

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

House Economic Matters Committee
January 26, 2021

Support

Catholic Charities of Baltimore strongly supports HB 97, which creates an Office of Digital Inclusion in the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) that is charged with ensuring that all Maryland residents are able to access reliable, universal, affordable, high-quality broadband internet service, and that they have the tools necessary to take advantage of the internet and its resources.

Inspired by the gospel to love, serve and teach, Catholic Charities provides care and services to improve the lives of Marylanders in need. As the largest human service provider in Maryland working with tens of thousands of youth, individuals, and families each year, we recognize how vitally important quality internet access is, and that with universal access, we can transform opportunities for our community members across the lifespan.

Each day, Catholic Charities staff interact with Marylanders facing challenges and difficulties, challenges and difficulties that have only escalated during the Pandemic. COVID-19 has laid to bare longstanding inequities in our systems, including inequitable access to reliable broadband internet. We strongly support HB 97, and the examples below outline how we see this legislation benefiting those we serve:

Ensuring access to telehealth care. We provide behavioral health care services across central and western Maryland, which includes utilizing telehealth technology. Without reliable broadband internet service for our clients, therapeutic relationship can be hard to foster and individuals or their children might forgo needed health services because they lack the tools necessary to engage in telehealth care. Increasing the infrastructure for quality, affordable broadband services is good for our State's public health.

Connecting loved ones to their family members in congregate settings. During COVID, we've had to be creative in fostering opportunities for our residents in our congregate care settings – seniors, individuals with disabilities, individuals experiencing homelessness - to communicate with their loved ones. While we've been able to bring in iPads and other tools into our programs for our residents, that doesn't always mean their family has reliable internet access on the other end. Today, the internet is necessary for communication, and lack of internet means lack of inclusion. Human connection is profoundly important, and dedicating resources to expand broadband internet access to all Marylanders would be transformative.

Creating opportunities for education and employment. As schools and work places become largely remote, reliable internet access is critical for economic security and opportunity. For Marylanders living in or near poverty, households often forgo internet access in order to pay for other basic necessities. A recent study shows that 23% of all Maryland households do not have home internet access, and 75% of those households live at or below the poverty line.¹ Moreover, the digital divide has a disparate impact on black and brown communities as 40% of households without internet are households of color.² Universal access to broadband internet would equalize economic and educational opportunities for children, individuals, and families across the state, as well as be a tangible step in the effort to dismantle the inequities born of structural racism and oppression.

On behalf of the individuals and families we work with, Catholic Charities of Baltimore appreciates your consideration, and urges the committee to issue a favorable report for HB 97

Submitted By: Lisa Klingenmaier, Assistant Director of Advocacy

¹ Disconnected in Maryland: Statewide Data Show the Racial and Economic Underpinnings of the Digital Divide. (2021, January). The Abell Report. https://abell.org/sites/default/files/files/2020_Abell_digital%20inclusion_full%20report_FINAL-web.pdf

² Ibid