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**Testimony in Support of HB13**  
**Susan Jagers, Director**  
**Ohio Poverty Law Center**  
**Senate Energy and Public Utilities Committee**  
**November 17, 2020**

Chair Wilson, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Williams, and members of the Senate Energy and Public Utilities Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill 13. My name is Susan Jagers and I am the Director of the Ohio Poverty Law Center. The Ohio Poverty Law Center's mission is to reduce poverty and increase justice by protecting and expanding the legal rights of Ohioans living, working and raising their families in poverty. We work closely with Ohio's legal aid programs that provide civil legal services to low-income Ohioans.

For many Ohioans, the Coronavirus has turned the internet into a critical lifeline. It is how we connect to our jobs, our doctors, education, and family and friends. But, there are more than one million Ohioans who lack internet access and they are even more of a disadvantage amid the pandemic. The reality of our digital divide has come into sharp focus during this crisis.

Hundreds of thousands of Ohio families with school-age children live in homes without the broadband internet connection they need to send email, use learning videos, Skype, or exchange documents with teachers. For employees, working from home is not an option without a reliable connection.

Many of these households are in rural areas where the infrastructure for high-speed broadband service just does not exist. By providing \$20 million in grants for providers to build infrastructure, House Bill 13 will help connect some of these households. We support this investment and know that the need is much larger and requires additional resources.

We do have two concerns related to the grant program and ask that you consider changes to address the following issues:

1. Government and quasi-governmental entities are excluded 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.

While expanding infrastructure is important, it is only part of the solution. The majority of households without access live in cities, suburbs, and small towns where broadband is readily available. For these Ohioans, the main barrier to broadband access is not geography, but cost. For example, in the city of Cleveland, 27 percent of households had no internet access of any kind (including smartphones).

In 2018, two-thirds of Ohio households without broadband had household incomes below \$35,000, and nearly half had incomes below \$20,000. The monthly bill for a home internet connection in most Ohio communities is now at least \$60 to \$70 a month which is not affordable for many Ohioans who are already struggling to get by.

We ask that you consider requiring 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.

We look forward to working with you to ensure that all Ohioans have access to the internet for school, work, health care, and critical services.