



*Mission:*

EYEJ drives social justice reform by empowering young people to advocate for change.

*Vision:*

An equitable and inclusive world.

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**December 1st, 2020**  
**Sub. H. B. No. 13 Opponent Hearing**

Members of the Energy and Public Utilities Committee,

On behalf of EYEJ: Empowering Youth, Exploring Justice, I thank you for allowing us to speak today regarding Substitute House Bill No. 13 and the injustices of the Digital Divide. While especially exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic these issues have been an epidemic in our communities for decades. I'm here today to advocate for the city of Cleveland, the city that I've grown to call my home over the past four years as a student at Case Western Reserve University.

I have spent the past couple of years exploring and embracing the diverse and vibrant city neighborhoods. As someone who hopes to one day enter the health field, living in one of the nation's greatest medical centers is not only inspiring, but motivating. However, as one dives into the field of medicine, you realize that it's much more than chemistry or biology, or even anatomy and physiology. You learn to study people and communities: how they came to be the way they are and why they suffer the conditions that they do. At the foundation of these communities are organizations like EYEJ, who bring people together to share their stories and to listen to one another. Since its beginnings in 2013, EYEJ has built a community of over 900 adult volunteers, donors, allies, and partners, all of whom are committed to EYEJ's mission of driving social reform by empowering young people to advocate

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for change. Through its programming, EYEJ has fostered the confidence, knowledge, and skills needed for 1,600 young people to become advocates for positive social change and potential lifelong change makers. The EYEJ Youth Council, a collection of high school and college aged students predominantly from Cleveland and East Cleveland, chose this year to focus their advocacy efforts on connectivity, encompassing both connecting communities and embracing one another, as well as, the Digital Divide and internet equity. Some highlights from the Youth Council's work over just the past few months include hosting a virtual protest to emphasize the urgency surrounding demands for accessible internet and e-learning devices for all, partnering with US Bank to facilitate a letter writing campaign to government officials to express the need for a solution to provide broadband access to all, and organizing a virtual Town Hall in which 216 attendees, including Cleveland Metropolitan School District's CEO, Eric Gordon, as well as representatives from Case Western Reserve University, The Cleveland Foundation, Hathaway Brown, Nord Family Foundation, St. Luke's Foundation, Sisters of Charity Foundation, Teach for America, U.S. Senator Sherrod Brown's office, Venture for America, and Youth Opportunities Unlimited and engaged speakers such as State Senator Sandra Williams and State Representative Stephanie Howse. As Cleveland was recently ranked the worst connected city in the nation by the National Digital Inclusion Alliance, EYEJ continues to fight to close the digital

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divide, implementing digital literacy programs, hosting the Youth Online Discussing Justice series, and advocating for those being left behind in the city of Cleveland.

The Sub. H. B. 13 will not effectively or justly close the Digital Divide. I urge you all to look closer at both the intention and efficacy of this piece of legislation. For example, this bill intentionally excludes cooperative utilities or publicly owned networks from participating in the solution. This provision would effectively exclude municipal networks like FairlawnGig, a successful broadband network, ranking 3rd in the North Central Region in PC Mag's list of best-performing ISPs in 2020, that contributed to job creation and returned high customer satisfaction rates. With FairlawnGig being just one example of a successful locally produced broadband network, I must question the intentions of a bill that fights against this network type. These limitations instead empower large companies such AT&T or Charter Spectrum, two prominent networks that already exist in the City of Cleveland. We can not make the mistake of placing the wellbeing of our residents' education, health, and work in the hands of these monopolies again. In 2008, AT&T introduced new fiber broadband to Cleveland, however the company essentially skipped over neighborhoods, a form of digital redlining. In fact, the experiences shared at the advocacy events hosted by EYEJ speak to this issue. In fact, just the other day I was trying to connect with Youth Council member Frank Austin, a graduate of Max S.

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Hayes High School and current student at Tri-C. He explained to me that though he relies on AT&T to provide him internet services, he still struggles to have a reliable internet connection. Research done by EYEJ and its partners shows that this digital redlining is highly correlated with historically redlined neighborhoods where poverty levels are high and in which private companies have failed to invest in. This largely affects people of color, leading to poorer health outcomes, lower graduation rates, and generally fewer opportunities for success. These unserved and underserved communities will continue to suffer under the care of these large corporations and the Digital Divide will grow deeper.

While I could ask this committee to reform this existing bill, I'm not sure that is what would be in the best interest of the residents of the state of Ohio. Ohioans deserve legislation that puts their well being at the forefront of the solutions being proposed. The COVID-19 pandemic, while a devastating and unprecedented time, has shined a light on the holes that exist in the systems that surround us and the injustices our communities have had to face for centuries. Over 50% of Cleveland Metropolitan School District families don't have reliable internet access. Telehealth is more important than ever, but over 30% of Cleveland residents lack reliable high-speed internet. The world is shifting online but our neighbors are being left behind. I urge you to take this silver lining opportunity to listen to our community

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voices and hear the experiences of those most affected by the Digital Divide.

Equitable broadband access for all is the answer; I hope that this committee and the legislators of the State of Ohio will see that closing the gap requires a comprehensive accountability, reliability, and affordability focused approach.

On behalf of EYEJ, I thank you for taking the time to hear us speak and for considering the perspectives of youth, the people of Cleveland, and future changemakers. Broadband internet is a public need just like water or electricity and this bill begins to address the urgent need that has swelled for over 25 years. Thank you again for your time and efforts. I wish you and your loved ones a happy and healthy holiday season.

Sincerely,

Anjali Patel

EYEJ Youth Council Social Policy Lead

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