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Before the Senate Finance Subcommittee on Workforce and

Opponent Testimony on Telecommunications Provisions of HB 64

Presented by: Mary Ellen Nose, Southeastern Ohio Legal Services

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Good morning, Chairman Beagle and Committee Members.

My name is Mary Ellen Nose. I am a Paralegal with the Athens' office of Southeastern Ohio Legal Services (SEOLS). SEOLS is a not for profit agency providing legal services in civil cases to low-income residents in 30 counties in Southeastern Ohio. The Athens SEOLS service area consists of seven counties including Athens, Gallia, Meigs, Monroe, Noble, Vinton and Washington. SEOLS Program also has offices in: Portsmouth which covers Adams, Lawrence and Scioto Counties; Chillicothe which covers Fairfield, Fayette, Hocking, Jackson, Pickaway, Pike and Ross Counties; Newark which covers Know, Licking, Muskingum and Perry Counties; Newark which covers Coshocton, Holmes, Guernsey and Tuscarawas Counties; and, Steubenville which covers Belmont, Carroll, Harrison and Jefferson Counties. Much of our service area is extremely rural and is considered in the Appalachian Region. If HB 64 passes in its current form and basic local phone service is discontinued without an alternative in place, it would impact almost 1/3 of the State.

I reside in Vinton County, a remote county which now has claim to two stop lights in the entire county, and has no city, but rather townships and villages. Vinton County has no hospital and the nearest one is ½ hour away from my home. Much of my county still does not have safe public water. There is no sewage system where I live, and limited sewage systems within the County. There are no fire hydrants in most of the County. Many of us have cell phones, but cannot access them at our homes because of no service. Some of us have limited internet service, which is dependent on landlines. HB 64 would allow AT&T and other major telephone companies in Ohio to withdraw their basic landline service to Ohio telephone customers and would be devastating to low-income, rural, disabled and elderly Ohioans.

FIRST, I want to tell you a personal story for you to better understand the result of discontinuation of landline service. As I stated earlier, I live in the beautiful, hilly, rural county of Vinton. My mother, who is 97, lives with me. I purchased a family cell phone service contract when my mother moved from her home in Central Florida and came to live with me. My mother's eye doctor happens to be a neighbor living about 1/3 of a mile away. When we were looking for a cell phone, because of the area where we live, no cell phone provider could guarantee service. Our neighbor had service through a provider, so I contracted with that provider. We thought being so close, we too would have service at our home, which proved incorrect.

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I have, by necessity, had to maintain landline service particularly for emergency services to be available to my mother while my husband and I are at work. She has severe mitral valve prolapse, and is susceptible to falling, due to her age. Otherwise, she is active. In the past year she has called 911 at least three times, at least one resulting in hospitalization. Had she not been able to access 911 through our landline, I do not know what the consequences may have been.

On another occasion, I came home to find my mother lying on the couch. Hearing a knock on the door, I responded to EMS who indicated they had received a call from the Sheriff's. Shortly after they went downstairs to my mother, another knock on the door was the Sheriff. They receive all 911 calls in Vinton, and direct them to the Emergency Medical Service. Because my mother at the time of the call was only able to say "Something's wrong," both responded. If we did not have a landline, neither would have been contacted. Again, I do not know what the consequences may have been.

SECOND, *landline service is the only available service in some area, and is the only affordable service in other areas.* There are many, many miles of roads particularly in Rural Ohio where cell phone service is simply not available. Many rural residents cannot afford cell phones that offer internet services. Some are not able to obtain free cell phones which have limited minutes and are offered through the Lifeline program. The reason is that the Lifeline program will not give a cell phone to a customer who has no cell phone service at their home address. Life and death situations arise where basic local exchange service is crucial, just as they do in any other part of the State. ***Allowing companies to do away with landlines is unnecessary and extremely hazardous to those living in these areas where cell phone companies do not provide any service, or in some areas, marginal service. It literally could mean the difference between life and death!***

THIRD, many rural Ohioans purchase monthly cell phones with limited minutes. They may run out of minutes well before the end of the month. If these phones are provided the Lifeline, additional minutes are not available until the following month. If the individual has purchased the cell phones, they can only add additional minutes when they are able to afford to do so. The cell phones may only work in certain areas where they live. This means they must drive until they come to an area where service is available,

FOURTH, *the elimination of landlines will only broaden the technological divide between those who have access to reliable technology, mostly available in a limited radius around schools in the rural areas, unlike in the metropolitan areas. This includes both internet cell phone services.* Until a few years ago dial up was the only type available to and affordable for me. I can only assume that many residents in our area still only have dial-up service available. We have no cable available, and personal satellite service is extremely costly. I am on the very edge of a provider satellite service area. The internet service I receive, when available, is much faster than the dial up. However, it is not consistent, and when it is cloudy or the weather is bad, I cannot access it. ***For our children in school, and adults living in rural areas, this creates an extreme disadvantage in learning capabilities, as well as the ability to compete with others from urban or suburban areas (where they can access internet, and cell phone service at school, but not when they return home) to be able to have the skills necessary for jobs when they leave school.***

FIFTH, *cell phones rely on electricity in order to charge them.* When outages occur for longer than the battery life of a cell phone, those in rural areas would have no alternative such as the landline, when an emergency occurs. It can take much longer for electric companies to

reconnect individual power in rural areas due to the geographic and topical landscape not found in urban and suburban areas. **Landlines are not dependent on electricity, and are a security for particularly the elderly and/or disabled who need access to a phone and "911" if a life-threatening emergency should arise.** In instances of extreme weather conditions, which Ohio experience multiple times this past winter, those in rural areas are particularly vulnerable, due to the geographic expanse, and the lack of cell coverage, in emergent situations. *Landlines are not dependent upon electricity, and are a security for those who are elderly and/or disabled and need access to a phone if a life threatening emergency should arise.*

SIXTH, more and more reliance on technology by residents in order to access benefits such as unemployment, SNAP, Social Security, employment and other services, is being mandated by government agencies, employers, etc. The ability to access needed services, to report mandatory changes if on benefits, or report off work if employed, and much, much, more, is dependent on the ability to make initial and subsequent contacts with employers, agencies, doctors, etc. **For those without internet and cell service, landlines are their only means of contact. Without them, they can lose benefits, lose employment, lose access to emergency services, and maybe even lose their life.**

SEVENTH, there are literally miles and miles of roads, particularly in rural Ohio, where cell phone service is not available. If an accident or fire occurs, someone must literally drive to an area where there is cell phone service. There is potential harm to the individual involved in the accident due to the lack of time for an emergent response. In many cases, residents in these areas have landlines, and are able to at least call in the emergency.

EIGHTH, some business in the rural areas could be greatly affected by having no landline. There are many "cottage industries" due to the rural aspect of the Appalachia, where there is little opportunity for employment due to the lack of infrastructure (sewage, high speed internet, accessible highways, etc.). Not only do these small cottage industries need landlines for phones in order to carry on their day-to-day business, they need landlines for fax service as well. **If landlines were abandoned without other reliable, affordable phone service in place, the very livelihood of this resident with "cottage industries" would be compromised.**

IN CLOSING, advancing technology including cell phone and internet services in all of Ohio is a goal for which we should strive. However, unless and until every citizen in Ohio can be covered by reliable and affordable alternatives to the basic landline phone service, to do away with landline service is an irresponsible, reckless action for the residents on fixed income, with low income, who are elderly and/or disabled, and who have no other alternative. I implore you to think not of the impact on the companies wanting this change, but on the devastating public interest impact that most probably will result.

Thank you for your consideration. I will try to answer any questions.

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