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Before The House Finance And Appropriations Committee
Opponent Testimony on Telecommunication Provision of House Bill 64
Presented by: Mary Ellen Nose, Paralegal, Southeastern Ohio Legal Services
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Good afternoon, Chairman Smith, Vice Chairman Schuring, Ranking Member Driehaus, and Committee Members.

My name is Mary Ellen Nose. I am a paralegal with the Southeastern Ohio Legal Services (SEOLS), Athens Area office. SEOLS is a non-profit legal aid office representing 30 counties, mostly in Rural Southeastern Ohio. The Athens office covers the counties of Athens, Gallia, Meigs, Morgan, Noble, Vinton and Washington. We have an area office in Chillicothe (covering Fairfield, Fayette, Hocking, Jackson, Pickaway, Pike and Ross Counties); New Philadelphia (covering Coshocton, Guernsey, Holmes and Tuscarawas Counties); Newark (covering Knox, Licking, Muskingum and Perry Counties); Portsmouth covering Adams, Lawrence and Scioto Counties; and Steubenville (covering Belmont, Carroll, Harrison, Jefferson and Monroe Counties). A map of our service area is attached in order to show the portion of Ohio that will be impacted by HB 64 if the bill passes as it now reads.

I reside in Vinton County, a remote county which now has claim to two stop lights in the entire county, and has no city, but rather townships and villages. Vinton County has no hospital and the nearest one is ½ hour away from my home. It is further for others, and is probably similar in some of the other counties noted above. Much of my county does not have water or fire hydrants, something taken for granted in more metropolitan areas.

I wanted to present testimony before you today as a resident of Vinton County, as well as on behalf of the many Ohio residents I represent (before administrative agencies in the Athens service area, including the Social Security Administration) and all who need basic local landline service. Those provisions in HB 64 that would allow AT&T and other major companies in Ohio to withdraw or abandon their basic landline service to Ohio telephone customers will adversely affect the health and safety of many low income, disabled and/or elderly, and rural residents, particularly in Southeastern Ohio.

FIRST, landline service is the only available service in some areas, and is the only affordable service in other areas. Many rural residents who cannot afford cell phones are not even able to obtain the free cell phones and limited minutes offered through the Lifeline program because of the lack of cell phone service in their particular area.

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SECOND, many clients purchase monthly cell phones with limited minutes and they may run out of minutes well before the end of the month. In situations where clients purchase monthly cell phones or minutes, once the minutes are used, they can no longer use the phone until they can afford to purchase more minutes or buy another phone. For those with phones through Lifeline, once their minutes are used, they must wait until the following month before more minutes are available.

THIRD, cell phones rely on electricity. When outages occur for longer than the battery life of a cell phone, those in rural areas have no alternative should an emergency occur. Because neighbors may be some distance from where an individual lives, persons cannot easily go for other help, as they otherwise could if living in an urban or suburban environment. Landlines are not dependent upon electricity, and are a security for all, particularly those who are elderly and/or disabled and need access to a phone if a life threatening emergency should arise. In the first week of March 2015, Southeastern Ohio experienced extreme weather conditions. In times of dire need such as recently experienced in Meigs County, for example, (snow, sub-freezing temperatures, extended power outages and extensive flooding) without landlines, residents would be completely cut off.

FOURTH, the elimination of landlines will only broaden the technological divide between those who have access to reliable technology, mostly available in the metropolitan areas. This includes access to cell phones, as well as internet. Until a few years ago dial-up service was the only type available to and affordable for me. I can only assume that many residents in our area still only have dial-up services available. We have no cable available, and personal satellite service is extremely costly, and not reliable. I am on the very edge of a provider satellite service area, and the internet service I receive, when available, is much faster than the dial up. My internet service is still dependent on my phone service. However, it is not consistent, and when it is cloudy or the weather is bad, I cannot access it.

FIFTH, the ability to access needed services, such as employment searches and applications and other services; the ability to access food stamps (SNAP) and other public benefits; the ability to report mandatory changes if on benefits, or report off work, and much, much, more, is dependent on the ability to make initial and subsequent contacts, with employers, agencies, doctors, etc. More and more reliance on technology as the way residents can access benefits is being mandated by government departments which oversee benefits (SNAP, Unemployment, etc.) in Ohio. For those without internet and cell service, landlines are their lifelines. Without them, they can lose benefits, lose employment, lose access to emergency services, and maybe even lose their life.

SIXTH, there are literally many, many miles of roads, particularly in Rural Ohio where cell phone service is not available. Life and death situations arise where basic local exchange service is crucial. Allowing companies to do away with landlines is unnecessary and would adversely affect those living in these areas where cell phone companies do not provide any service, or in some areas, marginal service.

SEVENTH, because of the rural aspect of the area we serve, there are many “cottage industries” which depend on telephone service for their business. Not only do they need landlines for phones, but landlines are also necessary for fax and internet service. If companies were able to abandon landlines without other reliable, affordable phone service in place, the very livelihood of these residents would be compromised.

Lastly, I want to tell you a personal story for you to better understand the result of discontinuation of landline service. As I stated earlier, I live in the beautiful hills of rural Vinton County. My mother, who will be 97 in May, lives with me. I purchased a family cell phone service contract when my mother moved from her home in Central Florida and came to live with me about 10 years ago. My mother’s eye doctor happens to be a neighbor living about 1/3 of a mile away. When we were looking for a cell phone, because of the area where we live, no cell phone provider could guarantee service. Our neighbor had service through a provider, so I contracted with that provider. We thought being so close, we too would have service at our home, which proved incorrect.

I have, by necessity, had to maintain landline service particularly for emergency services to be available to my mother while my husband and I are at work. She has severe mitral valve prolapse, and is susceptible to falling, due to her age. Otherwise, she is active. In the past year she has called 911 at least three times, at least one resulting in hospitalization. Had she not been able to access 911 through our landline, I do not know what the consequences may have been.

On another occasion, I came home to find my mother lying on the couch. Hearing a knock on the door, I responded to EMS who indicated they had received a call from the Sheriff’s. Shortly after they went downstairs to my mother, another knock on the door was the Sheriff. They receive all 911 calls in Vinton County, and direct them to the Emergency Medical Service. Because my mother at the time of the call was only able to say “Something’s wrong,” both responded. If we did not have a landline, neither would have been contacted. Again, I do not know what the consequences may have been.

Advancing technology, including extending cell phone and internet services to all of Ohio’s 88 Counties is an admirable goal. However, unless and until every Ohio resident can be assured of, and provided with, reliable and affordable alternatives to their current basic landline phone service, abandonment of landlines would adversely affect the health and safety of many Ohio residents. This is especially true for residents on fixed incomes, with low incomes, who are elderly and/or disabled, and those who have no other alternative, including those in rural and urban or suburban areas.

Please consider the current language in HB 64 and amend it to ensure that carriers **SHALL**, not may, **provide** reliable, affordable and comparative alternatives before abandoning landlines.

Thank you for your consideration. I am happy to answer any questions.