



HOWARD COUNTY OFFICE OF COUNTY EXECUTIVE

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February 9, 2021

Senator Paul Pinsky, Chair
Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee
Miller Senate Office Building, 2 West
11 Bladen Street
Annapolis, MD 21041

Re: Testimony **IN SUPPORT** of SB 66: Department of Housing and Community Development - Office of Digital Inclusion - Established (Digital Connectivity Act of 2021)

Dear Chair Pinsky and Members of the Committee:

I commend Senator Elfreth for introducing Senate Bill 66. The Digital Connectivity Act of 2021 would replace the Office of Rural Broadband with an Office of Digital Inclusion in the Department of Housing and Community Development. The Office of Digital Inclusion would be responsible for ensuring that all Maryland residents have access to reliable and affordable broadband Internet by the end of the decade. The Office would also ensure that residents have the tools they need to take advantage of Internet services.

Many Marylanders depend on Internet access to find job opportunities, access health care and social services, and educate themselves. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Marylanders with Internet access have been able to telework from home, set up telehealth appointments with healthcare providers, apply for COVID-19 relief assistance, and participate in remote learning.

Unfortunately, many residents cannot access this important service, often due to unaffordable prices or because of insufficient incentives for the private sector to develop markets in certain services areas. The Office of Digital Inclusion would audit and publicly share broadband Internet availability and pricing across the State to help close the digital divide. The Office would also serve as a key liaison with local governments, helping to identify the funding sources and partnerships that can expand Internet access areas. Greater coordination between the between state and local governments will enhance technical assistance efforts and harmonize broadband service strategic planning.

As Howard County Executive, I have prioritized expanding Internet access points to more residents. Howard County's Intercounty Broadband Network provides free public hotspots in government buildings and popular locations such as historic Ellicott City and Downtown Columbia. These hotspots saw an estimated 43 percent increase in average daily traffic from Fiscal Year 2018 to Fiscal Year 2020. Last year, I announced an allocation of \$450,000 in CAREs Act funding to invest in the HoCo STRIVES program, which funded hotspots and free Internet service to 500 families across the county.



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To further improve digital inclusion during the COVID-19 pandemic, my administration forged a partnership between the Howard County Public School System and the Bright Minds Foundation.

Statewide, the Abell Foundation found that 520,000, or one-in-four, Maryland households lack access to broadband Internet. COVID-19 has only exacerbated the State's digital divide and communities are suffering. Senator Elfreth's bill would provide a valuable, state-level officer to help align existing and future efforts to ensure that Maryland eliminates this gap so that all residents can benefit from reliable, affordable Internet service and equitable opportunities to learn and work.

I appreciate your consideration and I urge a favorable report on Senate Bill 66.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Calvin Ball', written in a cursive style.

Calvin Ball
Howard County Executive