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**Testimony SB66
Budget & Taxation Committee
February 5, 2021**

Position: FAVORABLE

Dear Chairman Guzzone & Members of the Budget & Taxation Committee:

St. Ambrose Housing Aid Center (St. Ambrose) is a 501 (c)(3) non-profit, whose mission is to create and maintain equal housing opportunities for low and moderate-income people, primarily in Baltimore City, and to encourage and support strong and diverse neighborhoods. Woven throughout St. Ambrose's history is the commitment to advancing racial equity. Founded in 1968 to confront the pervasive redlining and blockbusting practices that discriminated against minority homebuyers, prevented the creation of intergenerational wealth building, and shaped much of the racist and segregated housing, education, and workforce systems the results of which can be seen in Baltimore today. For this reason, St. Ambrose remains rooted in its commitment to the pursuit of social and economic justice by providing innovative, comprehensive housing services.

St. Ambrose is in favor of SB 66, which would establish the Office of Digital Inclusion in the Department of Housing and Community Development 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.

St. Ambrose is keenly aware of the inequitable and unjust effects of the digital divide on the individuals and families with whom we work. St. Ambrose staff encounter individuals experiencing these effects on a regular basis as they work their clients seeking a stable home and a pathway to a better life. One recent experience is that of Ms. Addison, an older woman living in Baltimore City whose access to St. Ambrose's services could have been expedited if she had access to the internet. Ms. Addison needed home repairs that would enable her to remain in her home safely, to maintain her health during the pandemic, and—in the long term-- age in place in the community she loved. St. Ambrose administers a program called Housing Upgrades to Benefit Seniors (HUBS) that provides repairs and accessibility modifications to ensure Baltimore's aging residents are able to do just that. Because Ms. Addison was not able to access the Internet in her time of need, she was unable to access key information regarding social security benefits, which made her unable to complete her HUBS application. She was forced to travel to multiple locations in person, risking her health, to retrieve appropriate documentation in order to qualify for the program and receive much-needed services. If she had simply been able to go online, not only would she have become eligible for services more quickly, she would have been able to stay safely at home and not put her health at risk.

Ms. Addison- and the thousands of individuals and families St. Ambrose serves-- would see direct benefits from the establishment of an Office of Digital Inclusion. Maryland needs one central office dedicated to broadband expansion for the whole state.

We respectfully request a favorable report for SB 96.

Submitted by

Gerard Joab
St. Ambrose Housing Aid Center, Inc.