

**Senate Energy and Public Utilities Committee**  
**Proponent Testimony**  
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**Tracy Nájera, Children's Defense Fund-Ohio**

Chairperson Wilson, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Williams, and Members of the Senate Energy and Public Utilities Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on House Bill 13. My name is Tracy Nájera, and I am the Executive Director of the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio. I am here today to offer support for H.B.13 which would establish a Residential Broadband Expansion program in Ohio.

Born out of the civil rights movement, with more than four decades of advocacy behind us, it is the mission of the Children's Defense Fund to champion policies and programs that lift children out of poverty, protect them from abuse and neglect, and ensure their access to appropriate and targeted health care, quality education, and nutritional wellness. We recognize that every child contributes to the vibrancy and success of our communities and are therefore driven to ensure every child and young person has equitable opportunities to gain the social, economic, cultural and political capital they need to flourish into adulthood and give back to their communities.

But the reality is that, in Ohio today, not every child has the opportunities they need to thrive into adulthood. We are highly concerned that nearly 1 in 4 Ohio school children do not have access to the internet or any device needed to connect to it. Inequitable access to the internet has persisted for decades for both rural and urban communities, and it has created expansive digital divides, and even digital deserts, where the lack of affordability and/or availability of internet is having far-reaching implications for Ohio children and families.

Access to high-speed broadband internet is vitally important to the livelihoods of our children and their ability to thrive, just as important to their well-being as their access to running water, electricity, and heat in their homes. Internet access is a "super-determinant of health" that underlies nearly every facet of a child's well-being - from education, to economic sustainability, health and wellness, food and housing security, and all of the conditions in our communities where we live, work, play and learn. In this digital age, broadband internet is absolutely essential infrastructure, and the importance of it could not be more amplified in its necessity than now during the COVID-19 pandemic, while many children are learning remotely and families experiencing hardship are relying on it to connect with employment opportunities and access public assistance to meet the basic needs of their children.

H.B. 13 is a crucially important first step towards greater digital equity in our state, specifically in regards to internet availability in our rural and Appalachian regions. A 2019 study of eight southeastern Ohio counties conducted by the Buckeye Hills Regional Council found that 80%-90% of households in these counties had no access to broadband at all. Statewide, the Council

estimates that approximately one million Ohioans, or 340,000 households, do not have any internet access. In areas where no broadband infrastructure exists, H.B. 13 plays a positive first step in expanding internet availability by providing grants to municipal corporations and townships to help fund projects that provide broadband to residential areas within their boundaries without this infrastructure. By designating \$20 million for providers through the Residential Broadband Expansion program and by enabling electric cooperatives to apply for these grants as well, we see a commendable first step towards greater connectivity throughout Ohio.

Ohio's H.B. 13 represents a crucial initial investment in Ohio's children and their ability to be connected in a broadband world, and we must ensure that we protect our returns on this investment by making sure our state's initiatives and efforts towards digital equity outlive the pandemic and current conditions where we find ourselves now. Specifically, we know that in order to fully expand access to families living in rural and Appalachian regions, we must follow through with a further investment of \$2.3 billion to run 45,000 miles of optic-fiber cables, which would even pose greater benefits to Ohioans by creating 9,000 jobs and boosting our GDP by \$1 billion per year. The short and long-term outcomes outweigh the costs in getting these efforts underway.

In our future efforts, we can also go beyond addressing accessibility by turning also towards the issue of affordability, which is out of reach for many families statewide in accessing the internet, but in particular, those communities in our low-wealth urban, rural, and Appalachian communities. In many ways, the digital divides we see today mirror the racial and economic divides we have seen throughout our history, and digital inequity acts to further perpetuate such racial and economic disparities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us the two Ohio's that exist - one where distance learning for students, higher education access, workforce development training, remote work, telehealth, and a myriad of other opportunities exist as a result of broadband, devices, and subscriptions. The other Ohio also exists where opportunities to live well are just out of reach in the absence of internet availability and the devices and incomes necessary to connect to it. With the passage of H.B. 13, we have an opportunity to begin building one Ohio that is connected and strengthened by its essential infrastructure and the opportunities that all Ohioans can glean from it.

We urge you to pass this this legislation as first step towards this vision of one Ohio where opportunity exists for everyone. I appreciate having the opportunity to provide testimony today.