



Testimony for HB97 - Digital Connectivity Act of 2021

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House Economic Matters Committee

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POSITION: SUPPORT

The ACLU of Maryland works to ensure that all students receive a “thorough and efficient” education under the Maryland Constitution. During a time in which educational instruction is being delivered primarily through virtual means, the availability of and access to affordable broadband Internet services has become a vital requirement to fulfilling the Maryland Constitution’s promise to our students. To ensure that all students in Maryland have adequate internet service for their education, the ACLU supports the passage of HB97 - Digital Connectivity Act of 2021.

HB97 establishes the Office of Digital Inclusion as the successor of the Office of Rural Broadband and expands its scope of work to include collecting geographic and demographic data on households that must rely on mobile broadband due to insufficient Internet service; evaluating the reasons that state residents do not have adequate access to broadband Internet service; auditing the availability, reliability, and affordability of broadband Internet services statewide; creating a statewide plan to ensure all residents are able to connect to affordable, reliable, and universal broadband Internet; and collaborating with local jurisdictions, local education agencies, and the State Superintendent of Schools to ensure all Maryland students have the ability to access reliable broadband Internet.

The COVID-19 pandemic has pulled the curtain back on and exacerbated the already existing digital divide that affects students and their families. According to the American Community Survey (ACS), 13.6% of all Marylanders do not have broadband Internet service, amounting to over 800,000 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).¹ As for student connectivity specifically, there is no reliable data on how many students in each county and statewide are unable to attend classes virtually due to a lack of broadband Internet connection. Baltimore City, Baltimore County, and Carroll County have acknowledged that they do not know how many families are without Internet service. In Baltimore City, it is estimated that nearly 20,000 households with school-aged children are without broadband Internet service or devices (Bowie & Reed, 2020).² In Allegany County, it is estimated that about 40% of

¹ U.S. Census Bureau. (2019). *2015-2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates*. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/search-results.html?searchType=web&cssp=SERP&q=internet>

² Bowie, L., & Reed, L. (2020, September 08). Baltimore-area schools start the year with online education. Thousands of students lack a way to engage. Retrieved January 21, 2021, from <https://www.baltimoresun.com/coronavirus/bs-md-first-day-of-school-20200908-jcicvjt2eza5jbtzetcplrxvu-story.html>

households lack an adequate connection to broadband Internet (Bowie & Reed, 2020).³ Whether due to lack of affordability or lack of geographical accessibility, the lack of broadband Internet across the state is hurting our students. National studies have shown that by the end of the 2020-2021 school year, students could have lost five to nine months of learning on average, with students of color fairing far worse than white students by a difference of two to four months (Hettleman, 2021).⁴ While it is currently unknown what portion of this learning loss can be attributed to students' lack of Internet service and access to devices, we can expect it to have played a significant role. School systems and community organizations have done their best to get students connected; school systems have provided tens of thousands of students with laptops and Wi-Fi hotspots, and organizations such as Elev8 Baltimore have installed their own Wi-Fi hotspots in various areas of the city to get broadband Internet service to families and students. However, these efforts are unsustainable. Some students are still having to leave home and get close to their schools to gain access to Internet service, or even complete their school work from parking lots of various food service locations because that is their best option for accessing reliable Internet.

These issues persist throughout the State of Maryland, from its most rural areas to its largest cities. Since comprehensive data is not being collected statewide on digital resources, it is unclear as to exactly what is needed in various areas of the state to ensure students can attend online school and complete assignments. Consequently, the state and local jurisdictions cannot develop a comprehensive and efficient plan to close the digital divide. HB97 will ensure that comprehensive data is collected on the demographics of unconnected households, the non-promotional prices from broadband Internet providers, network performance metrics statewide, and the many reasons individuals and families lack broadband Internet service, and allow Local Education Agencies and the State Superintendent of Schools to bring the availability, accessibility, and affordability issues students and families experience in regards to broadband Internet to the forefront of the discussion around digital inclusion.

Students have already lost an unprecedented amount of classroom time, face-to-face contact with educators, and learning since the pandemic began in March 2020, and students will likely continue to experience compounded learning loss as schools continue virtual learning and even after they return to in-person instruction. The pandemic has led to a greater understanding of how to utilize the Internet for learning, and there is much talk about how to continue to use these online platforms post-pandemic to engage students during out-of-school-time hours. This would be in addition to the already increasing need for students to utilize the Internet to access resources, complete assignments, and further their education. The Internet can be an extremely useful tool to provide additional academic and behavioral support to students who are struggling, but it is only as useful as the number of students who can reliably access it.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter, and we urge the committee to give HB97 a favorable vote.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hettleman, K. (2021, January 04). Will the General Assembly Be Lost Over Learning Loss? Retrieved January 21, 2021, from <https://www.marylandmatters.org/2021/01/04/kalman-hettleman-will-the-general-assembly-be-lost-over-learning-loss/>