



# Montgomery County

## Office of Intergovernmental Relations

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HB 97

DATE: January 22, 2021

SPONSOR: Delegate Lierman, *et al.*

ASSIGNED TO: Economic Matters

CONTACT PERSON: Kathleen Boucher (kathleen.boucher@montgomerycountymd.gov)

POSITION: Support with Amendments

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### Department of Housing and Community Development – Office of Digital Inclusion – Established (Digital Connectivity Act of 2021)

This bill establishes the Office of Digital Inclusion within the Department of Housing and Community Affairs (DHCA) for the purpose facilitating broadband Internet expansion throughout the State. Among other things, the duties of the Office include: (1) conducting a Statewide audit of the availability, reliability, and affordability of broadband Internet services; (2) creating a public map showing which residents lack broadband Internet access and the cost of broadband services in different areas of the State; (3) assisting local governments in their efforts to improve access to broadband Internet; (4) collaborating with school systems and community colleges to ensure that students have the ability to connect to broadband Internet; and (5) offering funding and technical assistance to help local governments and private entities qualify for federal funding.

Montgomery County strongly supports this bill with amendments that add the Maryland State Library and local library systems to the list of stakeholders with whom the Office must collaborate. Public library systems play an integral role in ensuring that all Marylanders, particularly those who do not have broadband access in their own homes, have free access to broadband Internet as well as programs that enhance digital literacy. The County also requests that the bill be amended to clarify that: (1) the Office must support and supplement local efforts, not replace or compete against, or create additional bureaucratic hurdles to quickly expanding digital equity efforts; (2) in addition to prioritizing infrastructure expansion, the Office must also prioritize efforts to ensure that residents have access to digital devices and the skills and training that allow them to use the Internet effectively (e.g., daily living, education, telehealth, etc.); (3) the data collection effort mandated by the bill should include the identification of people who do not have broadband Internet at home because they cannot afford it and not just people who lack access to broadband infrastructure; and (4) the State must include local governments, which operate community broadband networks that are used by school systems and community colleges, in their collaborative efforts with schools and community colleges to ensure that students have the ability to connect to broadband Internet.

Montgomery County prefers House Bill 97 over House Bill 43 – *Department of Information Technology - Office of Broadband and Joint Committee on Broadband* – because it leverages existing functionality and would more quickly expand the exemplary work done by DHCA to extend broadband to unserved Marylanders. The County respectfully requests that the Economic Matters Committee vote favorable on House Bill 97 with the requested amendments.