

February 9, 2021

Testimony on Senate Bill 66
Department of Housing and Community Development –
Office of Digital Inclusion - Established (Digital Connectivity Act of 2021)
Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee

Position: Favorable

Maryland Nonprofits is a statewide association of more than 1100 nonprofit organizations and institutions. We strongly urge you to support Senate Bill 66.

Our collective awareness of something known as ‘the digital divide’ probably began shortly after the emergence of the world-wide web as an everyday tool and convenience in both business and personal communication. To whatever extent we may have understood the importance of the internet in our day-to-day lives, the COVID pandemic has dramatically magnified the absolute deprivation that lack of adequate rapid broadband access represents for families – and businesses – that don’t have it.

In communities across Maryland, from isolated or rural, and to others in our urban settings, people without the ability or means to access broadband communication, who are more commonly in poor neighborhoods or communities of color, were essentially cut-off from critical services or opportunities: to safely work or shop from home, to find work, to file for unemployment, to find health care or benefit from telehealth, to participate in remote learning, even to find critical information about the disease, financial relief, social services, or food assistance. Even in the nonprofit sector, the majority of organizations have had to shift services and activities to virtual operations.

Most of us, certainly those participating in today’s hearing, can routinely access any of those services or opportunities on the internet. But whether the result of development or community planning decisions, limited affordable housing opportunities, costs and lack of adequate income, or limited personal ability or experience, too many Marylanders cannot. In many of these cases it is the result of past or ongoing social or racial inequities that has cut off so many families in the most critical of times.

The extent of this crisis is well documented by the findings of the recently completed Abell Foundation report [“Disconnected in Maryland”](#): “

- Some 520,000 Maryland households do not subscribe to wireline broadband service at home. That comes to 23% of homes lacking service.
- Approximately 391,000 Maryland homes do not have a desktop or laptop computer, or 18% of all households.
- Close to 290,000 Maryland households have neither a desktop, laptop, nor tablet computing device in their homes. That is 13% of households without these digital access tools.

- Some 108,000 Maryland households with children under the age of 18 do not have wireline internet service at home. These households suffering from the “homework gap” are disproportionately poor, African American, and Hispanic.

The Report also noted that “Internet access means very little without a computing device to log on, and there are substantial gaps in computer ownership in Maryland:

- 391,000 Maryland homes do not have either a desktop or laptop computer, or nearly one in five (18%) homes.
- Nearly 290,000 Maryland households lack either a desktop, laptop, or tablet computer (or 13% of all homes).
- As with wireline broadband subscriptions, the weight of these gaps falls heavily in urban and metro areas and among African American households.

Senate Bill 66 will expand the state’s focus and broaden our ‘agency infrastructure’ to address this issue on a statewide basis, with a new Office of Digital Inclusion and with a charge the recognizes the full scope of work and activities that are required, including development of a plan by 2022 to “ensure that every resident of the State has the ability to connect to universal, affordable, reliable broadband internet”.

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