Protecting Information Access:
Efforts to Maintain Paper Options in the Digital Age

"Digital Only" Policies Ignore Millions of Americans

Paper-based communications are critically important for millions of Americans—especially for seniors and the 33 percent of citizens without broadband Internet access. Yet federal agencies are forcing Americans to go "paperless" in order to cut costs and even allowing the private sector to do so. It is crucial to preserve paper-based options for Americans without regular Internet access, as well as those concerned about online security and identity theft.

Just look at the facts from the Pew Research Center, the Federal Communications Commission and the Department of Commerce:

- More than 30 percent of Americans aren't online, and 45 percent of seniors do not own a computer.
- Nearly 40 percent of citizens in rural areas – 23 million people – lack access to broadband Internet service.
- Just four out of 10 low-income households have wired Internet access at home.
- Only slightly more than half of all African American and Hispanic households have wired Internet at home—compared with 72 percent of whites.

We can go digital without discriminating against Americans who want or need paper options.

Short-Sighted Federal Decisions Allow Public & Private Sectors to Force Consumers into "Paperless" Communications

From the SEC to the IRS, federal agencies are implementing short-sighted "paperless" policies that seek to cut immediate costs at the expense of ordinary Americans who simply don't have the option to go online for the information they need. Fortunately, a broad array of stakeholders, including legislators, consumer advocates, and others, are fighting for the right to paper-based information. Examples include:

- **SEC Shareholder Reports**
  The U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) has proposed new regulation (Rule 30e-3), which would eliminate the current default requirement for mutual funds to transmit shareholder reports and other important information to investors in paper form. Implementing this change will potentially harm millions of investors – the majority of whom have already expressed a preference for paper-based investment materials. Equally concerning, this action would set a dangerous precedent for the private sector to decide if and when to switch the delivery method of critical information – regardless of consumer choice. Leading consumer groups and concerned citizens across the country are calling on Congress to urge the SEC to rescind this discriminatory rule before it becomes final.

- **Social Security Earnings Statements**
  In early 2017, the Social Security Administration (SSA) suspended the mailing of Social Security Statements, which have been described as the most important financial planning tool that Americans will ever see, to workers under the age of 60. The move came despite a measure in the Fiscal Year 2014 funding bill requiring the SSA to "significantly restore" the mailing of earnings statements. This decision means wage-earners under the age of 60 now have to take it upon themselves to confirm the accuracy of the figures that the government uses to calculate Social Security benefits.

- **Tax Forms**
  The IRS no longer mails tax forms—overlooking the 30 million Americans who file their returns by mail. Citizens who don't have access to computers, or the skills to use them, face a challenge. Others are concerned about security. With the GAO indicating that identity theft due to electronic tax filing has risen 480 percent since 2008, who can blame them?

  In order to address this harmful measure, H.R. 3673, introduced in 2016, would have amended the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 to require the Secretary of the Treasury to mail paper forms and instructions to individuals who filed a paper return for the preceding tax year.

- **Savings Bonds**
  Families have been giving children paper savings bonds since 1935, but that tradition ended in 2011. Now they have to go online, create an account and transfer money. Once a physical symbol of hard work and patriotism, savings bonds have become yet another virtual casualty of the digital age.

  Currently, the U.S. Treasury has only committed to maintain the Tax-Time Savings Bond Program, which gives taxpayers the option to receive their tax refunds via savings bond(s), through the 2016 tax season. The SAVINGS Act, introduced in 2016 by Rep. Matthew Cartwright (D-PA) in the U.S. House and Sens. Patty Murray (D-WA) and Susan Collins (R-ME) in the U.S. Senate, would preserve the Tax-Time Savings Bond Program through 2020.

Allowing citizens to continue receiving paper-based information, unless they specifically choose electronic-only, is a positive and empowering way to bridge the digital divide and save millions of federal dollars – without shifting cost burdens to citizens who can least afford them.