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**HB 97 Department of Housing and Community Development - Office of Digital
Inclusion - Established (Digital Connectivity Act of 2021)
Support
House Economic Matters Committee
January 26th, 2021**

Good Afternoon Chairman Davis and Members of the House Economic Matters Committee. I am Tammy Bresnahan. I am the Director of advocacy for AARP MD. As you know, AARP Maryland is one of the largest membership-based organizations in the Free State, encompassing almost 850,000 members. **AARP MD overwhelmingly supports HB 97 Department of Housing and Community Development - Office of Digital Inclusion - Established (Digital Connectivity Act of 2021)** and we thank Delegate Lierman for sponsoring this important legislation.

AARP is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, nationwide organization that helps people turn their goals and dreams into real possibilities, strengthens communities and fights for the issues that matter most to families such as healthcare, employment and income security, retirement planning, affordable utilities and protection from financial abuse.

The current focus of broadband support in Maryland is exclusively on rural broadband. According to the home page of the Office of Rural Broadband, within the Department of Housing and Community Development, its mission is: to ensure that every rural Marylander has access to broadband services, regardless of their zip code. Through partnerships with local jurisdictions and the private sector, the Office offers funding and technical assistance to help entities qualify for federal financing opportunities. The Office also has initiated a broadband funding structure through the Local Government Infrastructure Financing (LGIF) program at the DHCD to complement other funding sources. Through these efforts, Maryland will reduce, and eventually eliminate rural communities and residents being underserved by the current internet infrastructure.

HB 97 recognizes that broadband access is not exclusively a rural problem and that access involves more than just having broadband facilities serving the community – it also includes affordability, an appreciation of the value of broadband, and the skills to put broadband access to productive use. Two findings that give a good sense of the bill's objectives are: By advancing digital literacy and universal access

Real Possibilities

among Marylanders, the State will help eradicate the inequalities in adoption, knowledge, and skills needed to effectively use and communicate through various digital platforms and tools, ultimately enabling the skills and knowledge necessary for digitally inclusive communities; and a growing digital divide between Marylanders who have the ability and means to use broadband Internet services and those who do not exacerbates preexisting inequality in the State.

HB 97 would also establish an Office of Digital Inclusion within the Department of Housing and Community development, whose purpose is "(1) to ensure that every resident of the state is supported in the adoption of reliable, universal, high-quality broadband internet service at an affordable price," and "(2) has the tools necessary to use the internet and take advantage of internet resources." The Director of this Office would be appointed by the Governor, and the bill requires that funds be appropriated to support two employees, in addition to those currently assigned to the Rural Broadband Office.

AARP MD also supports HB 97 because the benefits of broadband internet access to older adults are well-recognized. Affordable, reliable internet access helps older adults to age in place productively and safely with a higher quality of life than would otherwise exist. The broadband platform supports access to telehealth and telemedicine, civic engagement, entertainment, on-line learning and other internet-based applications that address isolation and health challenges. Other benefits for older Persons include:

- Civic engagement (for example, sending emails and filing comments to town planners regarding local decisions about public resources and facilities);
- Overcoming social isolation as people age (the use of emails and social media allow older persons to engage with others with similar and shared interests and to access online newspapers and magazines);
- Distance learning for adults;
- Entertainment/Hobbies (movies, television, video streaming);
- Family connections (e.g., Skyping with children, grandchildren, friends, etc.);
- Small businesses (supporting websites that are offered by older self-employed persons); and
- Professional development (e.g., to participate in webinars concerning areas related to one's profession).

AARP MD believes that the bill does a good job of identifying the barriers to universal, affordable broadband and digital literacy. AARP MD respectfully ask the House Economic Matters Committee for a FAVORABLE REPORT on HB 97. We look forward to working with legislators on this and future efforts to expand broadband

access in communities throughout the state. For questions please contact Tammy Bresnahan at tbresnahan@arp.org or by calling 410-302-8451.