

PRESS RELEASE

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ARLFIBER CALLS ON ARLINGTON COUNTY BOARD TO FORM A BROADBAND AUTHORITY

Arlington Needs a Public Option for the Internet

Arlington, VA, July 17, 2020 — The current pandemic has laid bare the perils and injustice of the digital divide. We must not rely on nor subsidize corporate telecoms to provide internet access. The ArlFiber collective calls on the Arlington County Board to form a broadband authority to ensure high-speed, affordable internet for all.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it clear that the digital divide in our country is [a national emergency](#). The mass transition to online work and communication rapidly split us all up into [internet haves and have nots](#). This was most starkly highlighted [in the education arena](#) as students were taken out of classrooms and forced to attend class and complete assignments online. Here in Arlington, given what the county already knew about the [state of connectivity in many of its poorest neighborhoods](#), this was inevitably going to produce unjust outcomes for the many students [who lack access to high-speed internet and/or the proper devices at home](#). The recent announcement by the superintendent of APS that the fall semester will be conducted online means that this will be an ongoing problem. We applaud the County Board and APS for their efforts to address this problem through hotspots at public buildings, take-home devices, and the expansion of Comcast Internet Essentials to the neediest families, but all of these approaches leave much to be desired. We need a better, long-term solution to this seemingly intractable problem.

“This pandemic has made it clear that we must treat the internet as a public, not-for-profit utility”

Arlington County should use its existing dark fiber network to ensure that all members of the public in Arlington have adequate access to the internet. Arlington County currently has a dark fiber network that it uses to provide high-speed internet connection to county-owned

buildings and facilities. It is this network that has been utilized to set up the public hotspots that students and others have used to access the internet during the pandemic. [Existing telecommunication laws](#) in Virginia bar the county from using this network to provide internet access directly to non-publicly owned buildings and residences. Fortunately, there is a workaround: [The Virginia Wireless Service Authority Act](#). This law allows cities and counties (individually or in combination) to establish a “wireless service authority” that, despite the name, would allow the county to provide wireline fiber-to-the-premises connection to any building it desires. This would have to operate as a non-discriminatory [open access network](#), but that in itself could open up robust competition with the help of [software defined networks](#). Several cities and counties in VA have already used this law to establish their own “wireless service authorities”, with the most advanced and successful examples being in [Roanoke Valley](#) and on the [Eastern Shore](#).

Establishing a broadband authority will take time, so the County Board should begin to act immediately. Arlington County decided several years ago to sever its relationship with Comcast and provide service to its own buildings through a municipal network, which has not only saved us money, but improved service as well. Its residents should equally not have to rely on [monopolistic, shareholder-owned corporations for their internet service](#) (who, by the way, spend our money lobbying against things like net neutrality and privacy). This pandemic has made it clear that we must treat [the internet as a public, not-for-profit utility](#) that is available to everyone at home at a price they can afford (preferably free for the lowest income families). Even after the pandemic is over and children are once again in the classroom, the digital divide will continue to haunt us in myriad other ways. Let’s fix it once and for all with a public option.

Signed,

ArlFiber Collective