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Written Testimony on House Bill 13
Senate Energy and Public Utilities Committee
November 17, 2020
Jason Smith, AARP Ohio

Chair Wilson, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Williams, and members of the Committee,

On behalf of AARP Ohio, thank you for the opportunity to address our organization's support for House Bill 13. AARP is a nonpartisan, social mission organization with an age 50+ membership of nearly 37 million nationwide and approximately 1.5 million members here in Ohio. Our organization recently shared its recommendations for prioritizing legislation to help ensure the safety and health of older Ohioans during the coronavirus pandemic. We are very pleased that the expansion of high-speed internet remains a priority for Governor DeWine and the General Assembly members.

The pandemic has opened our eyes to society's reliance on high-speed internet access, also known as broadband. Around the state, teachers and students are finishing the school year with remote learning. Doctors and nurses are examining patients through telehealth services. Restaurants and other small businesses have been staying afloat with online ordering. Employers and employees have had to adjust to telecommuting. While in-person visits are restricted, more family caregivers rely on video chat to connect with loved ones in nursing homes.

Many internet providers have offered free and discounted services, expanded wireless hotspots, increased data caps, or suspended disconnections through the pandemic. These efforts are helpful in the short term, but we need permanent solutions for the future. House Bill 13 helps Ohio build that future.

For too many people living in rural communities, high-speed internet service is not available. According to the Federal Communications Commission, 25 percent of rural Ohioans lack access to the high-speed internet service needed to learn, stay healthy, fight off social isolation, and keep businesses running. Expanding high-speed internet access to more Ohioans and increasing service adoption would have a direct, positive impact on the lives of people 50 and older and their families. High-speed internet has become vital to helping our communities and residents thrive and be successful in both ordinary times and a crisis.

Real Possibilities

That is why AARP Ohio has identified House Bill 13 as a priority. We are encouraged by substantial improvements that appear to position more communities on equal footing by increasing the funding tenfold and eliminating the local funding requirement. However, we would also like to take this opportunity to raise our concern about the bill's explicit prohibition against awarding grants to any government or quasi-governmental entities. This limitation on the use of valuable funding would be a major step backward for Ohio's broadband policy. Therefore, AARP urges legislators to delete this language from the bill.

Ensuring all Ohioans have access to high-speed internet service means improving the quality of life and expanding opportunities for our residents and communities, no matter where they live. Telehealth services available through high-speed internet makes connecting to specialists and other health care providers easier for families, with the potential to improve health outcomes. Patients can receive state-of-the-art health services in their own homes. Not only is this significant during the height of a pandemic, but it also helps family caregivers save money on transportation or the expense of traveling great distances for expert care.

This issue is especially severe for older Ohioans living in rural communities where access to affordable high-speed internet and hotspots is limited or unavailable. Telehealth services have become even more critical as hospitals and other providers continue leaving rural communities, adding to already significant health care provider shortages. Expanding high-speed internet access also helps combat loneliness, making it easier to stay connected to friends and family. Social isolation is a serious public health issue, placing older Ohioans at higher risk for poor health and death.

Improving access to high-speed internet was necessary before this pandemic, and the "digital divide" has only become more apparent. AARP Ohio urges Ohio's leaders to bring the benefits of high-speed internet to all parts of our state. We request that you further amend House Bill 13 in line with AARP's testimony and pass House Bill 13 into law.

Thank you for the opportunity to express our support for this vital piece of legislation. If you have questions or require additional information, please feel free to contact our office.

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