



Stu Johnson, Executive Director

Proponent Testimony for House Bill 378

December 12, 2017

Chairman Smith, Vice Chair Ryan, Ranking Member Cera, and members of the House Finance Committee, my name is Stu Johnson and I serve as the Executive Director for Connect Ohio, a subsidiary of national nonprofit Connected Nation. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on House Bill 378 and to share why broadband and this bill are so important to Ohio's future.

Since 2008, Connect Ohio has worked extensively in both urban and rural communities throughout Ohio to bring connectivity to our citizens. We have gathered and field validated data from internet service providers, communities, and state and federal agencies to create and maintain publicly available, granular maps of Ohio's broadband landscape. We have provided technical assistance and resources to publish in-depth broadband assessments and formulate strategic project plans. Connect Ohio's efforts and data have helped contribute to over \$200 million in federal grants and subsidies being awarded to Ohio and its broadband provider community, as well as helping inform numerous investments from the private sector itself.

Connect Ohio's core mission is to expand broadband access, adoption, and use throughout our state. In executing this mission, I have the opportunity to interact with individuals and businesses that are directly impacted by a lack of broadband access every day. They feel disconnected figuratively and literally from a society in which nearly everything is dependent upon a reliable internet connection.

I have talked with businesses, community leaders, farmers, first responders, hospitals, seniors, schools, teachers, students, parents, and many others about their technology use and needs, and I can tell you that broadband is no longer a luxury: it is a vital lifeline to participate in society and an infrastructure that is quickly becoming just as critical as our roads, bridges, water and electricity.

Yet, 300,000 households in rural Ohio have no broadband access—households where children struggle to complete their homework and where parents can't even send a simple e-mail due to lack of connectivity. An additional 2.1 million households are

served only by a single broadband provider, meaning that more than half of all Ohio households either have no provider choice or no access at all. In Appalachia, this divide is even more pronounced where one in four households have no access to broadband. I'm sure that many of you on this Committee can also share stories about constituents who lack and need broadband access – whether it is to complete homework, search for a job, access healthcare providers, increase agricultural production, run a business, or seek government services.

House Bill 378 would go a long way toward bridging Ohio's digital divide. Modeled after Minnesota's highly successful "Border to Border" Broadband Grant Program, this bill will provide \$50 million per year over the biennium to projects that will ensure that middle-mile and last-mile broadband access is available to the tens of thousands of Ohio households that have little hope of otherwise getting connectivity at modern speeds. The bill rewards creative ways to stretch dollars and build out service to as many people as possible, while also prioritizing broadband service to unserved community anchor institutions, such as education, public safety, and healthcare facilities.

Thirteen other states have adopted a broadband infrastructure funding program to target unserved areas, and multiple states have even set a goal of connecting 100% of their residents to broadband within the next few years. I encourage our State to also ensure that every Ohioan has access to robust, affordable broadband connectivity, and House Bill 378 would be a significant catalyst to such a goal.

Thank you, Chairman Smith and members of the Finance Committee for the opportunity to testify on this important legislation. I'm happy to answer any questions that you may have at this time.