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Testimony HB 97
House Economic Matters
January 26, 2021
Position: FAVORABLE

Dear Chairman Davis & Members of the House Economic Matters Committee:

I'm Kimberly Vasquez, a senior at Baltimore City College High School and Lead Organizer of SOMOS which stands for Students Organizing a Multicultural and Open Society, a youth-led organization in Baltimore.

HB 97 would establish the Office of Digital Inclusion in the Department of Housing and Community 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.

We urge your favorable report for this bill.

Nowadays, Internet has truly been ESSENTIAL for everyone. We are solely depending on the internet to meet our daily responsibilities. This isn't just about students being disconnected. As well, parents depend on the internet to work. Seniors and other community members depend upon the internet for healthcare and other social services. Although the internet is in high demand, what we see is that the internet is inequitably distributed across lines of race and class.

We see the lack of connectivity everywhere, in both rural and urban areas. It is in need that the rural office expand to urban because if not we are failing to solve the whole problem. This issue needs to be taken seriously and the first step is having the resources necessary to study this problem in depth. There is this need of collecting data from every household on what internet they use and their speeds in order for us to have a base where we can bounce off of and understand how to best resolve the digital divide. Investing in this work is necessary to make sure that students exercise their constitutional right to an education.

I for one hand, am a subscriber to Comcast's *Internet Essentials* package, a 9.99 dollar plan for low-income residents. Since the pandemic, I've faced the challenge of accessing my zoom classes and submitting work in general. I've never entered a zoom class successfully the first time, I've always have to refresh the page at least 4-5 times for me to even get to the waiting room of my class and then hope that I get let into class before my internet cuts me out. Even when I am in class, I've repeatedly been kicked out and have found myself using my phone to connect. For example, right now, I'm joining this call through my phone because it's more reliable than my *Internet Essentials* wifi.

There has been many instances where my sisters and I have had to just sit at our table and eat in silence because none of us can enter our class. One time, I took a speed test when me and one of my sisters got kicked out of class and my report was 24.7 mbps up and 3.41 mbps down. This is the most I will ever get out of this package, and even then I'm being kicked out. I can't afford to miss 10 or more minutes of my class time when I only have 2 hours of that class per week. Each minute is ESSENTIAL to the success I have in that class and my future transition to college.

My sisters and I shouldn't have to choose who's going to sacrifice their education and fall behind in order for one of us to succeed, essentially forcibly deciding whose education is more important. Moreover, a parent shouldn't have to decide whether their job that brings food to the table is more important than their children's education that will open up doors for future jobs.

Take into consideration that some students have no device and are solely depending on their phones to complete work and using all of their cellular data. Which leads to a big, and ridiculously high bill payment at the end of every month. Other students have a device, but are sharing it amongst siblings, or cousins, in the same household, which creates conflict when everyone has to be in class simultaneously. As well, there are families, like mine, who are connected, but the internet is simply not sufficient nor adequate for students to stay online.

The more time we wait, the longer we are serving injustice to our communities and that's exactly what we don't want. Passing the Bill HB97 or Digital Connectivity Act, will ensure that families are put first and recognize that this problem must be solved as soon as possible.

Maryland needs one central office dedicated to broadband expansion for the whole state.

We respectfully request a favorable report for HB 97.

Submitted by Kimberly Vasquez, SOMOS