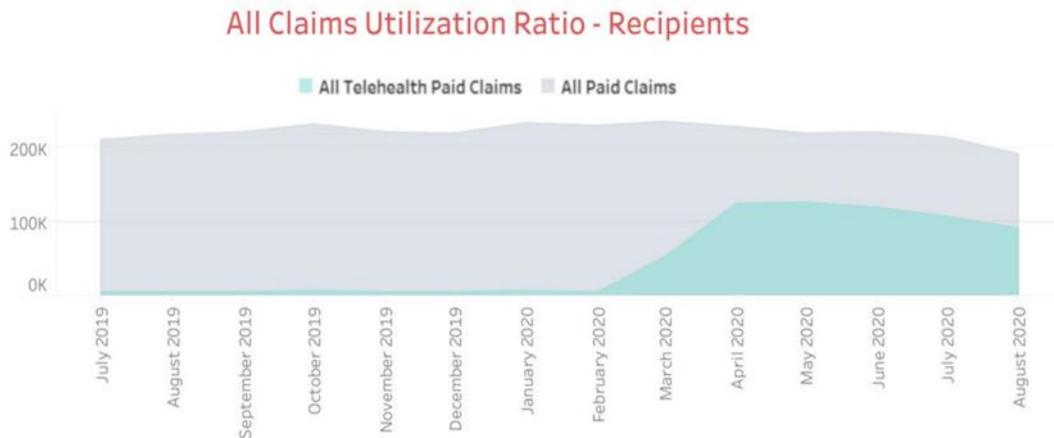




HB 13
Proponent Testimony
Senate Energy and Public Utilities Committee
11/17/2020

Chair Wilson, Vice Chair McColley, and Ranking Member Williams, and members of the Senate Energy and Public Utilities Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony supporting HB 13. The Mental Health and Addiction Advocacy Coalition (MHAC) is a statewide member organization actively advocating to increase awareness and advance policies to improve the lives of those impacted by mental illnesses and addiction disorders. The MHAC’s membership includes 125 organizations whose members exemplify the diversity of community organizations that have a common interest in behavioral health, including health and human service organizations; the faith-based community; managed care plans; advocacy organizations; courts; major medical institutions; the corporate arena; and behavioral health agencies serving adults and children.

House Bill 13 is Ohio’s first residential broadband expansion program bringing connectivity to underserved areas of the state. Across Ohio, hundreds of thousands go without internet in their homes. The internet has become a basic utility for much more than social connectivity. Remote learning, working, and accessing healthcare has exponentially increased because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The below chart illustrates utilization data from the Ohio Department of Medicaid showing mental health and addiction treatment services delivered via telehealth before and after the COVID-19 pandemic between July 2019 – August 2020.



As you can see, over half of the overall behavioral health services were delivered using telehealth once the virus spread to the United States. Behavioral health treatment providers have been able to use telehealth because of the expanded Medicaid telehealth rules allowing for more clinicians and fewer restrictions to deliver needed care. HB13 expands internet services to more households which is another important piece of keeping those with behavioral health disorders connected to treatment.

While the pandemic has generated ripple effects on the health of the economy, among other things, it is also giving rise to a surge in mental illness and substance use disorders. New or intensified stressors due to loss of routine, separation from friends and family, loss of employment, financial hardship, and fear of the virus is increasing anxiety and depression. These factors brought on by the pandemic are impacting people who never experienced issues with mental health issues before and are disproportionately affecting people in substance use disorder recovery, and people with ongoing mental health disorders.

Around the state, there is a need for continued access to treatment services via telehealth to ensure individuals stay connected to care. As the pandemic continues, more and more clients will want to continue to engage in telehealth services to stay safe from the spread of the virus and ease of use on an ongoing basis, but many Ohioans face challenges connecting to the internet.

Since COVID-19 is not likely to go away anytime soon, the behavioral health field is maximizing the use of telehealth to ensure access and services to clients continues. The state must find ways to make it easier for services to come to the client versus making clients come to the service during these uncertain times. That includes supporting needed internet infrastructure.

The following recommendations should be considered as we continue to move all Ohioans to high-speed internet.

1. Excluding government and quasi-governmental entities from the definition of Broadband Provider. This exclusion means 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.
2. Allowing electric distribution utilities to recover costs from their customers. This provision was added without time for public input in the House and at the request of AEP. It requires the PUCO, if the request meets certain requirements, to approve a rate mechanism that allows an electric utility to recover some expansion costs from its retail electric service customers. During this time of crisis, many Ohioans are struggling to pay their utility bills. 44 percent of Ohioans surveyed reporting using some of the one-time stimulus payment to pay utility and telecommunication bills. Additionally, now is not the time to let electric utility companies define how they want to participate in this program and recover their costs from customers who may not even benefit from the expansion of broadband.
3. Require Internet Service Providers who receive grant dollars to offer discount programs for low-income households. Access and affordability are both issues for internet access. While HB 13 would expand broadband infrastructure, that alone does not guarantee access if the cost is unaffordable. Utilities such as electricity and natural gas have programs that help low-income Ohioans manage costs. Internet service providers who receive grant dollars should offer affordable service.

The intent of this bill is to lay the foundational infrastructure to support internet access. While another part of the plan is tracking not only the number of households with broadband, but the speeds available, the price of service, and how many homes are purchasing the service. Monitoring those variables will help to continue the discussion of the broadband landscape in Ohio including addressing the availability of low-income programs. The MHAC supports efforts to ensure more Ohioans can connect to needed behavioral health care services and views HB 13 as the first step to more discussions on closing the digital divide.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kelly A. Smith". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Kelly Smith
State Program & Policy Director