OFFICE OF RACIAL EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Marc Elrich
County Executive

Tiffany Ward
Director

MEMORANDUM

June 27, 2022

To: Jennifer Bryant, Director
            Office of Management and Budget

cc: Gabe Albornoz, President
            County Council

From: Tiffany Ward, Director
            Office of Racial Equity and Social Justice

Re: Racial Equity Impact Assessment (REIA) for Supplemental Appropriation (SA) #22-94
            Montgomery Connects Computer Grant Funding

I.   **FINDING:** The Office of Racial Equity and Social Justice (ORESJ) finds that
        Supplemental Appropriation #22-94 Montgomery Connects Computer Grant Funding is
        likely to advance racial equity and social justice in the County as it targets resources to
        households most burdened by the digital divide to help increase access to computers and
        reduce opportunity and achievement gaps in education such as the Homework Gap.

II.   **BACKGROUND:** The purpose of Supplemental Appropriation #22-94 Montgomery
        Connects Computer Grant Funding is to purchase 40,048 computers (10,048 in FY22
        30,000 in FY23) for distribution to low-income residents participating in the Montgomery
        Connects Computer for You program in 2022. This program received federal funding from
        the Emergency Connectivity Fund which is a part of the American Rescue Plan Act of
        2021. The Emergency Connectivity Fund grant program aims to help schools and libraries
        provide the tools and services their communities need for remote learning during the
        COVID-19 emergency period[1]. The goal of this COVID-19 relief is to help close the

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[1] Federal Communications Commission. Emergency Connectivity Fund. Available at: https://www.fcc.gov/emergency-connectivity-fund

Office of Racial Equity and Social Justice
101 Monroe Street, 6th Floor   •   Rockville, Maryland 20850   •   240-777-2500
www.montgomerycountymd.gov

Homework Gap for students who currently lack access to internet or the devices they need to connect to the classroom[2].

The Homework Gap describes an aspect of the digital divide specifically related to a households' lack of home internet or hardware necessary to support online learning. Prior to the pandemic, data suggests that as many as 17 million children under the age of 18 in the US[3] were affected by this issue—disproportionately impacting low-income households and households of color specifically, those identifying as Black, Latino, and American Indian/Alaska Native[4]. Additionally, estimates suggest that the education of as many as 7.3 million children may be negatively impacted by not having a computer in their household[5]. In 2018, Black teens were more likely than any other racial or income group to report being unable to complete homework because of a lack of reliable access to a computer or the internet[6] while Hispanic teens were more likely than any other racial group to do their homework on a cell phone[7].

These data points suggest that even before the pandemic, students of color faced technology related barriers to academic achievement. For example, students who rely exclusively on smartphones for completing homework must deal with smaller screens which are less practical for writing, editing, calculations, and graphics and may carry financial or other barriers such as data caps or fewer features[8]. In an October 2020 interview, the Chairwoman of the US Federal Communications Commission, Jessica Rosenworcel, described the structural nature of this gap and the digital divide more generally[9]. She warned that—without intervention—the pandemic could exacerbate the Homework Gap[10], worsening existing education and opportunity gaps.

Pew research confirms some of these early fears about the Homework Gap amid the pandemic. In a 2021 survey, 27% of parents said their children had to do schoolwork on a cell phone while 16% said their child was unable to complete schoolwork because of a lack

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[2] Federal Communications Commission.

[3] All4Ed. Homework Gap. July 21, 2020. Available at: https://all4ed.org/publication/homeworkgap/

[4] All4Ed. See data analysis section.

[5] All4Ed.

[6] Katherine Schaeffer. Pew Research Center. "What we know about online learning and the homework gap amid the pandemic". October 1, 2021. Available at: https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/10/01/what-we-know-about-online-learning-and-the-homework-gap-amid-the-pandemic/

[7] Katherine Schaeffer.

[8] All4Ed.

[9] Tanya Basu. MIT Technology Review. "Why the "homework gap" is key to America's digital divide". October 13, 2020. Available at: https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/10/13/1010243/jessica-rosenworcel-homework-gap-key-to-americas-digital-divide/

[10] Tanya Basu. https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/10/13/1010243/jessica-rosenworcel-homework-gap-key-to-americas-digital-divide/

of computer access at home[11]. As with the homework gap, these hardware challenges disproportionately impact lower-income families, with 37% of lower-income parents reporting their child had to do their schoolwork on a cell phone and 25% of lower-income parents reporting that their child was unable to do schoolwork because they didn't have access to a computer at home[12]. These barriers have created concerns among teens about their academic achievement. In a Pew Research Center survey conducted between April and May 2022, most teens who at least sometimes do their homework on a cellphone say it's made keeping up with their homework harder[13]. Further, teens of color (19% of Black, 28% of Hispanic) were more likely than White teens (11%) to report being extremely or very concerned about falling behind in school due to the pandemic[14].

Results from the Montgomery Connects Computer for You[15] pilot and articulated racial equity and social justice goals point to a program with the potential of shrinking the Homework gap and reducing the digital divide in the County. The following are data points that accompanied this supplemental appropriation request:

- 55% of recipients earn less than $25,000 per year and 35% earn between $25,001 and $50,000 per year;

- 54% of recipients are Black or African American, and 31% are of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin;

- 85% of recipients responding to our survey stated they have a smartphone, but only 11% had a computer and most existing computers were more than 9 years old; and

- A combined 56% of recipients and events were in Upcounty (37%) and Eastern Montgomery[16] (19%).

These datapoints suggest that structural inequities disproportionately impacting low-income households and households of color in accessing education-related technology are being addressed through targeted outreach and enrollment criteria. In addition, the program's racial equity and social justice goals—working with trusted partners, collocating enrollment for services (including broadband), and expanding language access—indicate an

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[11] Katherine Schaeffer.

[12] Katherine Schaeffer.

[13] Monica Anderson. Michelle Faverio. Colleen McClain. Pew Research Center. "How Teens Navigate School During Covid-19". June 2, 20222. Available at: https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/06/02/how-teens-navigate-school-during-covid-19/
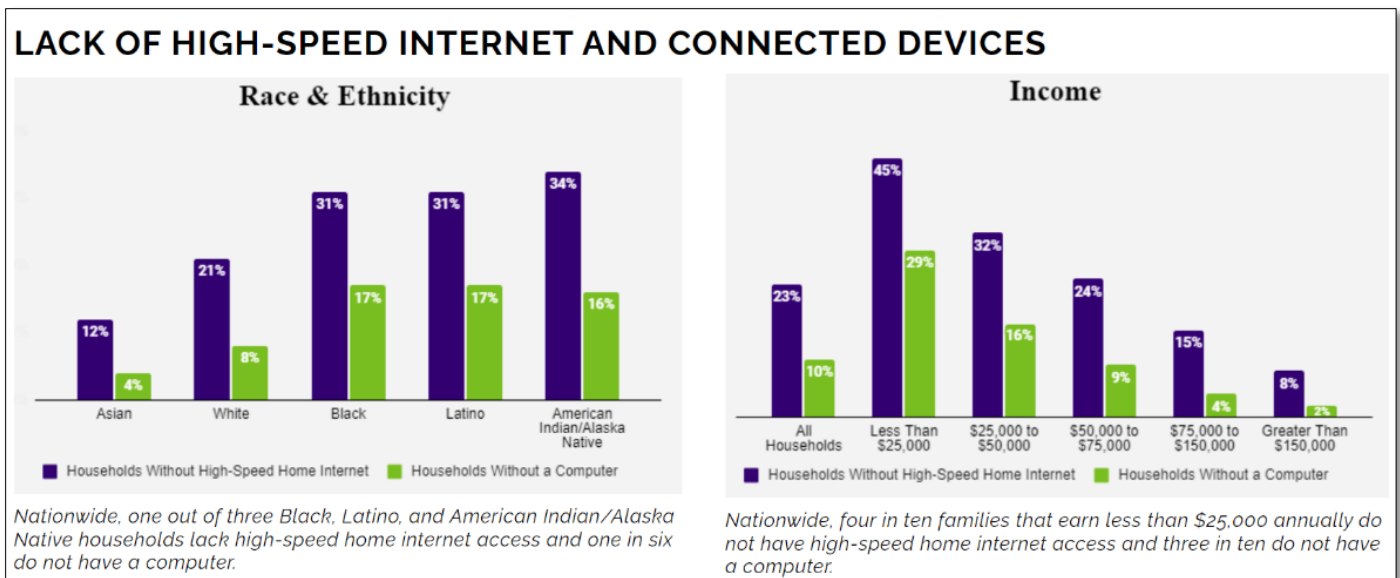
[14] Monica Anderson. Michelle Faverio. Colleen McClain.

[15] Montgomery County Government. *Montgomery Connects – Computer For You*. 2021. Available at: https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/obp/computer-for-you.html

[16] Montgomery County Government. *Regional Service* Centers. 2022. Available at: https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/Government/rsc.html

understanding of common barriers to access for low-income communities and households of color. While beyond the scope of this grant funding, ongoing engagement with residents— through surveys or other follow-up—will help program staff understand and measure educational outcomes and the effect of this program on the Homework gap. It will also help future distribution efforts, including identifying opportunities for program improvement and areas where complementary services—such as pro bono tech support and relevant digital literacy education—may strengthen impact.

III.   **DATA ANALYSIS:** The charts below are from an All4Ed Analysis of 2018 American Community Survey Data. The data shows the percentage of households without high-speed home internet and without a computer by race and ethnicity as well as income. The data shows larger percentages of Black, Latino, and American Indian/Alaska Native households – compared to White and Asian households – do not have access to high-speed internet or a computer at home. The data also shows that nationwide 23% of households do not have access to high-speed internet at home, while 10% of households do not have access to a computer at home. Those percentages almost double for households making less than $25,000 a year.

LACK OF HIGH-SPEED INTERNET AND CONNECTED DEVICES

Nationwide, one out of three Black, Latino, and American Indian/Alaska Native households lack high-speed home internet access and one in six do not have a computer.

Nationwide, four in ten families that earn less than $25,000 annually do not have high-speed home internet access and three in ten do not have a computer.

Source: Homework Gap. All4Ed. Published July 21, 2020. Available at: https://all4ed.org/publication/homeworkgap/

cc: Ken Hartman, Director, Office of Strategic Partnership, Office of the County Executive
       Gail Roper, Director, Department of Technology Enterprise Business Solutions
       Anita Vassallo, Director, Montgomery County Public Libraries