Assembly Joint Resolution No. 158 urges the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to take temporary measures to secure broadband access for those affected by the COVID-19 public health emergency. On January 31, 2020, the United States Health and Human Services Secretary declared the outbreak of a novel coronavirus, abbreviated as COVID-19, as a public health emergency in the United States. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the outbreak of COVID-19 a pandemic. Early research indicates that COVID-19 is more contagious than the seasonal flu, SARS, and MERS and the United States Center for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that people should exercise social distancing, which entails avoiding mass gathering, and quarantine, if an individual might have been exposed.

In order to practice social distancing, many schools and business have closed and cancelled mass gatherings, opting to continue operations remotely via the internet. Telemedicine services, accessed through the internet, also are vital to the COVID-19 response, as hospital-acquired infections dissuade in-person visits, traditional healthcare systems reach capacity, and quarantines prevent certain individuals from physically accessing healthcare facilities.

However, only 73 percent of American adults have access to high-speed internet and the estimates are even lower among rural and low-income areas. This lack of access makes it especially difficult for populations in rural and low-income areas to access medical care, continue education, and maintain employment during this public health emergency. The FCC is urged to secure universal broadband access by taking temporary measures, such as approving experimental licenses to expand wireless networks, applying funds to boost connectivity in areas of need, and urging private carriers to launch mobile cell towers. The FCC took similar measures in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. This public health emergency has the potential to exacerbate geographic and income inequality in this country and can be addressed by taking emergency measures that secure broadband access for areas in need.