Testimony in support of

SB66 – Digital Connectivity Act

Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee

Tuesday, January 26, 2021

Honorable Committee Chair Pinsky, Vice Chair Kagan and Distinguished Senators:

On behalf of Carroll County Public Library (CCPL) and as the Legislative Officer for the Maryland Library Association (MLA), I want to thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of the Digital Connectivity Act.

While it describes something in the virtual world, the "Digital Divide" has a very 'real world' impact. The digital divide is a challenge in three ways. Those who do not have digital access because *no access is offered or available in their location (accessibility)*. Those who *cannot afford access (economically)* and those who *do not know how to use digital tools and information (literacy)*. All three are very real barriers for many in our state and all three prevent people from fully participating in our society, democracy and economy.

Recent data from the Abell Foundation tells us that over 520,000 Marylander's do not subscribe to wired broadband services at their home. That is 23% of the population. 108,000 of these are households with children under the age of 18, creating an additional "homework" or learning gap This is especially worrisome in the time of COVID. These households are disproportionally poor, African-American and Hispanic. In fact, nearly 40% of all disconnected households are African-American. (206,000) *(Abell Foundation "Disconnected in Maryland" report, Jan 2021)*

Libraries have been working tirelessly for over 2 decades to bridge this ever-widening gap. In 1994, Maryland's public libraries created the SAILOR Network. Developed in recognition of a future need for electronic access to information and materials outside of the walls of a library, this statewide broadband network has provided connectivity to Maryland's public libraries, local governments and schools since 1996. During the 2019 fiscal year, public libraries offered online access on over 5,400 Internet terminals located in public libraries across the state. Additionally, our communities accessed the Internet over 4.9 million times via Wi-Fi services at a public library outlet. Currently, Maryland State Library is working with SAILOR and the Enoch Pratt Free Library to create a WiFi map. This map will make it easy to find free WiFi access anywhere in the state.

Libraries can speak as experts, then, in saying that by creating, staffing and funding the Office of Digital Inclusion, Maryland continues to take positive steps to address the causes of this problem. It will be our pleasure to work with such an office, share the lessons we have learned over the last 25 years and work together with our education, economic and government partners to assure that every resident of Maryland can both access and use the wonderful digital tools available to them.

On behalf of the Carroll County Board of Trustees and the Board of the Maryland Library Association, I thank you for your work in addressing this issue.

Respectfully submitted by

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