THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

WEBINAR

IT'S TIME FOR AN INFRASTRUCTURE BOOST: CONFRONTING UTILITY BILL AFFORDABILITY DURING THE COVID-19 RECESSION

Washington, D.C.
Tuesday, September 15, 2020

Introduction:

ADIE TOMER
Fellow, Metropolitan Policy Program
The Brookings Institution

HONORABLE BYRON BROWN
Mayor, City of Buffalo

Panel 1: Defining and Measuring Affordability

JOSEPH W. KANE, Moderator
Senior Research Associate and Associate Fellow, Metropolitan Policy Program
The Brookings Institution

RADHIKA FOX
Chief Executive Officer
U.S. Water Alliance

DIANE HERNANDEZ
Assistant Professor of Sociomedical Sciences,
Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health

TOM WHEELER
Visiting Fellow, Governance Studies, Center for Technology Innovation,
The Brookings Institution

PANEL 2: Designing a New Affordability Program

ADIE TOMER, Moderator
Fellow, Metropolitan Policy Program
The Brookings Institution

STACEY DEAN
Vice President for Food Assistance Policy,
Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

JOSHUA GOLDMAN
Director of Strategy and Business Development, VIA

MELISSA KOIDE
President and Director FinRegLab

* * * * *

P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. TOMER: Good morning, everyone. Thank you for joining today's Brookings event. It's time for an infrastructure boost confronting utility bill affordability during the COVID-19 recession. My name is Adie Tomer and I'm a fellow at the Institution where I help lead our infrastructure work. We know time is precious these days. Young children are at home, Zoom calls and college classes are endless and we're all a bit exhausted. Thank you for spending even a small bit of your day with us.

In the midst of a global pandemic and economic recession, the country has no shortage of major crises to manage. Today we want to discuss one that often gets overlooked by those fortunate enough to never worry about it. The price of a central infrastructure services. Keeping the lights on, the water running, the modem blinking and your car running all commands a significant amount of money. And for many Americans, the combination of all those bills is too much.

Now with permanent and temporary layoffs on the rise, we're seeing the chilling effects of little to no safety net around consumer prices. Water and electricity shutoffs are increasing. Students streaming classes are eclipsing their family's data caps. Car notes are going unpaid at the same time transit service is getting cut. This is no way to deliver an inclusive economic recovery. And with the colder months coming and COVID-19 a persistent threat, staying safe and productive inside our homes is of the utmost importance.

The United States is wealthy enough to do more and that's what we're here to discuss today. Our first panel moderated by my colleague Joe Kane will begin unpack the affordability challenge through the lens of different infrastructure expertise. Following that discussion, I'll moderate a second panel focused on potential solutions including lessons from the financial service industry and public nutrition programs.

Remember, you can submit questions via Twitter throughout the morning. We'll be monitoring and doing our best to post them to the panelists. But to kick off today's conversation, we are delighted to have Mayor Byron Brown of Buffalo, New York. Mayor Brown is now in his fourth term leading the city and his accomplishments in the local and statewide community are sizeable.

That includes today, a direct response to the affordability crisis. As the mayor and his regional collaborators have made water affordability and overcoming the digital divide among other issues chief concerns during this challenging economic moment. Even better for the rest of us, the mayor should be feeling good after the Bills and the Bills mafia scored a nice start to the NFL season on Sunday. Mayor Brown, thank you and the floor is yours.

HONORABLE BROWN: Thank you very much. And we are certainly feeling very good in Buffalo about the Bills win for their season opener. And also, that the Toronto Blue Jays are playing their home games in Buffalo. Good morning and allow me to thank Brookings for the opportunity to speak about the importance of water deliver infrastructure. It is my belief that access to clean water is vital to economic, environmental and the social health of a city.

That is why I have made affordable and safe water availability a cornerstone of my administration's approach to growth and equity. I want to recognize the leadership of the general manager of the Buffalo Sewer Authority and the chair of the Buffalo Water Board, O.J. McFoy as well as our commissioner of the Department of Public Works, Michael Finn.

Access to water is a right that every resident should be able to enjoy without it being the cause of economic hardship. While there is a cost to delivering this service, covering those costs must not become a burden that endangers anyone's ability to afford their housing, other utilities or enjoy a good quality of life. That's why my administration and the Buffalo Water Authority introduced our water equity road map.

This comprehensive plan emphasizes water affordability for Buffalo's low income residences and help generate support for the launching of our water affordability program in 2019 which can reduce the water bills of struggling homeowners by 20 to 60 percent. Enrollment in the program was designed to be very easy and accessible to eliminate any barriers to assistance that the most vulnerable residents too often face when trying to access government assistance.

Almost 700 people have enrolled in this program so far. Anyone who qualified for the county's heating assistance program or received nutrition assistance is automatically enrolled. Others can fill out a simple application that only takes 10 minutes to complete and can be done online. And the program does not discriminate between homeowners and renters. Anyone who uses Buffalo Water is able to participate.

In addition to affordable water, it is also a priority of my administration to ensure that Buffalo's water is safe. In 2019, with the use of approximately half a million dollars in state funding, the city launched the replace old lead lines or ROLL program to help residents who experience a break or other damage to their water line maintain a healthy and lead free water supply.

In the past, residents, especially in our poorest neighborhoods, would opt to repair rather than replace broken or damaged water lines. The cost of repairing them was significantly lower and many thought it was just as safe. As we know, repaired lead lines present a significant danger to the health of residents because the repair disturbs lead particles and contaminates the drinking water flowing through the line.

ROLL allows residents to replace those lines at no cost. So far, the program has helped over 300 residents and every Buffalo Water residential customer is able to purchase low cost insurance to protect their water lines through our partnership with a company called HomeServe, a well-known utility services insurance provider. Through this effort, we are not only updating Buffalo's water infrastructure but also providing low income residents the ability to become more financially secure through the purchase of this affordable insurance plan that will protect their home's water in the future.

The COVID-19 global health pandemic has been a terrible reminder of how critical clean and affordable water is to individuals and to our society as a whole. Water is critical to maintaining the level of hygiene necessary to combat the spread of the virus and other infectious diseases. And when people are experiencing water insecurity, they are placing the health of the entire community at risk.

That is why as part of my administration's response to COVID-19, we suspended all water shutoffs that were related to non-payment. We also proactively reached out to every home where the water had been turned off so we could arrange for it to be turned back on, helping hundreds of residents in our community.

In July, I also announced our water amnesty program. This initiative is open to all city residents who are behind on their water bills and waives the insurance rate and penalties associated with the customer's account balance. This proactive approach to ending water insecurity will help people pay for their service while our shutoff suspension is in effect and people can maintain a clean water supply as the public health crisis continues. To date, over 600 households have utilized this program.

By taking these steps, my administration is reaffirming its commitment to making sure every resident can benefit from the investments and upgrades we are putting into our water system. As I said at the opening of my statement, water is critical to the growth of Buffalo and is imperative that our future growth leaves no resident behind. Our focus is building a city of opportunity for all residents so that no resident is left out and no resident is left behind. Thank you for this opportunity to talk about water affordability in the City of Buffalo.

MR. KANE: Thank you, Mayor Brown. It's terrific to hear about your efforts in Buffalo and I think they set the stage very well for our panels today. Good morning everyone, my name is Joe Kane. I'm an infrastructure researcher at the Brookings Metro Program and I'll be moderating our first panel on defining and measuring affordability.

As Adie and Mayor Brown have already described, infrastructure affordability is a big challenge for many households across the country. That's especially true during the current pandemic and recession but it's also been the case for some time. It's just more visible now given just how much we recognize the importance of our essential infrastructure every day.

Water, energy, broadband, transportation and other bills have been an economic stress, especially for lower income households. From the perspective of utilities and other infrastructure operators though, we also know that there's a constant balancing act between affordability and investment. The financial and economic needs of our communities can vary widely. Geographic scale matters, the operational scale matters and the needs of individual rate payors matter too.

So, there's a lot to unpack here over the next 25 minutes or so. But I'm very excited to have three panelists lead our conversation and get a better handle on all this around the what, the where and for whom. That should hopefully set things up well for the second panel that will cover more of the how or how we address this challenge. And I also wanted to remind our viewers that you can submit questions at any time by emailing events@brookings.edu or tweeting using the #infraboost.

So first, we have Radhika Fox who is the Chief Executive Officer of the U.S. Water Alliance, a national non-profit advancing policies and programs that build a sustainable water future for all. Radhika is a widely recognized leader on a whole bunch of water issues from water equity to water infrastructure investment. So, we're really excited to have her join us today especially so early on the west coast. So thank you, Radhika.

Next, we have Diana Hernandez who is an assistant professor of sociomedical sciences at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. Diana's community oriented research examines the intersections between the built environment, poverty, equity and health with a particular emphasis on energy and securities. So, it should be a tremendous addition to the conversation.

And last but certainly not least, we have the Tom Wheeler who is the former chair of the Federal Communications Commission and currently a visiting scholar in the Brookings Governance Studies program. Many of you have probably heard of or met Tom but he brings over four decades of experience and leadership in telecommunications as a business leader, author and more. So Tom, it's an honor to have you here as well.

So, let's start with the broad question, right, what is affordability. In other words, what is the challenge and how does that challenge vary by the particular type of infrastructure be it water, energy, broadband. We know there's many different concerns, right, in each sector but probably parallel concerns too. So Radhika, let's start with you, just your initial take for a couple minutes on this admittedly big topic.

MS. FOX: Well, Joe I wanted to first thank you and Brookings for hosting this conversation. You know, this is united for infrastructure week where we talk about how we need to elevate the importance of infrastructure and greater investment in it. And, you know, when it comes to the water sector, I think that the affordability issue is really the flip side of the historic lack of investment, enough investment in our water infrastructure.

I think you're right, Joe, that the current COVID-19 pandemic has really highlighted for the nation the issues of water, the lack of water access, the water affordability crisis. You know, we've seen so many stories about shutoffs and people making really hard choices. Families making hard choices around am I going to pay my water bill or am I'm going to pay my groceries and that's a terrible circumstance to be in.

But for lower income people and communities of color, the issue of water affordability has been there and is growing as a crisis for many, many years. And again, it relates to this issue of lack of investment in our infrastructure. Back in the '70s, we had this federal investment that was a legacy generational investment that helped us build the drinking water and waste water systems that people enjoy today.

But those were never maintained because of politics, local politics and being able to raise rates in order to continue to invest in those systems. And so now we're at a place where those systems are aging, they're failing. Local cities like Mayor Brown that we just heard from have to increase rates in order to make those investments. And so, how do we keep those affordable, I think, is the big challenge. So, these issues of affordability and investment and infrastructure are just completely intertwined in the water sector.

MR. KANE: Yeah, that's great Radhika and, you know, I'm a big fan of water infrastructure so it's great to see it being kind of infrastructure issue number one today. But we know there are many other sectors at play and water is often closely overlapped with energy, for example. And so, Diana, I know a lot of your work has focused on issues of sort of energy insecurity, particularly as it relates to housing considerations. Do you see some of the same concerns that Radhika was referencing or other issues that you've uncovered in some of your work?

MS. HERNANDEZ: Yeah, well just to echo Radhika and thanking you, Joe, and just this panel. To me it's so important to be thinking about these issues as bundled because in fact in the live experience, these are bundled hardships. They're economic hardships that really force those tradeoffs as Radhika was mentioning. Oftentimes it's, you know, housing costs, food, medicine, transportation, water, property taxes and then, you know, WiFi telecommunications. And that is, in fact, the bundle of goods that are necessary but that also really force those hard choices and the tradeoffs that come.

In my work, I also kind of examine the health consequences of those hardships and what it actually means. To answer the question very specifically about, you know, the debate around how do we measure affordability, in the energy space there are, I would say, kind of a competing concept.

So, energy burden has received a lot of attention. There's moderate energy burden which is measured at 6 percent of household incomes. So, it's a ratio between expenditures and household income and then there's severe energy burden which is anything in excess of 10 percent of household income that's allocated to energy. And in the water space it's 2 and a half to 3 percent, in housing it's 30 percent.

And as you start to look at it, especially when you're working with a small budget to begin with, if you start kind of chopping down just on the basis of what these established metrics look like, you imagine that, you know, it starts to get really difficult for people as they are many times exceeding those basic metrics.

So, the point being that, you know, these are important considerations to appreciate together and to know that many people do without. Many low income families and households do without in order to make do.

MR. KANE: Right and it's, you know, on the one hand you think tough choices but there really is no choice, right. I mean, you can't choose well I'm going to pay my water bill versus my energy bill versus something else. I mean, these are all necessities, right, and I think you're totally right of it's a bundle, right. It's a bundle of services, it's not just deciding on bill versus the other but how do we better define engage all of this collectively.

So, I mean, I think Tom, I think that's in some ways a good pivot to you. We wouldn't even be able to have this event today, right, if we each weren't probably paying our own broadband bills, right. And so, you know, talk about the essential infrastructure of the moment of even making an event like this possible.

You know, how are we thinking about affordability in the broadband space both nationally but relative to some of the issues that you've been exploring recently. I know you came out with a great piece the other day highlighting some of these issues, particularly for lower income households. But I'd be just curious what some of your impressions are.

MR. WHEELER: Well thank you, Joe, and thank you to you and Adie both for setting this up with Brookings. You know, everybody has talked about what the broadband future will look like. Well, we're living it as you said, right. I mean, right now, COVID, if anything, one of the effects has been to speed up that broadband future and the importance of broadband to all of us.

But particularly the importance to low income American's who as Radhika and Diana have mentioned, have to worry about how am I going to have water, how am I going to have heat and light and now how am I going to get connected. You know, almost 10 million American students don't have access to broadband at home at the very time when they can't go to school and the school is telling them you've got to get online. And the reason they don't have access because they can't afford it.

You know, 60 percent of the people who live in homes that are passed, 60 percent of low income Americans who live in homes that are passed by broadband have had to make the decision, no I'm not going to bring it into my house because I can't afford it. You know, the average broadband price in the United States today is a little over $60. That's a lot of money when you stack it up against having to pay for water, having to pay for rent, having to pay for food, et cetera and that's one of the highest prices in the world.

So, the challenge that we have is how are we going to adapt programs that were adopted in a different era to solve the challenges of the broadband era. The Federal Communications Commission for instance has a lifeline program which was put in by the Reagan administration so that everybody had a low cost telephone line to call 911. We need to make sure that those kinds of funds get and a similar kind of program gets adopted for broadband.

The FCC also has the e-rate program which spends billions of dollars a year to make sure that America's classrooms are connected to the internet. But classrooms today aren't in school buildings. The FCC ought to be changing their definition to say yes, we can use that money to make sure that low income American's with students at home can go online.

So, we've got a very high importance of broadband, we've got a particular importance to the low income segment of society. We've got programs in place that could be doing something but in the Trump world are not.

MR. KANE: Right, no and you're right, Tom, in the sense of, you know, thinking of the different purposes of these services, right, and what are the impacts, right, for those who can't afford or can't access or plug in as the case may be to these services. And that has a difference for education, it has a difference for our health, it has a difference for applying for a job, right, for hygiene. And that all matters especially now but it's always, always been true.

And, you know, it's a good lead in to sort of the second question I had. I think I'll just open it up to all of you but we know affordability is a national issue, right. It's one that varies by geography though, right, urban, rural, suburban and we know it has been or has not been addressed by federal, state and local efforts.

And so, I know Diana you were starting to mention this a little bit with, you know, measurements and, you know, sort of as we're trying to get our hands around just sort of what the challenge is. You know, how do we begin to take steps that better define sort of the scale, the location even the intensity of this challenge.

You know, are there current efforts, you know, be it we heard what Buffalo is doing around some of this, right. We know there are some existing federal efforts around this for broadband. Not so much necessarily in terms of water as Radhika knows, you know, there are some benchmarks around this but I know there were many conversations of revising those benchmarks. So, I kind of open it up to all of you, you know, how should we be thinking about measuring this and are we measuring it? Maybe Diana, we'll just start with you since you brought that up in your initial comments.

MS. HERNANDEZ: Yeah, happy to do that. So, just in terms of measurement, one in three households in the United States is energy insecure. And that's 37 million and that is before all of COVID. And just to put that in context, there are about 17 to 18 million households that are food insecure and that measure comes from the USDA.

When they started to measure food insecurity, it also propelled a certain policy and action around addressing food insecurity and addressing hunger in America. And until we get to the point where we're more accurately kind of measuring the prevalence rate of water insecurity and food -- well food insecurity is so well-established but energy and (inaudible) are only in the broadband and telecommunications base it's important.

But one of the other pieces to this is the kind of harsh consequences of not being able to pay utility bills. And Radhika kind of mentioned the notion of disconnection. And to date, we don't really have a good handle on disconnection in the water space, certainly not in the energy space.

But the best kind of available data comes from the residential energy consumption survey, the 2015 panel. And we know that it's almost 3 percent back in 2015 of households in the United States that were disconnected. Many more, about 15 percent, that actually had a threat of disconnection.

And there again, a lot of evidence around evictions and the harsh consequences of evictions has also led to, you know, different policies and protections around, you know, kind of allowing space for that not to happen. And we see that occurring in the context of COVID.

What is really important is to get to the point where we could say the same thing about water issues, about broadband, about telecommunications and energy. So that, you know, the $112 bill, electricity bill which is the average electricity bill in the United States doesn't cause people to literally have their lights off. But that we actually have solutions so that folks aren't facing those harsh consequences on the disconnection side.

MS. FOX: I mean I would love to build on what Diana said because she's absolutely right. I mean, in the context of water, we don't have a good comprehensive national view around the affordability challenge. And Joe, I will say this would be a great project for Brookings and be amazing research, right.

So, individual local public water agencies who are maybe mapping and tracking, their customers may know this but we don’t have a good national number. But I will say the short answer is that every community has a water affordability challenge. And there is a funny conundrum that we face because on the one hand, water service is generally affordable for most people. It's really the lowest income and how they both increase water rates frankly for those who can afford to pay including probably most of the listeners but then maintain that affordability for low income people is the thing we have to figure out.

Diana mentioned the EPA affordability metric that a family shouldn't pay more than 2 and a half percent. That is a flawed metric, frankly. It is a blunt number and I think EPA recognizes that and they're actively think about alternative definitions of affordability. But it is a blunt target because it looks across a service area, it looks across income. It doesn't take into account community context and that's what we need.

What gives me some optimism around this bill is we do really see some local water agencies who are really thinking in more innovative ways around how to understand affordability. So, for example, you know, some of them are saying let's understand who is the population in my service area that is 200 percent below the poverty line.

How do we pay attention to them? Or as we're thinking about affordability, how do we better segregate the lowest 20 percent income in my service area and think about targeted programs there versus the overall population. So, I think some innovations are happening, frankly at the local level and hopefully the federal government will learn from and as Tom said, adapt these programs accordingly.

MR. WHEELER: So, let me drop a little good news into this discussion, Joe. In the past week or so, the broadband industry in the United States has voluntarily launched a program called the Bridge to Broadband which does two things. First of all, they are going to measure where are those homes we talked about a minute ago who are passed by broadband but can't afford broadband and have a student in them.

And then they're turning around to cities and school districts and saying for those homes, we are going to have a special price. You know, the broadband industry has already done the responsible thing of stepping up and saying that, you know, for instance Comcast Internet Essentials were $9.95 special rate per month for broadband access. And they're going to go beyond that now to talk about those 10 million students that don't have access to the internet. That's the really good news.

The bad news is that Mayor Brown in Buffalo and his colleagues are going to have to come up with the cash to pay for that price. It may be a reduced price but they're still going to have to come up with the cash to pay for it at a time when revenues are down and their other COVID related costs are up. And the worse news is that the Trump FCC, as we discussed before, that has a couple of programs that it could turn around and target to do something to help this voluntary industry program work for 10 million students are sitting on their hands. And the chairman of the Trump FCC actually when asked about what he felt about this industry program said it's a great idea and there's money in the COVID bill that the cities ought to use.

And yes, there was money in the COVID bill to help with education but it was all of the increased costs resulting from COVID into the delivery of education and you can't hide behind that. You've got to say we've got programs that were designed to assure the connectivity of Americans, specifically low income Americans and we ought to use them for broadband but we're not doing that.

MR. KANE: Yeah, it's you know, when all of you are talking about this it's like well, I figured, you know, Radhika is going to be the water person and Diana is going to be the energy person and the Tom is just going to talk about broadband. And it's like well no, it all comes together as we talk about this and measure it.

And I think, you know, in the limited time that we have, I want to leave time for questions, of course so we'll have this last one be kind of a lightening question but it's, I think, probably one of the most important questions. Is we can talk about, I love the word, Radhika, blunt, right of you know, we have these blunt measures and we can put, you know, certain numbers around all of this and quantify it and we really, we have to do that, right? We have to be very -- the devil is in the details when it comes to really defining these issues.

But we have to think, you know, affordability for whom, right, I mean, it's about people, it's about households and we need by we, it's probably federal, state local, need to be targeted and intentional about how any sort of assistance may or may not work in terms of eligibility, in terms of the timing of these efforts. And Tom as you, you know, hit the nail on the head, I mean, the timing is of the essence right now. I mean it's just something clearly has to give.

So, you know, I'll just sort of open it up to all of you. You know, who is the priority when we think about these affordability concerns? Of course, you know, all households need these services, right, regardless of income but we know when it comes to paying for these services, some of the lower income households struggle the most. And so, just quickly I'm just curious of your take on the affordability for whom question.

MS. FOX: Well, I think it has to be affordability for all. In a nation of such abundance, it's shameful that people don't have some basic access to housing, food, water, energy, broadband. And I think Diana said it the best that we have to design these policies based on the lived experience of people, right.

The stress and trauma that people face when they have to make choices between a grocery bill and a water bill, they have to fill out three or four different forms to be able to get some of the subsidy programs that really were designed to be the safety net. That has to stop. And what I would just say is if not now, when? If we cannot have a humane and compassionate response around affordability for infrastructure services at this moment of COVID-19, when will we as a nation?

MR. WHEELER: Who can add anything to that? If not now, when? That's it.

MS. HERNANDEZ: Time is of the essence and home has never been more important, right. I mean, if we've learned anything about COVID is that the primary infrastructure that people interact with is their home. And so, thinking about for whom, the evidence is really clear.

We know that households with -- low income households, Black and Latino households, households with children, elderly, people living in mobile homes, people living in homes that report inadequate insulation. People living in rural areas and also multifamily buildings in cities are all disproportionately impacted by energy insecurity.

It's not a question about being able to target and know the demographics and we know the kind of correlates around the hardship. But we have to think not just about bill assistance for instance which is how it's played out in the context of energy but we also have to make sure to couple that with energy efficiency efforts.

Right, if people are paying more because the infrastructure of their homes means that they have not just a diminished quality of life but also more costs associated with it, it's a problem and we see that in the water infrastructure as well. I mean it is kind of like the mayor was saying, lead pipe issues and water quality issues in the home.

So, I would say, you know, the real kind of simple answer is we know who to target, we just haven't done enough around rate variability and the accommodations that are necessary to make up, you know, kind of affordable infrastructure available to everyone and we should.

MR. KANE: Right. And I think, you know, as much as it's easy to just focus and fixate on the challenge and, you know, the struggles which are real and they're visceral and they're very widespread, they're everywhere. There are positive stories unfolding here too as Mayor Brown demonstrated in Buffalo. That's one of many examples.

And perhaps, you know, there's momentum building in certain places among certain leadership nationally around these issues. And so, having these sorts of conversations I think is helpful to highlight, you know, where those examples are kind of taking place and maybe where this is possibility for not just measuring but actually reaching more people.

So, you know, I have a bunch of great questions here from our audience and I know we only have about seven minutes or so until the next panel. So, I'll try to break it up in different chunks and then try to get through as many as we can. But Tom, I think I'll start with you since a few of these are directed towards broadband specifically although Radhika and Diana, you're more than welcome to hop in here too.

You know, there are several questions, Tom, that we've received on sort of ensuring broadband is available to low income households and communities. But the struggles, right, of kind of where we are at the moment almost in terms of the models that are in place. And so, there's this great question from Jane Brown at the Robert Deutsch Foundation who says, you know, what needs to happen for broadband to rightfully be legally treated as a utility when we think of, you know, how we're even managing both these affordability questions but obviously other questions too.

MR. WHEELER: So, I guess the first question that I've got on that is whether or not broadband is a utility, okay. I mean, a utility is something that is so important that government must provide it. Radhika, the other day in a conversation we were having talked about 80 percent of the water in the United States is provided by local governments.

But I do think that we need to -- there's a difference between utility and what we call a common carrier. Which is a critical service that needs to be regulated in a way that recognizes that criticality and that's the challenge we have.

You know, when we were at the FCC in the Obama administration, we passed a rule that said that all ISPs, internet service providers, broadband service providers were common carriers. And were subject to specific rules of common carriage including standby authority to regulate rates if that was necessary. The Trump FCC as soon as they came in immediately repealed that. But we've got to come to grips with the fact that we are dealing with a critical service that ought to have a regulatory oversight plan that reflects that criticality.

MR. KANE: Gotcha. I know, Tom, you could probably talk about that for an hour here about each of these questions so that's terrific. And I think actually in some ways leads to, you know, related questions on some of the infrastructure sectors. You know, Radhika, I received a great question from our friend Emily Wham at the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission. Who said, you know, how can we get federal or state funds to help fund great payor assistance programs, right.

So, there's this kind of this as we have been talking about sort of this challenge in, you know, federal sort of national regulation oversight of this. But also, just real concerns at the local level of well how do we pay for all of this in addition to everything else that's on our plate at the moment, especially in the current pandemic.

And so, I know you've talked to many utilities across the country that might be thinking about these same questions. Have you heard anything from them or anything in your work to help answer Emily's question?

MS. FOX: Yeah and I just have to say, Emily kudos for being up at 7:30 in the morning for this conversation. You're obviously very committed on these issues. So, I would say three things.

One is in the context of the various, you know, COVID relief and recovery discussions a lot of really good solutions to water affordability have been debated. Some are about how do we leverage programs like YHEEP and provide resources directly to families. There are other proposals out there around how do we get resources to the public agencies to then provide relief that way.

So, either both would be great solutions. I think the problem is we have to get that over the finish line. And to me, I think it's shameful that, you know, we for example have provided hundreds of millions of dollars to subsidize airports. Very important essential infrastructure service but water agencies haven't gotten a penny and they are really both struggling and the families that they serve are struggling.

As far as how we get it done, I think that now is a moment where we need to build a coalition of people who are focused advocates for families who are concerned around affordability, human rights, civil rights and the infrastructure providers. The water agencies, the electric providers, the broadband providers. Because if we can create a coalition of equity advocates and infrastructure providers, I think we can have a powerful voice on Capitol Hill to actually get many of the very good proposals over the finish line.

MR. KANE: Right, I think that's well said in the sense of, you know, how is there collaboration. You know, the greater sort of economies of scale almost to some of these challenges that can be very fragmented and localized but are really true at a national scale too. Diana, you know, I wish I had more time to ask you even more questions, all three of you.

Diana, a question that's more related on the energy side. So, we received from Sara King at the Cleveland Foundation. You know, what's going to happen if electricity is turned off in homes that can't afford payment, especially, you know, local school kids, right, who can't use internet, right. So, you know, as we've been talking about these different challenges, right, it's almost like a domino effect, right. Where you can't afford your power bill well then you probably aren't going to be able to have internet, right, and then maybe you also can't have water.

So, as we think of, you know, there are some households that are dealing with this. Maybe the moratoria for shutoffs have helped protect some of these households in the past few months. But we know that those moratoria aren't going to last forever necessarily so this is a real challenge that's going to be unfolding. So, what would you say to leaders as we think about some of those households that are about to or already seeing some of these electricity shutoffs?

MS. HERNANDEZ: Well we know what happens when people are shut off. We know that there's a disruption in family life, right, that people end up, you know, visiting and staying for kind of long hauls with their family members. We also know that they are making these forced tradeoffs.

When it comes to families with children, there are states that mandate reporting. And in that case, it triggers, you know, calls to child protective service agencies and that becomes a problem not necessarily of negligence on the parent's part but really, you know, to the points that were made earlier about negligence in recognizing this as an issue.

The way that I think we should move forward is that we kind of take a right spaced approached to many of these issues. If we had a right space approach to energy, to water, to broadband, we would, you know, kind of invest in the necessary infrastructure, right, the best available, the most efficient.

People would have access to healthy, sustainable energy sources and they would also have the right to affordable energy and the right to uninterrupted energy services. So, that when families are actually like facing these challenges, they have alternatives.

Because one of the challenges right now around the question of affordability and we see it in housing too is that bill forgiveness is not part of the equation. So, we have the moratoriums around shutoffs and that's also true seasonally when it comes to energy. But then people are shut off come, you know, like the spring months if you're in the northeast for instance.

So, we have to be thinking about this from a more humane perspective recognizing that this is necessary for every day life. It's absolutely essential for modern day living and that maybe we, you know, kind of have to define this from a right space place so that people aren't having to kind of unnecessarily have to deal with these traumas.

And the kind of downward spiral that could include not just evictions but death. You know, if people don’t have access to electricity and they are dependent on medical equipment, you know, it could literally mean life or death for some folks. And so, that to me is unacceptable.

MR. WHEELER: Joe, let me pile on there for one second.

MR. KANE: Sure.

MR. WHEELER: Diana just said a great thing. This isn't about water, this isn't about energy, this isn't about broadband, this is about people. That's what we can't afford to lose focus on.

MR. KANE: Tom, I think you, I can't beat that. I am going to let that be the explanation point to, this conversation just speaking for myself has been tremendous. I have left with so many notes and takeaways and, you know, coming in having, you know, coffee with you guys last week, I knew there would be a lot of parallels and commonalities.

But, I mean, really almost like I wouldn't even know whether Radhika you were talking about water and Tom you were talking about broadband. I mean, at the end of the day, this is an issue that deals so much with people and how that's translated across different types of households and sort of the stacking of these services as sort of that basket that's so essential is the way we have to think about this.

And so, hopefully that's helpful for our next panel on all right, how are we going to do something about this. So, Radhika, Tom, Diana, thank you so much for your time. Really appreciate your continued leadership on these issues and look forward to keeping the conversation going even after.

MR. WHEELER: Thanks, Joe.

MS. HERNANDEZ: Thank you, Joe.

MS. FOX: Thanks, Joe.

MR. KANE: Great. So, I'm going to pass it now over to or back to Adie who is going to be leading our second panel who in the next 30 minutes is going to solve the affordability challenge. So Adie, it's off to you.

MR. TOMER: Yeah, thanks Joe. And this feels like we're on like some kind of weird news network and like you're giving me the handoff at the top of the hour. That was great. First off, thanks for moderating it and you could really see their conversation bounded around the idea of not just people which is, of course, essential to this but the commonalities across these different sectors.

So, we're going to broaden even more. I'm going to invite the panelists for the second panel to kind of turn on their feeds as it were, right, come to the stage and (inaudible). We are excited to actually expand the conversation even more. As if infrastructure wasn't a big enough sector to start with, let's bring in folks who have even a wider set of expertise as well as you'll meet Josh here in a second who also has a mix of expertise as well as transportation.

We haven't even talked about transportation much yet and I think it speaks to both how big this infrastructure sector is as you kind of heard ringing out both from the mayor as well as the panelists, I mean, people are really hurting. And in particular, all three of the prior panelists talked about this proceeded COVID too. This is only something that's exacerbated effectively but it's getting worse. We're talking about people so let's speak in human terms today. People are really struggling and there's a lot we can do.

So, I am delighted to have the panelists join us for this second panel. I'm going to introduce them in alphabetical order. We're going to try to go or at least I'm going to try to go fast so we can leave as much space for you three to speak about these really critical topics.

So, first we have Stacy Dean who is the vice president for food assistance policy at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Stacy has unparalleled experience working at the nexus of both household opportunity and public nutrition programming. We really, really appreciate you bringing your knowledge here today, thanks Stacy.

MS. DEAN: Thank you.

MR. TOMER: Next is Josh Goldman who is director of strategy and business development at Via. Who many of you probably know Via's products has one of the most innovative transportation companies operating in metro areas today. What some of you may not see is the incredible work that Via does behind the scenes working with many cities on other routing technologies and other kind of similar digital tech interventions. And Josh also has some experience working in the federal government too so he can see it on both sides today.

And then finally to continue the theme, we have Melissa Koide who is the president and director of FinRegLab. Formerly, Melissa was the U.S. Treasury Department's Deputy Assistant Secretary for Consumer Policy. Melissa, we are so lucky to have your expertise in particular around financial inclusion today which is something has been kind of looming around the conversation. But let's get really explicit about it right away and Melissa as you know, I want to start with you.

The issue of financial inclusion is so central to these issues. It's complimentary but it's also connected. And that makes for some interesting food for thought in particular for a lot of infrastructure folks, probably that's the bulk of our listeners today. They often think in project terms, right, it's like civil engineering or calculus. This is something different but it's deeply connected to that human scale. So, what are some of the challenges around financial inclusion broadly that you're seeing kind of resonate, at least through the conversation we've heard today?

MS. KOIDE: Sure. Thank you for having me, Adie, it's wonderful to be a part of this conversation which is so critical and the first panel was fantastic. Between when we did the prep session and this morning, I actually went back and spent a fair bit of time thinking about the variety of ways that while sitting at the U.S. Treasury a couple of times and even in between we have been really focused in how we build a plumbing or an infrastructure. That enables not just households and families to have access to the ability to transact and save and build wealth but really importantly, basic government provided supports. And so, I'll bring some of those insights to today's conversation with you.

But I think for starters for the audience, it would be really helpful to set the context about what is happening in this country in terms of households, families and individuals but importantly also small businesses, lack of access to our financial system and what that means in terms of both cost. But also, the ability to access basic payment services and facilitate basic financial and economic activity.

So, to start, in the U.S. we have, according to the FDIC, almost 7 percent of households in the U.S. who are unbanked and that was as of 2017. The latest survey data will be coming out soon. That's about 8.4 million households across the country. These are people who don’t have access to basic banking services, a checking or a savings account. And it is important to know that this is somewhat of a fluid number. People are in and out of access to financial products and services.

But we also have another 18.7 percent of U.S. households who we deem underbanked and that is they may or may not have a savings account but they're also turning to alternative types of financial products and services, check cashing services, payday loan services to really meet those basic needs. Whether that's access to short term credit because they've got a bill that they need to pay or they need to cash that payroll check because they've got a utility payment the need to make. And those expenses can really start to add up.

Importantly too, these rates are much higher among African American and Latino populations and those populations, African American populations have account access of 84 percent and among Latino household's 86 percent have access. So, there are big differences there in terms of who is going without basic financial services.

COVID has made this all the more apparent to us. What the real limitations are when people don't have the ability to access the financial system. We delivered benefits payments, the CARES Act support through our financial system. And there we had millions of people who were waiting for the ability to access those moneys. And we at FinRegLab had spent a fair bit of time looking at the challenges, especially for minority business owners and small business owners and the fact that they didn't have the connections to the financial system. What that meant in terms of their inability to access the PPP monies.

So, why is all of this happening and frankly many of us who have been thinking about financial inclusion issues for over 20 years, you know, have seem some improvements in terms of numbers over time. And we've seen some improvements in terms of both what the financial sector has been able to do in terms of leveraging technology and data to provide more responsive products and services to households. But yet we still have as the numbers I've just presented, tell you significant populations who are left without access.

So, why is this? There are access challenges and I hope we're going to talk about this in more detail. Are you who you say you are is a critical question for getting into the financial system. It is a critical question for accessing benefits and there are real challenges both in terms of these sort of typical process by which the financial sector identifies individuals for access to the financial system.

And at the same time, there are real concerns and costs associated with fraudulent activities. And those costs have real bearing in terms of the financial sectors appetite for building products that are responsive to, if you will, non-traditional people who have non-traditional types of identity, ways of being identified.

The timing and access to funds is a really big deal. The fact that it can take three weeks for monies to actually be accessible when they hit your account, that's a tremendous limitation for households who have bills that need to be paid immediately and frankly probably a couple of weeks back. And the timing of access to those funds is relevant in the context of paychecks, benefits, irregular incomes and remittent services.

And then there are also important challenges that still exist around just lack of comfort with more traditional financial institutions. We have areas where we have banking deserts. We have, you know, communities who have just felt over generations that they're welcome into more traditional institutions.

The things that we spend a fair bit of time thinking about at FinRegLab are where are these data options, the potential of using data for solving some of the cost issues. For solving some of the efficiency issues, identify verification issues. Where can they be brought to bear so that we are able to overcome some of these challenges that exist.

So, let me stop there. I've got plenty more we can talk about. I know we're going to get in to but hopefully that gives folks here a sense of what the infrastructure challenges are especially when we're talking about the private sector. But I know we're going to really probe some of the infrastructure questions when it's government itself in partnership with the financial sector extending access to any type of benefit. And governments both the federal and the states are doing that quite extensively. And I think who've built some really important plumbing that might be possible to leverage for purposes of thinking about some of these base needs and access goals.

MR. TOMER: Yeah, I love that infrastructure plumbing comes up. Infrastructure owns all metaphors in the United States so it's always good to see the appearance. But in all seriousness, let's just stack even more problems on top of what we heard on the last panel. Tom spoke positively and it’s a negative place and we have real challenges here.

You know, Josh, I'm so glad you could join us. First of all, you and I both work a lot on transportation issues which is in a good way. Transportation gets a little bit too much attention in the infrastructure sector so it's glad we're the last one to speak in a way.

But talk a lot. Look, folks who are probably listening today they could be doing it mobilely, right, if you will. You all are at the vanguard and it's not just Via, right, this emerging transportation solution didn't exist 10 years ago really, right. But all the elements it requires not only what Tom as speaking quite about in terms of yes, mobile, but basically telecommunications.

But also, what Melissa just introduced, right. It is a whole lot easier to interact with kind of modern transportation service companies if you are digitally back. How is Via grappling with this and frankly, how are you collaborating with cities to think about innovative solutions not only the routing but to get people into the potential system to provide the key service that you have?

MR. GODLMAN: Yeah, a lot to talk about there. First off, thank you, Adie and Brookings. It's wonderful to be, I guess, virtually here and with Melissa and Stacy. I guess starting quickly with affordability it's a huge problem. So, for many households in the U.S., transportation is often the second highest cost category after housing. And, you know, you see families with incomes below $25,000 are much less likely to own a car than higher income households.

And so, affordability is a real challenge. It's something that cities are trying to address. More and more cities are experimenting with fair, free public transit or in some cases with discounted transit. So, for example, in New York City where I live, the city introduced this fair fares program recently which offers 50 percent discounted transit passes to families below the federal poverty line.

But as Melissa was talking about, you know, I think the same issues apply to transportation where affordability is a huge challenge. But when we work with cities and policymakers, the conversation is really more broad than just affordability. It touches really on core issues around equity and access. So, access to jobs and essential services and really ability to access economic opportunity.

And Adie, as you know and as you and some of your metropolitan policy colleagues have written extensively on, the linkages between physical mobility and economic mobility are profound and impossible to ignore in a conversation like this. You know, one study in San Diego found that car commuters could access 30 times the number of jobs then public transit commuters could.

So, basically higher income families who live in areas with more robust transit networks have more access to jobs and to ladders of economic opportunity then low income communities and usually communities of color. So, this just perpetuates this drastic income gap that we have in this country. And similar studies, many of them from Brookings around the country have sort of similar results.

And these disparities in access really have profound and lasting effects. One study by

Raj Chetty and his colleagues found that actually commute times at the sense track level for a significant predictor of long term upper mobility. So, even for children, right, so children grow up in areas of less robust public transportation have essentially lost out on economic opportunity because of that lack of access. So, you know, affordability but also access to safe, affordable, reliable transportation is really a core component of economic mobility and building inclusive economies.

So, the work we do at Via is we work with cities and transit agencies to design and help operate flexible on demand transit systems that can be deployed really quickly and in a targeted way to improve mobility in communities. So, riders will use a mobile app or riders without smartphones, Adie, to your question about sort of the digital gap, can call an operator by phone and request a ride from wherever they are to their destination.

Quite often, it's a multi modal hub so people are using this as a last mile connection to access to get out of the transit deserts and connect to high volume transit networks. And other times it's a point to point service that connect people to the central services.

And it's proven a flexible way to deploy transit in underserved areas more quickly than some traditional solutions could. And often particularly in lower density areas and off-peak hours, in a more efficient way then a traditional sort of fixed street transit system.

We have because many of the sources we operate are sort of designed to address transit deserts and to introduce service to traditionally underserved communities, we do take steps to make sure that the unbanked communities are included whether through vouchers or cash payments or waived fares. I'm so happy to get into that in more detail later.

MR. TOMER: That was great, Josh. And let's kind of finish expanding the conversation to really one of the most well-known ways that we think about delivering benefits directly to those households in need. Stacy, thank you for being here. I can attest, I go to a whole lot of infrastructure events virtually, in person whatever, they rarely bring in someone who works on the nutrition side.

Except, as the infrastructure community starts to think very seriously about this affordability idea directly creating benefits, the portability of how you deliver those is a lot of the issues that Melissa and Josh have raised. I'm so delighted you're here because there are lessons that we need to take both from a SNAP and EBT system and you're here to help explain those to us, right. So, what can we learn, what's working, what's not both again on the kind of SNAP programming side but also the EBT delivery protocol?

MS. DEAN: Yeah sure, happy to jump in with that and thanks for having me. This has been a great conversation and I just think, you know, wrapping up from the first panel and this panel, you know, I mean it's a little obvious. But people with low or no income can't afford things, right. It's not just utilities, it's not just transportation, it's their rent, it's diapers, it's basic human needs issues.

So, you know, fundamentally, increasing income to those folks who are out of work or who aren't able to work is really the solution to a lot of these problems. But one of the things that you asked me to talk about today was SNAP along with Medicaid is an incredibly, one of the most expansive, not expansive but universal to reach low income people in the month that they are low income. I think that's important.

There are many people in and out of poverty and so SNAP captures them at those moments when they are low income. And so, could it be used as a mechanism to identify those who would be potentially eligible for some kind of subsidy for the infrastructure that we've talked about today. So, let me just tick off a few things about SNAP so we all have the same baseline of information and then chat about whether it might work.

So first, SNAP which is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program which used to be known as food stamps is our nations largest food assistance program. You might be surprised to know that today it reaches 1 in 8 Americans or 43 million people and that's July of this year number. The benefits are paid entirely by the federal government but it's run by states and it's an entitlement program which means it can expand to need. Which is why you saw 6 million people join the program between February and May since so many more people became eligible as a result of COVID.

Benefits can only be used to buy food and they are issued on a debit card but we call an EBT or Electronic Benefit Transfer and you use that to buy food at prequalified stores. The program is highly efficient and very targeted to low income people. Household monthly gross income cannot exceed 130 percent of the poverty line which for a family of three is about $2300 a month. So, it's a relatively strict eligibility standard.

And households are pretty heavily scrutinized in the eligibility process. Both who they are and what their current, that month income and expenses are. So, because of that because it is really, it's also often called the program of last resort and the program some of the more rigor in assessment. In our world, there has long been a conversation about our households in SNAP can we allow them to prequalify for other things so we don't run duplicative assessments of need given that SNAP is so robust.

And Tom Wheeler was a real champion of promoting this when he was at FCC to say anyone on SNAP should just prequalify for lifeline services both internet and phone and, you know, we ought to be looking for uniform coverage there. And it's true, kids on SNAP prequalify for free school meals, the WIC program.

States often use SNAP determination to prequalify people for childcare. It does not always mean that they'll get that benefit because there may be other questions like do you have a child who needs childcare and there also can be caps on the amount that's available. But it's been long considered a robust system.

So, one question I think for the conversation is are we looking just at whether households on SNAP prequalify for some kind of infrastructure subsidy and then the second is should that subsidy be delivered through SNAP or could it happen through a different mechanism. So, I'll stop there because I think there's plenty to talk about.

MR. TOMER: That was great, Stacy. And that's exactly, raising that kind of specific mechanics question is exactly where I want to go. Open it up to all three of you. If we are kind of for a second talking about a universal program, I mean, this is what we kind of heard in that first panel was hey, it's about people and it's a shared set of needs across these sectors.

So, if we were going to have some kind of universal program that kind of is like a SNAP for infrastructure if you will like just for a second to think about that, we don't have that right now, nothing even close. So, what would be the kind of mechanics that we need to start to think about whether it's from the financial services side, whether it's from this kind of qualification element.

Anything you can kind of layer on here and the reason we're asking this to be clear is as policymakers, practitioners start to think about this, this is what you've got to grapple with. It's enough to recognize the need but we've got to think about actual mechanics here. So, what are you all thinking about if we want to launch some kind of infrastructure affordability program?

MS. KOIDE: Can I, I know, Adie, you want us to be somewhat engaging with each other so I'm going to go ahead and jump right in. But a couple of things that I think are worth calling out. The SNAP program and the infrastructure, the beauty and elegance and efficiency is, you know, without question as Stacy has talked about. I think it's also valuable to realize there are other government mechanisms for disbursement of benefits and frankly, Stacy, from our prep conversation too, I dug back in and it's tedious but there are differences there.

So, the Treasury Department issues the direct express card. This is actually a prepaid card that U.S. Treasury facilitates issuance of in partnership with the financial sector in one particular institution. These are individual accounts and it is a plumbing infrastructure that is enormously powerful and billions are delivered annually through that government infrastructure.

There are still, I think, so that's not the controversial part. But just to call out, there other mechanisms by which the federal government and even the state governments. I mean they use prepaid cards for lots of different disbursement purposes, employment benefits et cetera.

So, I think keeping that in mind is one thing. We are a non-advocacy organization. Our purpose is really to just get some of these insights out for the conversation. So, I'm not advocating for any particular mechanism, I'm just saying make sure we're thinking about the landscape of options both that are in place right now but that are also being contemplated in terms of financial access and financial inclusion.

Another one that I would mention that's on the horizon is this idea of something called Fed Accounts. Where actually individuals, not just financial depository institutions would have access to accounts that the Federal Reserve system would provide to individuals. And it's a big bold idea but it's getting some interest and some traction.

Are there potential opportunities for leveraging that kind of significant plumbing. It's optional but that kind of significant plumbing for people to then have a financial product or service by which they could be both getting, you know, these sort of aggregated funds for paying these basic necessities. Could that plumbing infrastructure be something that would be useful there?

So, keeping all of that in mind, to Stacy's, I think, really good question, is there an infrastructure even with SNAP that could be, you know, used as especially sort of this initial and efficient way of qualifying individuals for significant benefits infrastructure. That's a great question but I also think we have to also consider there are people who may not be able to participate in the SNAP program or frankly even the direct express program who legally have a right to financial access.

And I'm thinking about, I mean, the latest numbers are almost up to 10 million undocumented individuals in this country who need transit capabilities and they need an infrastructure to be able to make those payments digitally. And so, how do we sort of consider that sort of marginal of marginal populations who also are going to need these basic needs and services.

So, as we think about the benefits of using existing government infrastructure, let's also keep in mind how far that gets us and how far we still need to push ourselves. To consider, you know, those additional families who are also in need of broadband, of transportation while they may not be eligible for some of our government provided funds like SNAP benefits.

MS. DEAN: No, not at all, I think that's an excellent point. SNAP reaches 85 percent of eligible people in the month, right, it's not over the course of a year so it has a very high enrollment rate. But you're right, not ever low income person is eligible for SNAP.

The way that lifeline handled that and that many other where you have a cross connection is to say everyone on SNAP prequalifies or if you can illustrate, if you can demonstrate, show your letter of enrollment in SNAP which many households can download from their online account, you're in. And then the question is you create an application process for those who aren't otherwise. Or you can bridge forward by bringing other programs that have a more comprehensive review.

So, that, I think, you make an excellent point. I'm not saying that's perfectly solvable because I think you'll always have to have some kind of application process. But maybe for the purposes of this conversation, we could just talk about using this one as a platform knowing that it would have to be improved and built upon.

I think to me a state or even a community, particularly a county, could right now say, you know, we want to provide subsidies for and pick, you know, utility or transportation X, for example, a bus pass or, you know, again. And the idea would be what are some of the issues there. One is just getting either you're going to have to say to the individual you have to prove you're on SNAP or program X and that will prequalify you or you get the ability to data share the enrollment so that you can provide the benefit. And there are some logistical issues there but it's not impossible because it's done right now.

So, for example, WIC which is a program that just provides a, not just, it provides really valuable nutrition counseling and targeted benefits to women, infants and children at early ages of life. When someone walks into a WIC clinic and says, you know, I'd like to apply, that clinic almost always has the ability to ping SNAP and say are they enrolled and they just get a yes or a no. And if it's yes, they are prequalified for WIC. If it's a no, then the individual is handed a form to fill out.

So, I think these are the kinds of things that there's a lot of experience on the benefit delivery side. The question is where is the money to pay for these subsidies. If we're talking federally, I really think the first available dollar should go to increase cash assistance overall so families can decide what they want. But I think locally, you know, you could absolutely experiment with this mechanism of targeting infrastructure assistance through some form of, you know, a prequalification system.

MR. TOMER: Stacy, I want you to hold that thought because we'll have time for one audience question after Josh jumps in but it's exactly what you just raised. So, but Josh, let me throw it to you for some mechanics.

MR. GOLDMAN: Sure yeah. I mean, just quickly on mechanics, as Stacy was suggesting, in many cases the easiest way to sort of validate eligibility is just by cross reference to other programs or other thresholds. So, for example, fair fares in New York is tied to the federal poverty line. And in other cases, eligibility for transit or transportation systems is tied to Medicaid eligibility or other programs.

The way we've done it in some cases is just by directly sort of geofencing areas and really targeting service delivery directly to the communities that when we work with our partner cities that we identify together as those most in need. So, for example, in Los Angeles, we partner with LA Metro to provide first and last mile connection on on demand basis in three low income communities around El Monte, Compton and North Hollywood.

And so, riders in those areas now have access that they never had before to an on demand system that will bring them to metro rail and metro link metro stops and it's considered a free tranistor. So, sometimes you can just directly provide a service in those particular areas.

In other cases, we've done that with food so, you know, many low income students rely on the federal school lunch program for nutrition. And so, when schools closed down during COVID they lost access to that source. So, sort of providing the, you know, tying the eligibility in this case to this new benefit which is sort of delivering those meals. We took the roster of students from schools and Genuine Food is who we partnered with in D.C. and just essentially brought that fresh produce to the students' homes so that they can maintain access to that during COVID.

MR. TOMER: Yeah, it's great. Let's think about all the stuff we've heard and then we'll get to this last question. So, we've got we were talking about data at one point, security, connecting to other programs, food and nutrition link up. One thing we almost didn't touch on that's interesting right, is we've got effectively different affordability targets based on cost of living in different markets.

You've got different providers you talked on the last one. I just want to stress this. There is a lot to do on this if we want to develop even a state based or certainly as Stacy was talking about, all the work that has gone into SNAP, right, a universal like if not formally universal federal program here.

So, this leads into one question that is perfect because we have kind of talked about in advance and Stacy just alluded to it. Should we be having targeted programs here or is the problem that we affectively don't have enough money in people's pockets especially those who income related are most disadvantaged, most vulnerable right now.

So, we're going to close on that. It's an almost unfair question to answer quickly but I have to ask you for it because of the lords of recording here are going to require us to stop. They're going to like turn off the lights on us. So, in as quickly as you can, should we be developing targeted programs or is there a different debate that we should be having concurrently about actually just expanding income for those who are most again, income related vulnerable.

MS. KOIDE: I'm going to pass on that question. This is not our particular area of expertise so I'll yield my time to the other two guests. But it's a really critical question and lots of thought needs to go into it.

MS. DEAN: Well look, I'll absolutely make the case for expanding cash assistance to low income individuals and households. The number of children who are now living in households with no income let alone how much are eligible in receiving cash assistance compared to 20 years ago. It's stunningly much lower.

So, to me that the federal -- that's the paramount federal priority and if ever there were a time when the weakness of the poorest cash safety network boasts, this is it. But that doesn't preclude, I think, localities, counties, states, for looking at building out other forms of support to address some of these infrastructure issues. So, I don't feel like it's completely an either or, to me it's just a sequence of priorities.

MR. GOLDMAN: Yeah, I'm glad Stacy opened to the door to sort of both and answer. You know, I think there's a very compelling case for increased cash assistance and I think that, you know, that's something that absolutely we should do. I just think it's insufficient by itself because even, you know, particularly on the transportation side, even if households' sort of could afford a transit fare, in many cases there's just no access, the system isn't there. So, we need to invest in expanding access to transit, food, broadband, water, all of these essential utilities.

MR. TOMER: Yeah, great way to end. Look, this is not going anywhere. The four of us know it. I think everyone who is watching right now knows it. It doesn't matter what happens in November. Not just for the president but in the House and the Senate and in state races. I mean, this is, we are in a significant economic recession and preceding it people could not afford their bills before it.

Question is what are we going to do about it and there are a lot of concurrent debates happening at the same time. The need is real, it's expansive. That creates policy competition. So, what I'm hoping comes out is conversation for folks who are listening in, you heard from the panelists today, this touches on a multi-sectoral approach. It's about people. It touches on our peers that work in nutrition and in digital and financial inclusion.

There's a broad set of things happening here and we're going to have to collaborate together to come up with solutions. We're excited to hear where the three of your work keeps going, Stacy, Melissa and Josh as well as the prior panel. A big thank you again to the mayor for making time when his schedule is certainly pressing at this moment.

Thanks again, everyone. You can find the work that Josh, Melissa, Stacy do as well as the prior panelists with their respective organizations. We'll have a link up if you want to send it around to your friends. Enjoy the rest of your day and thanks for making your time with us.

* * * * *

CERTIFICATE OF NOTARY PUBLIC

I, Carleton J. Anderson, III do hereby certify that the forgoing electronic file when originally transmitted was reduced to text at my direction; that said transcript is a true record of the proceedings therein referenced; that I am neither counsel for, related to, nor employed by any of the parties to the action in which these proceedings were taken; and, furthermore, that I am neither a relative or employee of any attorney or counsel employed by the parties hereto, nor financially or otherwise interested in the outcome of this action.

Carleton J. Anderson, III

(Signature and Seal on File)

Notary Public in and for the Commonwealth of Virginia

Commission No. 351998

Expires: November 30, 2020