



**Statement of Jonathan Forte, FACHE**

SVP & Chief Operating Officer, Choptank Community Health System

To the Economic Matters Committee

March 5, 2020

House Bill 999: Member-Regulated Cooperatives – Establishment (Rural Broadband for the Eastern Shore Act of 2020)

**POSITION: SUPPORT**

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Delegate Sample-Hughes, Chair Davis, Vice Chair Dumais, and members of the Economic Matters Committee, Choptank Community Health System, Inc. (CCHS) is in SUPPORT of House Bill 999: Member-Regulated Cooperatives – Establishment (Rural Broadband for the Eastern Shore Act of 2020).

CCHS is a private, non-profit, Federally Qualified Community Health Center providing primary care, dental, and behavioral health services in Caroline, Dorchester, and Talbot Counties. We are also the largest provider of school-based healthcare in Maryland. As a nationally recognized quality leader, Joint Commission Accredited and Certified Primary Care Medical Home, our mission is to provide access to exceptional, comprehensive and integrated health care for all, while improving the health and well-being of the communities we serve.

HB999 directly supports Choptank Community Health System’s mission and vision by removing roadblocks and allowing member-regulated cooperatives to provide broadband service in areas where other companies have been unable. Access to broadband service would directly improve the health and well-being of the 20,000 patients we serve. Social determinants of health are the conditions in which people live, grow, work, and age. They include socioeconomic status, education, employment, physical environment, and social support. In July 2019, the American Society of Law, Medicine, & Ethics called Broadband internet access a “super-determinant” of health due to its impact on increasing the availability of educational and employment opportunities, as well as improving healthcare access. Providing equitable healthcare to all requires broadband, allowing rural patients with the ability to have equal access to the caliber of care their urban and suburban counterparts receive.

The nation’s healthcare system is currently being transformed by the availability and accessibility of broadband-enabled services and technologies and the development of life-saving wireless medical devices. Unfortunately, rural and underserved populations along Maryland’s Eastern Shore who stand to benefit the most from this transformation are also the least likely to have access to broadband internet. Given the potential impact of emerging infectious diseases, such as COVID-19, HB999 would also allow medical providers like CCHS to utilize virtual video visits to effectively treat patients in their own home, helping stop the spread of such diseases. The innovative work of the Maryland General Assembly has already ensured that such telehealth visits are authorized and reimbursable through Medicaid and private insurance. Improving broadband access for our most vulnerable patients is the next step.

CCHS is uniquely positioned to improve access to care through telehealth modalities, leveraging existing infrastructure within the Choptank Electric Cooperative network, to provide improved access to behavioral health and specialty medical care for our patients, many of whom cannot travel across the Bay Bridge to Baltimore or Washington, or north to Wilmington & Philadelphia. CCHS is already partnered with a local Medical School, developing a Rural Health Family Medicine Residency Program. With improved access to broadband internet, CCHS and our partners could develop additional agreements to provide telehealth access to academic medical centers in Baltimore without the need to leave the Eastern Shore, lowering the total cost of care to our Maryland Medicaid system, while decreasing out-of-pocket expenses and lost wages for the uninsured & underinsured.

Choptank Community Health System believes this legislation would enable rural healthcare systems to provide life-saving support to our Eastern Shore communities. Thank you for your consideration and support.

*Jonathan P. Forte, FACHE, SVP & COO, [jforte@choptankhealth.org](mailto:jforte@choptankhealth.org), 410-310-0837*