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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony in Support of HB 97: Digital Connectivity Act of 2021

January 26, 2021

Economic Matters Committee

What this bill does

The Digital Connectivity Act expands the current Office of Rural Broadband to create the Office of Digital Inclusion (ODI).¹ The Office of Rural Broadband has done important work since its creation in 2017, but more is needed. The ODI Office will expand the work to include working with all Maryland jurisdictions with the goal of ensuring that every Marylander can be connected to high-quality, high-speed, affordable, internet.

The Office of Digital Inclusion will first and foremost be the central office responsible for coordinating activities and adding capacity to our local governments – helping to ensure, for instance, that the state has a coordinated and inclusive response to RFPs issued by the FCC or Federal Government with resources and grant availability. ODI will also be responsible for developing definitions and standards for broadband internet; addressing fair and equal pricing standards; auditing availability, reliability, and affordability of broadband; and collecting and analyzing pertinent data on geographic, economic, and demographic factors.

ODI will partner with local jurisdictions, agencies, and the private sector to identify geographic areas of need, sources of funding, and new technologies in order to increase availability of reliable, affordable, high-quality broadband internet across the state. This statewide office will partner with key stakeholders like libraries and institutions of higher education to support local jurisdictions in their efforts to improve digital literacy and access to broadband internet.

¹ The office of rural broadband was created by Executive Order by Governor Hogan and is currently housed within DHCD. The new office will remain there.

It will also be charged with identifying current policy and regulations that present barriers to success and creating recommendations for future policies, regulations, and legislation that will promote the availability of broadband internet for all Marylanders.

Most importantly, the Act requires that the Office of Digital Inclusion create a comprehensive state plan which will serve as a written reflection of the data and stakeholder needs, outlining goals and priorities which will serve as a benchmark upon which the State can measure whether the initiatives are working. Under this Bill, by July 1, 2022, the state would have a comprehensive plan to address the digital divide and will require the state to ensure all Marylanders have the ability to connect to universal, affordable, and reliable broadband no later than December 31, 2029.

Why this bill matters

While in the past lack of access to broadband internet may have merely been an inconvenience, it is now a public emergency. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Marylanders, more than ever, rely on access to the internet and technological tools in order to access critical services, like healthcare, education, and public benefits. Further, without reliable access, Maryland residents and businesses are unable to conduct work remotely and access resources.

In 2017, the Governor sought to address the issue of rural connectivity through the creation of the Rural Broadband Office by Executive Order. While this office has done important work, there is so much more to be done, urgently. **The problem in Maryland is greater than just a lack of rural access.** Our most populous cities, like Baltimore, experience significant gaps in access, affordability, adoption, and digital literacy. For example: 41% of Baltimore city residents do not subscribe to the internet and 31% of Baltimore city residents do not own a desktop or laptop. According to the Abell Foundation report “Disconnected in Maryland”, densely populated metro counties and rural counties experience very similar rates of internet subscriptions and access to computers and laptops.² On several metrics, such as broadband upload/download speeds, the situation is worse in our urban areas, although for different reasons often. The bottom line, though, is that Marylanders who live in every region of the state lack access right now to affordable, reliable, high speed internet – and we need to have an office dedicated to fixing that.

The causes of inequitable access range from lack of infrastructure to cost. This includes the cost of service subscriptions, digital tools, and digital literacy training. The private sector has failed to build the infrastructure in many areas, due to a lack of incentive, and, while some provide low-cost options, these plans often provide internet that is insufficient to support video

² DISCONNECTED IN MARYLAND: STATEWIDE DATA SHOW THE RACIAL AND ECONOMIC UNDERPINNINGS OF THE DIGITAL DIVIDE 1–19 (2021), https://abell.org/sites/default/files/files/2020_Abell_digital%20inclusion_full%20report_FINAL-web.pdf.

and critical functions, like telehealth visits or online educational platforms. This is a statewide problem that requires a statewide office that can pull together partnerships, agencies, and governments to identify the gaps and implement real solutions. Race, income, and age are also significant factors in access to and adoption of broadband internet.

Why you should vote for this bill

The private sector alone has been unable to ensure adequate infrastructure and affordable options exist for all Marylanders. Without a coordinated approach and funding through a dedicated Office, the long-term quality of life for many Marylanders will continue to decline. You should support this bill to establish the Office of Digital Inclusion because it will ensure that the State prioritizes addressing these gaps, leading to broader workforce participation, better student outcomes, better health outcomes, and strengthen our businesses. Without passing this legislation, Maryland residents and businesses will continue to suffer and be excluded from an increasingly digital world.

It is imperative that we increase access to affordable broadband services for all Maryland residents and businesses. This legislation will do just that. The Digital Connectivity Act will take the lead on ensuring that all Maryland residents and businesses have access to reliable broadband internet regardless of age, income, or geographical location.

Over 25 other states have statewide offices of broadband. This office will do critical work in mapping the need so that the State is able to start addressing this complex issue and be positioned to channel impending federal broadband funding.