



ARCHDIOCESE OF BALTIMORE † ARCHDIOCESE OF WASHINGTON † DIOCESE OF WILMINGTON

January 26, 2021

**House Bill 97
Department of Housing and Community Development – Office of Digital Inclusion –
Established (Digital Connectivity Act of 2021)**

Economic Matters Committee

SUPPORT

The Maryland Catholic Conference offers this testimony in SUPPORT of House Bill 97. The Conference represents the public policy interests of the three (arch)dioceses serving Maryland, the Archdioceses of Baltimore and Washington and the Diocese of Wilmington, which together encompass over one million Marylanders.

House Bill 97 would create a statewide Office of Digital Inclusion to promote and expand broadband internet service access to all of Maryland. The bill also seeks to promote affordability in broadband access. Additionally, it would also foster innovative collaboration through public-private partnerships, providing an opportunity to narrow digital inequities by using the myriad of resources our state has to offer.

Particularly in Maryland's lower-income communities, digital inequity is a problem in need of a solution. House Bill 97, through its focus on the expansion of affordable internet access, would provide significant means toward those ends. Access affordability is one of the primary catalysts in the digital divide.

Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, as students and schools have had to switch gears to virtual and hybrid systems of learning, the digital divide has become significantly more pronounced. We support the initiative of House Bill 97 on behalf of Maryland's low-income public school students, as well as the thousands of low-income students educated in our Catholic schools, in both urban and rural areas of the state.

Access to internet service and technology are key components to a high-quality education today. It is through access to a high-quality education that the cycle of poverty is broken in our low-income, marginalized communities. Our state should do all that it can to promote successful educational outcomes for children who might otherwise be deprived of the same opportunities as their wealthier counterparts. Pope Francis has stated that the Church should highly value education, leading to gainful employment, as it is through the same that "human beings express and enhance the dignity of their lives." (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 192).

It is for these reasons that the Conference respectfully requests a favorable report on House Bill 97.