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

**Position: FAVORABLE**

Dear Members of the Department of Housing and Community Development:

The Baltimore Digital Equity Coalition (BDEC) connects committed organizations and individuals to coordinated efforts to advance digital equity and close the digital divide. A cohort of over 70 member organizations, BDEC works to address both the urgent and long-term need for increased digital access throughout the city of Baltimore. Initially formed as a “rapid response” effort in the wake of COVID-19 closures and shutdowns, the Coalition acknowledges the deep-rooted and systemic history of digital inequity and aims to close the digital divide in Baltimore by providing:

- **Access to Devices** – Ensuring affordable, available, and sufficient devices for all historically underrepresented residents, small businesses, and community organizations.
- **Greater Internet Connectivity** – Ensuring there are sufficient options for affordable and available internet connectivity for all.
- **Digital Skills Training and Technical Support** – Creating and delivering educational opportunities for all residents and ensuring technical support is available to all who need it.
- **Advocacy** – Engaging elected officials, civic leaders, and citizens most affected by the digital divide to advocate for equal access to computers, internet connectivity, and digital literacy.

For over 100 years, systemic racism has been prevalent in Baltimore City. Professor Lawrence Brown of Morgan State University refers to these racial disparities as “White L vs. the Black Butterfly.”<sup>1</sup> In the white L, well-to-do residents of Baltimore receive tax increment financing (TIF) dollars for development, have access to free buses, and well-resourced schools. Residents in the Black Butterfly, located in Black West and East Baltimore, pay for substandard services. Baltimore’s current infrastructure and fiber optic service availability in the city and surrounding counties mirrors the “White L vs. the Black Butterfly.

The Office of Rural Broadband currently has a narrow scope of connecting rural communities which continues to perpetuate systems of inequity. Nearly 40 percent, or 206,000, of Maryland’s Black

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.baltimoresun.com/citypaper/bcpnews-two-baltimores-the-white-l-vs-the-black-butterfly-20160628-htmlstory.html>

households lack wireline broadband service connection.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, as of 2018 73.3% of white households in Baltimore City have this service compared with 50.2% of Black households and 46.4% of Latinx households.<sup>3</sup> Without data illuminating racial disparities, narratives around access to broadband will be framed as a rural, white issue. With data, it is clear that Black and Latinx households are disproportionately disconnected.

BDEC urges committee members to firmly uphold the requirement to collect, analyze, and publicly share geographic and demographic data on broadband affordability, adaptability, and service quality. Digital equity is not confined to access to devices, broadband, and digital skills; digital equity is also readily available, transparent data that can enable communities to further engage in self-advocacy.

We respectfully request a favorable report for SB66 and the data-based metrics outlined which will inform a state-wide approach to ensure that all Marylanders, regardless of race, zip code, income level, education, or immigration status, will have the resources necessary to participate actively in modern society.

Sincerely,



Tia Price  
Director  
Baltimore Digital Equity Coalition (BDEC)

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<sup>2</sup> (Horrigan, *Disconnected in Maryland: Statewide Data Show the Racial and Economic Underpinnings of the Digital Divide* 2021)

<sup>3</sup> (Horrigan, *Baltimore's Digital Divide: Gaps in Internet Connectivity and the Impact on Low-income City Residents* 2020)