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Testimony HB 97

House Economic Matters

January 26, 2021

Position: FAVORABLE

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

My name is Franca Muller Paz, I am a Building Representative for the Baltimore Teachers Union, a faculty advisor for the student-led organization Students Organizing a Multicultural and Open Society (SOMOS), and a high school teacher in Baltimore City Public Schools.

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. We urge your favorable report for this bill.

Since this pandemic began, the Baltimore City school district has been at the mercy of the goodwill of Comcast, a company whose functional high-speed service is out of reach for many of our families and staff and whose “internet essentials” program for low-income families falls far short of the service they need for a 21st century education.

Yet, despite the advocacy of students, teachers, educational advocates, politicians, and the school district, Comcast routinely has come up short for our kids.

As the 3rd wave of COVID continues, it is clear distance learning and its impact on education as we know it, will be with us for the foreseeable future. The need for internet speed that we have today will not disappear even after the storm of COVID has passed.

Instead of waiting for a multinational, multibillion-dollar company to do the right thing, we must work together to find another way to get all Baltimoreans online. The first step in this solution? Supporting HB97, the Digital Connectivity Act.

This act will ensure that Maryland’s internet access, a crucial resource for our students, is studied and that meaningful goals will be set to close the state’s digital divide.

To this day, our City is the victim of digital redlining. From neighborhoods like Sandtown to Cherry Hill and beyond, there are areas of Baltimore City that internet service providers, like Comcast, have determined it is not worth their investment to build out functional internet infrastructure.

That is why, I am asking you to all be champions in advocating for our youth and push the Maryland General Assembly to step up for our kids - where these private for-profit companies have fallen desperately short.

Across the state of Maryland, residents today face a comparable challenge to what rural Americans faced a century ago. In the 1930s, millions across rural America lived without electricity, a lack of infrastructure that hurt both people, education, and the economy.

In response to inaction from private power utilities that falsely claimed extending coverage would be unprofitable for them (sound familiar) an activist government and mobilized communities stepped up. The Rural Electrification Administration under President Franklin D. Roosevelt brought light, power and a place in the 20th-century economy to the rural United States.

In the past, rural children struggled to do homework without electricity. Today, inadequate internet access, slow speeds and high costs stand in the way of a child's right to an education. This is especially true in Maryland's working class, rural, and urban households. In the case of Baltimore, less than half of Black and Latino families are connected to broadband internet.

Two decades into the 21st century, our kids and communities still struggle to access the internet, a basic necessity and a human right as defined by the United Nations. If we do not solve this problem, we face an educational deficit that will affect our State's children for years to come.

Maryland needs one central office dedicated to broadband expansion for the whole state, a commitment to study the issue of the digital divide, and a goal for closing our state's gap in internet access.

We respectfully request a favorable report for HB 97.

Submitted by Franca Muller Paz, Baltimore Teachers Union