



**Testimony HB 43**

**House Economic Matters**

**January 26, 2021**

**Position: FAVORABLE**

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

The Community Development Network of Maryland (CDN) is the voice for Maryland's community development sector and serves nearly 200 member organizations. CDN—focuses on small affordable housing developers, housing counseling agencies and community-based non-profits across the state of Maryland. The mission of CDN is to promote, strengthen and advocate for the community development sector throughout Maryland's urban, suburban and rural communities. CDN envisions a state in which all communities are thriving and where people of all incomes have abundant opportunities for themselves and their families.

HB 43 would alter the uses of the Rural Broadband Assistance Fund. It would establish the Office of Broadband in the Department of Information Technology to assist local jurisdictions in improving access to high-speed internet. The bill requires coordination with the executive branch establishing a Joint Committee on broadband to ensure that local jurisdictions are able to expand access to high-speed internet and make recommendations for new laws, programs and services needed to support expansion.

I urge this committee to resist creating a new Office of Broadband in the Department of Information technology and not connect to the existing Office of Rural Broadband at the Department of Housing and Community Development. We urge you not make this a rural versus urban issue. We need the state to see broadband connectivity and underlying affordability as a critical economic development issue for the whole state of Maryland.

In October 2020, CDN commissioned a report, "Disconnected in Maryland," by John Horrigan, Ph.D. The report found that they are more than half a million households, nearly 1 in 4, do not have a home wireline broadband subscription. This is not exclusively a rural issue. Two-thirds of those who are disconnected live in metro counties or Baltimore City. These households are disproportionately poor. Of particular concern are children in poverty unable to access classroom instruction and older adults cut off from services and needed support.

We ask that you amend this bill to include the language in HB97 establishing a statewide Digital Inclusion to address the need for high-speed internet statewide. CDN agrees with need for a Joint Committee on broadband to make recommendations for new laws, programs and services needed to support expansion. We hope that that committee will also be able to address innovation that may help to provide short term solutions to help children connect to classrooms, etc.

With respect to innovation, In Utah, the Murray School District recently figured out how to build a network for a part of the Salt Lake County that includes some of the poorest neighborhoods in the state. Every student will soon be connected to high-speed internet at home. And the service will be free for the kids there at a crucial time, when the pandemic has made access to broadband as essential to education as books.

We respectfully request a favorable report with amendments.

Submitted by Claudia Wilson Randall, Associate Director, Community Development Network