



Testimony HB 41
House Economic Matters
January 26, 2021
Position: FAVORABLE

Dear Chairman Davis & Members of the House Economic Matters Committee:

The Community Development Network of Maryland (CDN) is the voice for Maryland's community development sector and serves nearly 200 member organizations. CDN—focuses on small affordable housing developers, housing counseling agencies and community-based non-profits across the state of Maryland. The mission of CDN is to promote, strengthen and advocate for the community development sector throughout Maryland's urban, suburban and rural communities. CDN envisions a state in which all communities are thriving and where people of all incomes have abundant opportunities for themselves and their families.

HB 41 would alter the uses of the Rural Broadband Assistance Fund. It would establish Office of Broadband in the Department of Information Technology to assist local jurisdictions in improving access to high-speed internet. The bill requires coordination with the executive branch establishing a Joint Committee on broadband to ensure that local jurisdictions are able to expand access to high-speed internet and make recommendations for new laws, programs and services needed to support expansion.

In October 2020, CDN commissioned a report, "Disconnected in Maryland," by John Horrigan, Ph.D. The report found that they are more than half a million households, nearly 1 in 4, do not have a home wireline broadband subscription. Two-thirds of those who are disconnected live in metro counties or Baltimore City. This is not exclusively a rural issue. Forty percent of the disconnected are African American. These households are disproportionately poor. Of particular concern are children in poverty unable to access classroom instruction and older adults cut off from services of all kinds. Further, for workers of color, immigrant workers, and workers with limited formal education, digital access and skill gaps present immediate threats to their ability to sustain their families and make them significantly less likely to reconnect to work once separated.

We ask that you amend this bill to include the language in HB97 establishing a statewide Digital Inclusion office to coordinate statewide efforts for broadband and internet connectivity. We encourage the office of rural broadband to continue their efforts to connect rural communities and start to make plans for unconnected areas of the state. Maryland state policymakers need to commit to creating digitally equitable systems in response to the Covid-19 crisis and beyond. Failing to act now will whole communities on the sidelines of the economy.

We respectfully request a favorable report with amendments.

Submitted by Claudia Wilson Randall, Executive Director, Community Development Network