

JOTF JOB OPPORTUNITIES TASK FORCE

Advocating better skills, jobs, and incomes

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 97:

DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT – OFFICE OF DIGITAL INCLUSION – ESTABLISHED

TO: Hon. Dereck E. Davis, Chair, and Members of the House Economic Matters Committee

FROM: Korey T. Johnson, Esq., Senior Policy Research Analyst, Job Opportunities Task Force

DATE: January 22, 2021

The Job Opportunities Task Force (JOTF) is an independent, nonprofit organization that develops and advocates policies and programs to increase the skills, job opportunities, and incomes of low-skill, low-wage workers and job seekers in Maryland. As remote communication becomes essential, technology access has become more important than ever. Currently, due to the digital divide in the State of Maryland, vulnerable workers and students have suffered many consequences as a result of lack of access to technology and broadband access. The COVID-19 transition to virtual infrastructure has left many Marylanders behind, further exacerbating the structural inequalities workers, job seekers, and students experience. We support House Bill 97 as a means of expanding access to high-quality broadband Internet service at an affordable price to increase opportunities to jobs, education, and other life necessities.

The digital divide is frequently framed as a challenge for school-aged children. Given the increased shift towards remote learning, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, students in low-income households are at a disadvantage if they lack internet and devices to complete homework. 17 percent of students do not have access to a computer at home, and 18 percent lack broadband access. With a majority of Maryland school districts transitioning to full online learning for the 2020-2021 school year, many students have suffered the consequences of structural inequity.

In Baltimore, according to Baltimore City Public Schools, 45 percent of students lack the technology or internet necessary for remote learning. A 2020 Abel Foundation indicated that 19,200 households with children, or more than a third, lack a reliable wired internet connection.

Further, although the digital divide has important consequences for the academic achievement of school-age children, there are concerns for people of all ages as internet access is necessary for survival in the age of the “new normal.”

In Maryland and Virginia, nearly 1 million people have no access to cable lines, fiber, or any high-speed internet. In Baltimore, about 96,000 Baltimore households (40.7 percent) did not have a wireline internet

service (such as cable, fiber, or digital subscriber line service) at home. More than a third, or 75,000 of Baltimore City households, do not have a computer at home. 8,900 households with children had no broadband access at all -- not even a smartphone. The digital divide fell upon racial and socioeconomic lines, as half of Black households and less than half of Hispanic ones had wired broadband access, while 75 percent of white households did. Over 92 percent of households with children had access to computers, compared to 44 percent of the lowest-income households. Connectivity in Baltimore is lower than the national average; while 83.8 households with children across the country have access to wired internet, only 65.3 percent of Baltimore City households have the same. 72.7 percent of Baltimore households have a desktop or laptop computer compared to the 83.8 percent national average.

With these overwhelming statistics, it is necessary that we grant the right of broadband access to all Marylanders. With the establishment of the Office of Digital Inclusion, this right will be ensured by developing statewide policies and procedures under the supervision of the Governor and state officials. Therefore, we respectfully urge a **favorable** report of House Bill 89.