



Montgomery County

Office of Intergovernmental Relations

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SB 66

DATE: February 5, 2021

SPONSOR: Senator Elfreth, *et al.*

ASSIGNED TO: Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs

CONTACT PERSON: Kathleen Boucher (kathleen.boucher@montgomerycountymd.gov)

POSITION: Support with Amendments

Department of Housing and Community Development – Office of Digital Inclusion – Established (Digital Connectivity Act of 2021)

This bill establishes the Office of Digital Inclusion within the Department of Housing and Community Affairs (DHCA) for the purpose facilitating broadband Internet expansion throughout the State. Among other things, the duties of the Office include: (1) conducting a Statewide audit of the availability, reliability, and affordability of broadband Internet services; (2) creating a public map showing which residents lack broadband Internet access and the cost of broadband services in different areas of the State; (3) assisting local governments in their efforts to improve access to broadband Internet; (4) collaborating with school systems and community colleges to ensure that students have the ability to connect to broadband Internet; and (5) offering funding and technical assistance to help local governments and private entities qualify for federal funding.

Montgomery County strongly supports this bill with amendments that add the Maryland State Library and local library systems to the list of stakeholders with whom the Office must collaborate. Public library systems play an integral role in ensuring that all Marylanders, particularly those who do not have broadband access in their own homes, have free access to broadband Internet as well as programs that enhance digital literacy.

In implementing the bill, it will be important for the Office, in addition to prioritizing infrastructure expansion, to prioritize efforts to ensure that residents have access to digital devices and the skills and training that allow them to use the Internet effectively (e.g., daily living, education, telehealth, etc.) and to ensure that the data collection effort mandated by the bill includes the identification of people who do not have broadband Internet at home because they cannot afford it and not just people who lack access to broadband infrastructure. The Office must also include local governments, which operate community broadband networks that are used by school systems and community colleges, in their collaborative efforts with schools and community colleges to ensure that students have the ability to connect to broadband Internet. It is our understanding that these priorities are consistent with the intent of the bill but believe the bill could be amended to more clearly articulate these expectations.

The County respectfully requests that the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee vote favorable on Senate Bill 66 with the amendments outlined above.