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**Testimony HB 97**

**House Economic Matters**

**January 26, 2021**

**Position: INFORMATIVE**

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

Housing Initiative Partnership (HIP) is an innovative, green nonprofit housing developer and HUD-certified housing counseling agency based in Prince George's County, Maryland dedicated to revitalizing neighborhoods and removing blight. With over 30 years' experience, HIP creates housing and economic security for persons of low- and moderate-income and provides services that improve the quality of life in the communities we serve. HIP has developed over 460 affordable units of rental housing as well as over 95 single-homes sold to homebuyers earning 80% or less of AMI. HIP is a HUD-approved counseling agency providing a wide range of housing counseling services from placing homeless families in permanent housing to rental counseling to homebuyer education to foreclosure counseling to financial capability counseling.

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.

**HIP urges Maryland to create one central office dedicated to broadband expansion for the whole state.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the digital divide in our communities. More people than ever are working and schooling from home. Many of our most vulnerable residents do not have necessary computers, tablets, or smart phones let alone reliable internet access to accommodate this new crisis. As government agencies are also working from home, almost all services and assistance require internet access and some form of smart technology. Further, those households lucky enough to live in apartment communities with commuter rooms, cannot access the amenities. Due to COVID-19, most community spaces are closed to the residents.

Specific examples of how the lack of internet and smart technology is challenging to our residents can be found with include rental assistance, MyDHR, and now COVID-19 vaccination appointments.

Rental Assistance has been a critical resource helping to sustain our residents facing job loss and reduced hours. HIP has been assisting residents in both Montgomery and Prince George's County apply for local rental assistance resources. These programs required applicants to have an email address and internet access to pre-register for rental assistance and provide the various forms of required documentation. HIP ultimately devised safe opportunities for residents to hand-deliver their documentation to our office, so staff could convert the paperwork to an electronic format and submit on their behalf. However, this was an extra burden on applicants to find transportation to our office simply because they did not have internet and computer access.

MyDHR is the electronic portal for applying for and submitting recertification information for benefits such as Food Stamps and Medical Assistance. My DHR requires a client not only to have internet access, they must have a unique e-mail address and cell phone number. Opening an account requires 2 step authentication where the client must have an email address and a cell phone number to received a text. This platform does not allow for a social worker or trusted family member to utilize their email address and cell phone number to assist technology challenged clients to apply for benefits. Offices are closed to the public. Our most vulnerable clients must only apply with paper applications which are very slow to be processed since there is limited staff in the various Social Service offices to receive and review the documentation.

COVID-19 vaccine appointments are now available our most vulnerable seniors ages 75 and older. Residents cannot easily pre-register or make appointments for the limited COVID-19 vaccines without internet access. This limitation is impacting the most vulnerable minority communities the hardest and these are the communities most in need of the vaccine. As a specific example, in one of HIP's senior affordable communities in Bladensburg, most residents do not have email addresses or wi-fi in their apartments. The Resident Services Coordinator is working with each of the 80 residents to pre-register for the vaccine. Once approved for an appointment, the coordinator will need to continue to assist each of those residents to provide the required information for the appointment.

As more and more programs and services are marketed and require online applications through email, eblasts, and other social media outlets, there is an assumption that those in need have access to reliable internet and smart technology. This simply is our most vulnerable communities.

Equity and inclusion demands that the State of Maryland have a centralized office of Broadband to ensure all Maryland residents have liable, affordable internet access.

Submitted by,



Maryann Dillon  
Executive Director