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**SB 540 Member-Regulated Cooperatives – Establishment
(Rural Broadband for the Eastern Shore Act of 2020)
SUPPORT
Senate Finance
February 25, 2020**

Good Afternoon Chairman Kelley and Members of the Senate Finance Committee. I am Tammy Bresnahan. I am the Director of advocacy for AARP MD. As you know, AARP Maryland is one of the largest membership-based organizations in the Free State, encompassing almost 900,000 members. **AARP MD overwhelmingly supports** and we thank Senator Hershey for sponsoring this important legislation **SB 540 Member-Regulated Cooperatives - Establishment (Rural Broadband for the Eastern Shore Act of 2020**

AARP is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, nationwide organization that helps people turn their goals and dreams into real possibilities, strengthens communities and fights for the issues that matter most to families such as healthcare, employment and income security, retirement planning, affordable utilities and protection from financial abuse.

SB 540 establishes a process for an electric cooperative to operate as a member-regulated cooperative on the Eastern Shore of the State that may provide broadband Internet access to its members.

Throughout the country, AARP actively supports broadband deployment to unserved communities and also supports policies and programs that facilitate broadband adoption. SB 540 furthers the important goal of bringing broadband to areas that are currently on the wrong side of the digital divide. These communities find themselves removed from the information economy because broadband providers traditionally have found it unprofitable to serve them. SB 540 is an important bridge that will help to close the urban-rural digital gap. The bill also includes important consumer protection safeguards, such as prohibiting the sharing of customers' proprietary information.

Electric membership cooperatives, with their long history of serving rural areas, are uniquely positioned to bring broadband internet access to the communities they serve. With SB 540, Maryland's Eastern Shore would join the growing number of states that have carved out an important role for electric cooperatives in bringing a broadband internet ramp to unserved communities, most recently in Tennessee, Mississippi and Georgia.

Real Possibilities

AARP MD also supports SB 540 because the benefits of broadband internet access to older adults are well-recognized. Affordable, reliable internet access helps older adults to age in place productively and safely with a higher quality of life than would otherwise exist. The broadband platform supports access to telehealth and telemedicine, civic engagement, entertainment, on-line learning and other internet-based applications that address isolation and health challenges. Other benefits for older Persons include:

- Civic engagement (for example, sending emails and filing comments to town planners regarding local decisions about public resources and facilities);
- Overcoming social isolation as people age (the use of emails and social media allow older persons to engage with others with similar and shared interests and to access online newspapers and magazines);
- Distance learning for adults;
- Entertainment/Hobbies (movies, television, video streaming);
- Family connections (e.g., Skyping with children, grandchildren, friends, etc.);
- Small businesses (supporting websites that are offered by older self-employed persons); and
- Professional development (e.g., to participate in webinars concerning areas related to one's profession).

AARP Maryland thanks Senator Hershey for his leadership on this issue and we ask the Senate Finance Committee for a FAVORABLE REPORT on SB 540. We look forward to working with legislators on this and future efforts to expand broadband access in communities throughout the state. For questions please contact me -- Tammy Bresnahan at tbresnahan@aarp.org or by calling 410-302-8451.