



DATE: January 26, 2021 **COMMITTEE:** House Economic Matters
BILL NO: House Bill 97
BILL TITLE: Department of Housing and Community Development - Office of Digital Inclusion -
Established (Digital Connectivity Act of 2021)
POSITION: Support

Kennedy Krieger Institute supports House Bill 97 - Department of Housing and Community Development - Office of Digital Inclusion - Established (Digital Connectivity Act of 2021)

Bill Summary: House Bill 97 establishes the Office of Digital Inclusion within the MD Department of Housing and Community Development to ensure that every resident of the State has access to high-quality broadband internet service at an affordable price.

Background:

Kennedy Krieger Institute is dedicated to improving the lives of children and young adults with developmental, behavioral, cognitive and physical challenges. Kennedy Krieger's services include inpatient, outpatient, school-based and community-based programs.

Kennedy Krieger Schools: Kennedy Krieger is deeply proud of our nonpublic schools, currently serving over 550 publically funded students with complex disabilities from over half of the school districts in Maryland. We employ nearly an equal number of highly trained teachers, related-service clinicians, and support staff. We have long-standing partnerships with the Maryland State Department of Education and the Local School Systems based upon our specialized expertise and commitment to children with disabilities.

Alongside our public and nonpublic special education partners, Kennedy Krieger has mobilized to leverage our extraordinary expertise by actively developing and implementing individualized "continuity of learning" plans that are consistent with our high quality multidisciplinary approach, avoiding the danger of generic continuous learning plans. In addition to the learning plans, we have leveraged the expertise of the Institute to deliver related therapy services through telehealth practices pioneered by Kennedy Krieger Institute.

Kennedy Krieger Children's Hospital: Kennedy Krieger serves more than 25,000 individuals a year (more than 85% are children from Maryland, coming to us from every county). Our highly trained professionals use an interdisciplinary approach to provide comprehensive patient care that incorporates multiple fields, including, but not limited to: audiology, behavioral psychology, child life and therapeutic recreation, neuropsychology, nursing, nutrition, occupational and physical therapies, psychiatry, social work, special education, speech/language pathology, and trauma-informed therapy.

Kennedy Krieger Institute Telehealth services include education, consultation, evaluation, and treatment. Prior to the pandemic, Kennedy Krieger had an established telebehavioral health program with demonstrated outcomes across telehealth and clinic-based services. In the pre-pandemic, six weeks leading up to March 15th, 2020, 18 of the 585 Kennedy Krieger providers delivered 70 telehealth appointments (approximately 11 per week). Since March 15th, 2020 the Institute's 585 providers have delivered over 72,000 telehealth appointments (approximately 4,000 per week), although many families struggle with inconsistent connectivity.

Rationale:

An Office of Digital Inclusion for Maryland would facilitate and negotiate collaborative partnerships on a larger scale with private and federal entities to work to close the gaps in access to internet services statewide.

As noted in the Abell Foundation's report on the "digital divide" published May 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has made internet access part of the social safety net. While the report focused on Baltimore City, the information is applicable to communities and jurisdictions across Maryland. In today's world, broadband connectivity should not be a luxury, but rather a right to which every individual has access. This bill would ensure a thoughtful, organized process to expanding broadband throughout Maryland and ensure that every Marylander is guaranteed this service.

Within Baltimore City and other high population density areas in Maryland, broadband is not a given, with many students sitting in coffee shops, parking lots, and other locations to attend their classes. Numerous studies have shown that there is a huge disparity in virtual education, exacerbating an already large achievement gap and causing a devastating toll.

Maryland's rural jurisdictions share common characteristics that set them apart from their suburban and urban counterparts, such as geographic isolation, lack of transportation, and lack of access to health care availability. Health profession shortages exist in Maryland's rural regions, where a greater percentage of Maryland's residents live.

In-home telehealth services are feasible, safe, efficient, and effective, and they allow families across the state access to the highest quality of services and providers available. For Maryland families with little or no access to care, telehealth provides quality services and lowers the cost associated with the continued lack of proper treatment. However, telehealth is a nonstarter if a patient does not have access to the infrastructure needed for access.

Kennedy Krieger Institute requests a favorable report on House Bill 97.