DATE: May 12, 2020

TO: Board of Supervisors

FROM: Dave Cortese, Supervisor

SUBJECT: Closing the Digital Divide for Vulnerable Families

RECOMMENDED ACTION
Approve referral to Administration to report to the Board at the June 2, 2020 meeting with options to partner with the Santa Clara County Office of Education to provide equipment and data coverage for underserved community members who need access to services online.

(Cortese)

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS
There are no financial implications stemming from this referral.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION
As the County continues our 8th week of sheltering in place, schools remain shut down, and our school systems have sought to transition services online. This has reinforced known inequities and heightened our awareness of the lack of access to technology and connectivity to obtain vital services among our neediest communities that exists in our present-day society. Specifically, the need for connectivity has presented significant challenges for our community members who live in areas with poor or no broadband service.

The lack of broadband service in underserved areas has disproportionately affected our lower-income communities. Lack of access to Internet connectivity prevents residents from receiving distance learning resources, telehealth services and access to health care providers, delivery services, job opportunities, and other online resources. To overcome these digital inclusion gaps, residents need suitable computing devices, cell phones, access to hotspots, and Internet coverage.

This referral requests information on how the County can partner with the Santa Clara County Office of Education (SCCOE) to provide coverage and purchase equipment for underserved community members, starting first with the 15,000 families identified by SCCOE who have the highest need of assistance to get connected. These families consist of
those who are receiving government support during this crisis, including MediCal recipients, CalFresh and CalWORKS clients, WIC beneficiaries, foster and resource families, and other low-income community members in need. Many families in these programs have children who utilize multiple types of services from the County and education community. We must provide proper equipment to these families to ensure our youth can succeed in school.

The report back from the Administration should include whether the County can secure funding to provide approximately 11,000 hotspots/connectivity devices and 14,000 devices, such as laptops or tablets, to these families. Purchase and provision of cellular phones may also be necessary as a means to provide better hotspots.

Once we are able to bridge this gap for lower-income families, there also remains thousands of families who are unable to connect due to a lack of infrastructure for broadband coverage. Since many of these dead zones exist in the City of San Jose, the County should consider partnering with the City of San Jose to make broadband connectivity infrastructures permanent around low-income communities to allow for community members to access much needed resources, even beyond the COVID-19 public health emergency.