

Health Information Compliance Alert

Industry Notes: 2 New Bills Aim to Boost Broadband Usage

See COVID's impact on the legislation.

In recent legislation, the U.S. Senate addressed IT deficits and broadband equity issues in light of new data garnered during the pandemic.

Details: Before COVID-19 upended the world and changed the way people communicate and do business, healthcare was already pushing the digital envelope. However, despite the many HIT advancements on the market, the pandemic highlighted longstanding inequities for providers and patients in certain areas of the country. Two Senate bills propose that better broadband access, distribution, and utilization are key to bridging these equity gaps.

BRIDGE Act: On June 15, Senators **Michael Bennet** (D-CO), **Angus King** (I-ME), and **Rob Portman** (R-OH) introduced the bipartisan Broadband Reform and Investment to Drive Growth in the Economy (BRIDGE) Act of 2021. The legislation, which was originally put forward by King and Bennet last year, aims to bolster broadband affordability and adoption - particularly in areas that lack access - while "provid[ing] states with the resources and flexibility to deploy 'future-proof' networks able to meet communities' needs," notes a release from Bennet.

COVID-19 "underscored the vital importance of high-speed broadband to modern American life," and also showed how lacking resources can impact remote work, schooling, and telemedicine, the release says. Some of the top provisions mentioned in the bill include giving \$40 billion to the states, Tribal governments, and U.S. territories for broadband; investing in rural, urban, and underserved communities; bolstering broadband competition in the marketplace; promoting gigabit-speed increases; and making usage more inclusive and affordable.



Digital Equity Act: On June 10, Senator **Patty Murray** (D-WA) spearheaded the introduction of the Digital Equity Act of 2021 in coordination with her colleagues Senators King and Portman. The legislation hopes to "clos[e] the growing digital divide in communities across the country" with grants and policymaking, a Senate release suggests.

Key points in the legislation include:

- \$125 million in grants to "fund the creation and implementation of comprehensive digital equity plans in each State," the release says.
- Another \$125 million annually dedicated to equity projects, communities, and special interest groups.
- Assign the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) with the task of researching digital inclusion and offering support to local, state, and federal stakeholders.

The Digital Equity Act was originally part of President **Biden's** 2020 platform, the release indicated.

Both bills reference the importance of broadband and digital equity to healthcare, specifically telehealth and telemedicine.

Resources: Review the Digital Equity Act specifics at www.murray.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/ac629b47-4d7b-4f60-84cb-4887221a92f9/ehf21643.pdf and the BRIDGE Act details at www.bennet.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/e/a/ea2c14a9-2912-4ffd-bff6-443019b0629d/1ED0213CCE8AC2FD82441CD7B9FC5032.bridge-act-final.pdf.

