



Statement of Maryland Rural Health Association

To the Finance Committee

March 16, 2021

Senate Bill 824 Economic Development – Broadband Providers – Joint Trenching and Fee (Building Out Broadband Act of 2021)

POSITION: SUPPORT

Chair Kelley, Vice Chair Feldman, Senator Hester, and members of the Finance Committee, the Maryland Rural Health Association (MRHA) is in SUPPORT of Senate Bill 824 Economic Development – Broadband Providers – Joint Trenching and Fee (Building Out Broadband Act of 2021).

MRHA supports this legislation that establishes the purpose of the Maryland Digital Connectivity Fund to include expansion of affordable broadband services provide financial assistance to authorities to expand high-speed Internet access in certain areas of the State.

Rural Maryland faces many unique challenges compared to the rest of the state, including deteriorating infrastructure, economical and broadband issues. This fund would provide greatly needed initiatives and solutions to address broadband infrastructure and economic situations across rural Maryland.

Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic where rural communities depend on reliable broadband for school, work, and health care, this bill would provide essential financial assistance and expansion of broadband to rural areas in need.

MRHA's mission is to educate and advocate for the optimal health and wellness of rural communities and their residents. Membership is comprised of health departments, hospitals, community health centers, health professionals, and community members in rural Maryland.

Rural Maryland represents almost 80 percent of Maryland's land area and 25% of its population. Of Maryland's 24 counties, 18 are considered rural by the state, and with a population of over 1.6 million they differ greatly from the urban areas in the state. And while Maryland is one of the richest states, there is great disparity in how wealth is distributed. The greatest portion of wealth resides around the Baltimore/Washington Region; while further away from the I-95 corridor, differences in the social and economic environment are very apparent.

MHRA believes this legislation is important to support our rural communities and we thank you for your consideration.

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