



TESTIMONY PRESENTED TO THE HOUSE ECONOMIC MATTERS COMMITTEE

**HOUSE BILL 97 – DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT -
OFFICE OF DIGITAL INCLUSION - ESTABLISHED (DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY ACT OF 2021)**

Sponsor: Delegates Lierman, Attar, Bridges, Henson, D. Jones, Rosenberg, and Smith

January 26, 2021

**DONALD C. FRY
PRESIDENT & CEO
GREATER BALTIMORE COMMITTEE**

Position: Support

The Greater Baltimore Committee (GBC) supports House Bill 97, which establishes the Office of Digital Inclusion in the Department of Housing and Community Development to ensure that every resident of the State is supported by high-quality broadband Internet service at an affordable price, and has the tools necessary to use and take advantage of the Internet. The legislation requires the Office of Digital Inclusion to develop a statewide plan to ensure all State residents have the ability to connect to reliable broadband Internet by December 31, 2029. The plan is due on July 1, 2022.

Technology continues to develop at an exponential rate and digital access is an essential part of education, health care, workforce development, and business operations. The coronavirus pandemic has made fair and equitable access to the Internet more important than ever before. But it has also exposed major disparities regarding high-speed, reliable broadband home access among Marylanders:

- 18 % of all Maryland households do not have a laptop or desktop computer at home.
- 8,900 households in Baltimore City lack even a smartphone with broadband internet speeds.

It is even more alarming when you look at the breakdown of these statistics:

- 40% of the Marylanders who lack wireline broadband services are African American (African Americans comprise about 30% of the state's population).
- 75% of White households have wired broadband access compared to just half of African-American households.
- 75% of White households have wired broadband access compared to less than half of Hispanic households.

It is incumbent upon the State of Maryland to ensure that all citizens have an opportunity to learn, work, and have access to health care. According to the Institute for Emerging Issues at North Carolina State University, major network providers often engage in digital redlining – the systematic exclusion of low-income neighborhoods from broadband service and deploying only sub-standard low-speed home Internet. Similarly, a study conducted by Michigan State University reports that the lack of infrastructural support in rural areas also prevents equitable high speed internet access. Marylanders should not be barred from essential services

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111 South Calvert Street • Suite 1700 • Baltimore, Maryland • 21202-6180

(410) 727-2820 • www.gbc.org

just because of where they live. A statewide plan to ensure that all residents have the ability to connect to reliable broadband Internet allows us to address those challenges.

In the Greater Baltimore Committee report *Gaining the Competitive Edge: Keys to Economic Growth and Job Creation in Maryland*, eight core pillars were identified for a competitive business environment. An essential pillar is a highly educated and trained workforce to meet Maryland’s business needs. Reliable broadband service is key to ensuring that workforce.

HB 97 is also consistent with the Greater Baltimore Committee’s [2021 Legislative Priorities](#), as shown in the table below.

Greater Baltimore Committee 2021 Legislative Priority	Why HB97 Helps Achieve the Legislative Priority
Advocate for solutions to accelerate economic recovery for small and minority owned businesses	Economic recovery is dependent upon providing businesses access to all available resources to allow them to be competitive
Advocate for inclusive policies that strengthen economic competitiveness and job creation	A competitive market, and thus a strong economy, cannot exist when high speed internet is unavailable in certain geographic areas
Strengthen education and workforce systems to prioritize equity, accountability, and alignment with Maryland’s high-growth industry sectors	High speed internet connection is an essential component of student success and workforce systems, and low-income and minority individuals are disproportionately impacted by the lack of a coherent plan for broadband in Maryland.

For these reasons, the Greater Baltimore Committee urges a favorable report on House Bill 97.

The Greater Baltimore Committee (GBC) is a non-partisan, independent, regional business advocacy organization comprised of hundreds of businesses -- large, medium and small -- educational institutions, nonprofit organizations and foundations located in Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Carroll, Harford, and Howard counties as well as Baltimore City. The GBC is a 66-year-old, private-sector membership organization with a rich legacy of working with government to find solutions to problems that negatively affect our competitiveness and viability.