

**Ohio House of Representatives
Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services
House Bill 110**

June 4, 2021

Chairman Dolan, Ranking Member Sykes and members of the committee, my name is Chris Burns, the Marketing and Education Manager for Encore Technologies, which is based in Cincinnati, Ohio. I am presenting testimony supporting the restoration of \$210,000,000 in state investments in broadband expansion on behalf of the over 3,000 business executives who comprise ReadyNation.

Broadband expansion in rural and urban Ohio is essential for education, commerce and health. ReadyNation Ohio, a group of business executives focused on building a strong workforce for today and tomorrow, supported HB2 and we strongly support the Governor's proposed budget investments in the state budget.

Research shows that children who start out behind in life often stay behind. The educational attainment and employment levels of their parents are often major determining factors of a child's starting point.

One significant barrier to academic and employment success is the lack of a broadband connection. This "digital divide" leaves children behind their more connected peers in school, and it makes distance learning impractical for working adults without access. More than 300,000 households, which is close to one million Ohioans, currently lack reliable broadband access.

Addressing the digital divide has become a more pressing matter during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students have had to rely more on online learning resources, and employers and workers are doing more work remotely now than ever before. Those without broadband access are left behind.

How widespread is the problem? Recent research reveals that Ohio is seventh in the nation in the number of K-12 students who lack adequate internet connection to participate. There are 500,000 children (29 percent) without adequate internet connection and 402,000 children (24 percent) without adequate devices. Twenty-three percent of students who lack adequate internet access in Ohio are Black, Hispanic, or Native American.

Passing House Bill 2 was an excellent first step to help bridge this divide. We know that the broadband shortage often stems from a low return on infrastructure investment for broadband providers. This bill allows the state to work with service providers to defray the costs associated with expansion to areas with lower population density. Studies show that Ohio broadband coverage ranks near the middle of US states, and we lag behind neighboring states of Indiana, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. Better, more affordable broadband coverage in these other states puts Ohio at a competitive disadvantage.

The future workforce and economy of Ohio depend on our state equipping all students with the skills and credentials they need. Approximately 65 percent of Ohio jobs will require a postsecondary degree, credential or certificate; yet, fewer than 50 percent of Ohio adults have reached this level of attainment. Broadband access is a key component to delivering educational resources to meet this goal while also opening up communities to greater employment opportunities.

The business community hears Senate President Huffman’s concerns around the development and implementation of a statewide broadband program, and we welcome the opportunity to work with the President to ensure the program reaches its full potential. However, eliminating new funding for this effort in the state budget will stall the fast track progress made by the Ohio House and Senate with HB2. We encourage the full restoration of these funds to the state budget and offer to work collaboratively on addressing implementation challenges as they arise.

Broadband is much more than just an educational tool. It is essential for workforce development and expanding commerce. This is the best opportunity for Ohio to take the lead in providing broadband to all regions of the state.

Sincerely,

Christopher P Burns

Christopher P. Burns
Encore Technologies