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**Testimony in Support of HB2
Susan Jagers, Director
Ohio Poverty Law Center
House Finance Committee
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Chair Oelslager, Vice Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Crawley, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill 2. 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 pandemic 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 disadvantaged amid the pandemic. The reality of our digital divide has come into sharp focus during this crisis.

Many of these households are in 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 2 will help connect some of these households. We support this investment as a critical first step and know that the need is much larger and requires additional resources.

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 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.

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 per month which is not affordable for many Ohioans who are already struggling to get by.

We are encouraged by the provision in the most recent federal COVID-19 relief bill, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, that establishes the Emergency Broadband Benefit

Program. This program will reimburse internet service providers for providing a \$50 monthly discount off the cost of broadband internet access to low-income and unemployed qualifying households.

This federal response is a temporary program to help households afford internet service during the pandemic. But, we know that addressing affordability, like infrastructure, needs both an immediate response and a long term plan. Broadband access is not a luxury service. We need to make sure all Ohioans have the ability to be connected.

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.