



Advocates for Ohio's Future

Substitute House Bill 13- Proponent Testimony
Senate Energy and Public Utilities Committee - November 17, 2020

Chairman Wilson, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Williams and Members of the Senate Energy and Public Utilities Committee, my name is Kelsey Bergfeld, and I am the Coalition Manager of Advocates for Ohio's Future (AOF).

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments in support of Sub HB 13 which creates the Ohio Residential Broadband Expansion Grant Program to provide grant money for internet service providers to build critical infrastructure needed to connect Ohioans who do not have access to broadband.

AOF is a nonprofit, nonpartisan coalition of over 500 state and local health and human services policy, advocacy and provider organizations that promotes health and human service budget and policy solutions so that all Ohioans live better lives. Our coalition believes in investing in our state's most valuable resource—our people—to ensure that they are safe, healthy, and can access pathways to prosperity for themselves and their families.

Today more than 300,000 households in Ohio representing close to 1 million Ohioans lack access to high-speed internet. In some parts of our state, communities have little or no access to the internet because of gaps in or complete absence of digital infrastructure.

Though broadband access was rising in importance before the pandemic, the Coronavirus has turned the internet into a critical lifeline. Over the last eight months, the internet has become the primary way many Ohioans work, go to school, access healthcare, search for employment, seek assistance and connect with friends and family.

Ohio communities and families with limited or no access to high-speed internet now clearly suffer a disadvantage in the classroom and in the workplace, as well as a competitive disadvantage in today's technology-infused economy. In today's socially and physically distanced world, the lack of connectivity results in limited opportunities and can impact a person's wellbeing and quality of life.

Sub HB 13 and the proposed Ohio Residential Broadband Expansion Grant Program is one of the first steps in Ohio's Broadband Strategy developed by InnovateOhio. We acknowledge where this bill started and are pleased that additional funding is now included to make the grant program \$20 million. Though the need is much larger and many more resources are required to connect all Ohioans, this bill will connect families to this vital resource.

While we support and appreciate the goal of Sub HB 13, we, along with a number of our member organizations suggest two amendments that align with the overall goal of increasing broadband connectivity for Ohio residents.

Currently, Sub HB 13 excludes government and quasi-governmental entities from the definition of Broadband Provider, meaning they are not permitted to submit a grant application. Consistent with testimony that was provided in the House, we believe the definition should not exclude these entities. In some communities, the best entity to expand service may be a government entity.

Sub HB13 also allows electric distribution utilities to recover costs from their customers. This provision requires the PUCO, if the request meets certain requirements, to approve a rate mechanism that allows an electric utility to recover some infrastructure expansion costs from its retail electric service customers. During this time of

crisis, many Ohioans are already struggling to pay their utility bills and this provision could place additional costs and burdens on customers who may not even benefit from the expansion of broadband.

In addition, AOF would like to emphasize the overall vision of Ohio's Broadband Strategy is to bring high speed internet access to every Ohioan by focusing on improving access for two groups: the unserved and underserved. While Sub HB 13 would expand broadband infrastructure, that alone does not guarantee high-speed internet access if the cost of access is unaffordable or existing infrastructure is severely neglected and outdated.

For many Ohioans, the main barrier to broadband access is not geography, but cost. In the city of Cleveland, 27% of households had no internet access of any kind (including smartphones) according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Similar large shares of the populations in Toledo, Dayton, Lorain, and Youngstown are unconnected and under-connected. The monthly bill for home high speed internet connection in most Ohio communities is now at least \$60 to \$70 per month—an amount too great for many families already struggling to pay rent and keep food on the table.

At a time where broadband access and connectivity will be a vital factor in economic recovery for both families and communities during and in the aftermath of the Coronavirus pandemic, equitable, affordable access to broadband becomes a crucial factor in the reality of two Ohio's—one laden with greater job and education opportunities, better health outcome and overall quality of life—while the other is left behind. Digital inclusion and digital literacy must be addressed to achieve the vision outlined by Ohio's Broadband Strategy—where all Ohioans have access to this vital resource.

Though addressing affordability is not the intent of Sub. HB 13, we urge the committee to consider ways to help low-income families from around the state afford high-speed internet access and incentivize internet service providers to update and improve their networks in low-income areas to increase opportunities for both families and businesses.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment in support of Sub-HB 13. We urge you to support Sub-HB 13 to increase access to broadband and to consider strategies to make high speed internet access more affordable so all Ohioans to have the opportunity and ability to participate in Ohio's economy.

Advocates for Ohio's Future

175 S. Third Street Suite 350, Columbus, OH 43215
614-745-0740 ext. 305 | kbergfeld@communitysolutions.com
www.advocatesforohio.org