



## **Advocates for Ohio's Future**

House Bill 2- Proponent Testimony

Senate Financial Institutions and Technology Committee - March 9, 2021

Chairman Wilson, Vice Chair Hottinger, Ranking Member Maharath and Members of the Senate Financial Institutions and Technology Committee, my name is Kelsey Bergfeld, and I am the Director of Advocates for Ohio's Future (AOF).

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments in support of HB 2 which creates the Ohio Residential Broadband Expansion Grant Program to provide grant money for internet service providers to build critical infrastructure needed to connect Ohioans who do not have access to broadband.

AOF is a nonprofit, nonpartisan coalition of over 500 state and local health and human services policy, advocacy and provider organizations that promotes health and human service budget and policy solutions so that all Ohioans live better lives. Our coalition believes in investing in our state's most valuable resource—our people—to ensure that they are safe, healthy, and can access pathways to prosperity for themselves and their families.

Today more than 300,000 households in Ohio representing close to 1 million Ohioans lack access to high-speed internet. In some parts of our state, communities have little or no access to the internet because of gaps in or complete absence of digital infrastructure.

Though broadband access was rising in importance before the pandemic, the Coronavirus has turned the internet into a critical lifeline. Over the last eight months, the internet has become the primary way many Ohioans work, go to school, access healthcare, search for employment, seek assistance and connect with friends and family.

Ohio communities and families with limited or no access to high-speed internet now clearly suffer a disadvantage in the classroom and in the workplace, as well as a competitive disadvantage in today's technology-infused economy. In today's socially and physically distanced world, the lack of connectivity results in limited opportunities and can impact a person's wellbeing and quality of life.

HB 2 and the proposed Ohio Residential Broadband Expansion Grant Program is one of the first steps in Ohio's Broadband Strategy developed by InnovateOhio. We acknowledge where this bill started as HB 13 in the last General Assembly and are pleased by the significant investment this bill represents. Though the need is far greater and more investments are required to connect all Ohioans, this bill will connect families to this vital resource.

While we support and appreciate the goal of HB 2, we, along with a number of our member organizations suggest three amendments that align with the overall goal of increasing broadband connectivity for Ohio residents.

Currently, HB 2 excludes government and quasi-governmental entities from the definition of Broadband Provider, meaning they are not permitted to submit a grant application. Consistent with testimony that was provided in the House, we believe the definition should not exclude these entities. In some communities, the best entity to expand service may be a government entity and there are models across Ohio where a municipality has been providing reliable, hi-speed broadband service to their residents at a competitive cost.

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In addition, we would suggest including cost of service under the scoring criteria for proposals before grants are awarded and include price points for service, in addition to addresses served, in annual grant award reports and the Authority grant program report. These additions and attention to cost of service before and after grant awards are made will encourage providers to ensure their prices are competitive and more affordable for Ohioans in need.

AOF would like to emphasize the overall vision of Ohio's Broadband Strategy is to bring high speed internet access to every Ohioan by focusing on improving access for two groups: the unserved and underserved. While HB 2 would expand broadband infrastructure, that alone does not guarantee high-speed internet access if the cost of access is unaffordable or existing infrastructure is severely neglected and outdated.

For many Ohioans, the main barrier to broadband access is not geography, but cost. In the city of Cleveland, 27% of households had no internet access of any kind (including smartphones) according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Similar large shares of the populations in Toledo, Dayton, Lorain, and Youngstown are unconnected and under-connected. The monthly bill for home high speed internet connection in most Ohio communities is now at least \$60 to \$70 per month—an amount too great for many families already struggling to pay rent and keep food on the table.

At a time where broadband access and connectivity will be a vital factor in economic recovery for both families and communities during and in the aftermath of the Coronavirus pandemic, equitable, affordable access to broadband becomes a crucial factor in the reality of two Ohio's—one laden with greater job and education opportunities, better health outcome and overall quality of life—while the other is left behind. Digital inclusion and digital literacy must be addressed to achieve the vision outlined by Ohio's Broadband Strategy—where all Ohioans have access to this vital resource.

Though addressing affordability is not the intent of HB 2, we urge the committee to consider ways to help low-income families from around the state afford high-speed internet access and incentivize internet service providers to update and improve their networks in low-income areas to increase opportunities for both families and businesses.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment in support HB 2. We urge you to support HB 2 to increase access to broadband and to consider strategies to make high speed internet access more affordable so all Ohioans to have the opportunity and ability to participate in Ohio's economy.

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