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**Written Testimony on House Bill 2**  
**Senate Financial Institutions & Technology Committee**  
**March 23, 2021**  
**Jason Smith, Associate State Director, AARP Ohio**

Chair Wilson, Vice Chair Hottinger, Ranking Member Maharath, and members of the Committee, on behalf of AARP Ohio, thank you for the opportunity to address our organization's support for House Bill 2 (HB 2) and recommendations to strengthen the bill. AARP is a nonpartisan, social mission organization with an age 50+ membership of nearly 37 million nationwide, and approximately 1.5 million members here in Ohio. Last year, our organization shared its recommendations for prioritizing legislation to help ensure the safety and health of older Ohioans during the coronavirus pandemic, and we are very pleased that the expansion of high-speed internet remains a priority for Governor DeWine and members of the General Assembly.

As Ohio and much of the nation remained at home to help slow the spread of the coronavirus, the pandemic has opened our eyes to society's reliance on high-speed internet access, also known as broadband. Around the state, teachers and students are finishing the school year with remote learning. Doctors and nurses are examining patients through telehealth services. Restaurants and other small businesses have been staying afloat with online ordering. Employers and employees have had to adjust to telecommuting. While vaccines are slowly becoming available, family caregivers continue to rely on video chat to connect with loved ones.

For too many people living in rural communities, high-speed internet service is not available. According to the Federal Communications Commission, 25 percent of rural Ohioans lack access to the high-speed internet service needed to learn, stay healthy, fight off social isolation, and keep businesses running. Access to affordable broadband services also continues to be a significant problem in our urban communities with a disparate impact on communities of color. Expanding high-speed internet access to more Ohioans and increasing service adoption would have a direct, positive impact on the lives of people 50-plus and their families. High-speed internet has become vital to helping our communities, and residents thrive and be successful in both ordinary times and in crisis.

While we believe HB 2 is a good start, we would also like to take this opportunity to offer recommendations that we strongly believe will improve the bill. We are very concerned about the bill's explicit prohibition against awarding grants to any government or quasi-governmental entities. This limitation on the use of valuable funding would be a major step backward for Ohio's broadband policy and could prove to be a barrier to the creation of new public-private partnerships, and therefore AARP urges legislators to delete this language from the bill. Additionally, the grants are designed to go to

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projects that will bring benchmark speeds up to 25/3 Mbps or more, but this is an unambitious benchmark for the prospective funding of current technology. We strongly encourage committee members to amend the bill to call for higher speed benchmarks for eligibility.

Making sure all Ohioans have access to high-speed internet service means improving the quality of life and expanding opportunities for our residents and communities, no matter where they live. Telehealth services available through high-speed internet makes connecting to specialists and other health care providers easier for families, with the potential to improve health outcomes. Patients are able to receive state-of-the-art health services in their own home. Not only is this significant during the height of a pandemic, but it also helps family caregivers save money on transportation or the expense of traveling great distances for expert care.

Improving access to high-speed internet was necessary before this pandemic, and the “digital divide” has only become more apparent. AARP Ohio urges Ohio’s leaders to bring the benefits of high-speed internet to all parts of our state and request that you further amend HB 2 in line with AARP’s testimony to maximize the opportunity of HB 2 for all Ohioans.

Thank you for the opportunity to express our support and recommendations for this important piece of legislation. If you have questions or require additional information, please feel free to contact our office.