



CLOSE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE! ENSURE INTERNET ACCESS FOR NEW YORKERS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

**SUPPORT #WIFI4HOMELESS
A.5649-A (AM Reyes) / S.4561-A (Sen. Gonzalez)**

What does #wifi4homeless achieve?

- State-funded temporary housing facilities would be required to provide internet access with sufficient strength to all residents in common and private areas. Staff could not refuse access to residents in shelters where WiFi is already being paid for by the provider.
- Temporary housing facilities includes, but are not limited to, family shelters, shelters for adults, domestic violence shelters, runaway and homeless youth shelters, and safe houses for refugees.
- The State would facilitate, fund, or reimburse temporary housing facilities for the cost of providing internet access through the ConnectAll program.
- This bill would build upon the successful installation of internet access in over 200 shelters housing school-age children in New York City in response to litigation in 2021.

Why do individuals staying in shelters need access to WiFi?

- State regulations do not require WiFi to be provided to shelter residents. It is an essential tool which could reduce the length of residents' stays and facilitate their successful exit into permanent housing by helping them advocate for themselves and self-actualize.
- Without reliable internet access, shelter residents cannot search and apply for permanent housing or jobs, participate in remote classrooms or complete assigned homework, apply for government benefits, stay connected to friends and family, access basic entertainment, or obtain necessary medical care.
- Many critical services have become reliant on internet-based platforms as we have moved to a hybrid world post-COVID. Everything from legal services and virtual court appearances to counseling and telehealth are now offered remotely and often preferred by service providers. Poor or no internet connectivity leaves many shelter residents unable to effectively participate in services needed for their well-being.

- When reliable internet access is not available in shelter, people need to use their extremely limited financial resources to buy monthly cellular data plans or utilize free public WiFi, (e.g., in public spaces, libraries, or coffee shops). This modest access is insufficient and impractical. Self-paid cellular plans often include limits on minutes or data, and may not work in shelters with bad cell service. Public WiFi does not provide the data protection or privacy needed to conduct sensitive personal business.
- This is not just an issue of technology access, it is also an issue of racial justice. New Yorkers of color are disproportionately represented among those experiencing homelessness. Eighty-eight percent of homeless single adults and heads-of-household in family shelters identify as Black or Hispanic. An estimated 56% of people sleeping in DHS shelters are Black, compared with 24% of the New York City population. Any policy that affirmatively bridges the digital divide homeless New Yorkers face, is an essential step to address racial disparities in both the City and the State.

It is critical that the State act quickly to close the digital divide. This bill would represent a huge step forward by ensuring that all shelter residents across New York State are finally guaranteed reliable internet access.

**We urge the Legislature to pass
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