



The Delivery of Legal Services Section Council

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

The Delivery of Legal Services Section (DLS) is a section of the Maryland State Bar Association formed to promote the fair administration of justice in the State of Maryland. The Section supports and encourages free or low cost legal services for people of limited means through legal services programs for the indigent, public interest legal organizations, pro bono publico, reduced fee, and other alternatives to traditional fee-for-service representation to provide access to the courts, and court alternatives for the resolution of disputes. The areas include legal practice and legal reform for the indigent and persons of modest means, for example, civil rights, consumer advocacy, civil and criminal legal services, and lawyer referral services. The Section Council is comprised of a mix of practicing attorneys, including those working for civil legal aid organizations, private practitioners, and government attorneys, who all share a common goal: increasing access to justice.

The DLS strongly urges a favorable bill on House Bill 97. 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.

Maryland needs one central office dedicated to broadband expansion for the whole state. From even before the pandemic, broadband access has become essential in the delivery of legal services and for the litigants attempting to access justice. Our members have experienced firsthand the challenges that low-income residents face when trying to attend virtual hearings, meetings, and more. Further, their inability to access important legal information about their own cases, file legal pleadings, or learn about the law in general, is severely hampered by their inability to have meaningful internet access. This is true across the state, in both rural and urban areas. As our legal system has begun to increasingly rely on electronic filings and virtual hearings, the toll on self-represented litigants and low-income litigants has increased. It is clear that these virtual proceedings will continue long past the pandemic, adding to the chasm between folks with access to reliable internet and those without.

For these reasons, we respectfully request a favorable report for HB 97.