



Senate Energy and Public Utilities Committee

SB 8 – Proponent Testimony

2/2/2021

Good morning Chairman Senator Peterson, Vice Chair Senator Schuring, Ranking Member Senator Williams and members of the Senate Energy and Public Utilities Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio in support of Senate Bill 8. S.B.8 is particularly important in light of the challenges that so many people in Ohio, especially our children are facing as a result of Covid-19.

CDF-Ohio is a statewide non-profit organization which serves as an independent voice for all children. Our mission is to ensure every child a *Healthy Start*, a *Head Start*, a *Fair Start*, a *Safe Start* and a *Moral Start* in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. We work to champion policies and programs that lift children out of poverty, protect them from abuse and neglect, and ensure quality education as well as appropriate and targeted access to resources to meet children's health and nutrition needs. The pandemic has left families and children struggling to make healthy choices, to adequately cope with the stress of daily life, and to recognize and adopt behaviors that promote well-being and personal health promotion. We urge your support of S.B. 8 as it is a step in the right direction to provide expanded access to broadband.

Broadband access impacts nearly every aspect of child wellbeing– from education, to health and wellness, food and housing security, and economic stability for families. The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the critical necessity of broadband to our daily lives and simultaneously exposed the reality that over one million Ohioans, in both rural and urban areas, lack access to high-speed affordable internet.

Broadband access overlaps so many areas of child wellbeing and family stability that it has been identified as a "Super-Determinant of Health." Nearly one in eight families lack access to broadband. In Ohio's nine largest central cities, about one household in five lacks basic internet service. Among unserved rural households, 80% are in the hard-to-reach, rugged terrain of Appalachian Ohio. Even those with service often endure connectivity speeds too low and connectivity too unreliable to support distance learning, remote work, virtual doctor visits, and essential business operations. The problem is one of both availability – the inadequacy or absence of broadband infrastructure – and affordability – the inability of low-income households to pay for service.

Closing the digital divide in Ohio requires meaningful financial resources and collaboration among all levels of government working in partnership with providers and communities. S.B.8 is a helpful start, but to truly solve the problem, Ohio needs an ongoing, dedicated budget line item for broadband.



Affordable internet and necessary devices to access it are essential for our children's education many of whom are attending school on a virtual or hybrid model during the pandemic. With the recent permanent expansion of Telehealth for certain services in our state, broadband is a critical component to ensuring many of our children and families have access to these services. For families seeking to ensure their children's basic needs by applying for SNAP, Medicaid, unemployment, and other public assistance programs during this challenging time, internet access is vital.

Ohio must improve the technological infrastructure in the state by making critical investments to expand broadband access and its affordability by recognizing broadband as an essential utility that all Ohioans must be able to access.

Lack of investments and policies have created sizable digital divides and in some places, digital deserts, where the lack of available and/or affordable internet has far-reaching consequences for children and families throughout Ohio and across the country.

Nearly 1 in 4 (435,368) school-age children in Ohio lacked full digital access in 2018 (meaning they had no broadband internet access and/or no devices capable of connecting to the internet at home), and this figure is likely higher now as families across the state endure financial hardship. Of the school children in Ohio who lacked full digital access, this includes 45% of all children in households below the federal poverty threshold and 28% of all Black, Indigenous, and other children of color.

Access to the internet in Ohio's rural and Appalachian areas remains a pervasive issue, especially in terms of internet infrastructure and availability, leaving many already isolated rural children and families unconnected and unable to access opportunities and services they need to thrive. Buckeye Hills Regional Council's research found that 80-90% of households in the rural expanse (areas with fewer than 20 households per square mile) also had no access to broadband internet of any type. In fact, a recent survey conducted by the Appalachian Children's Coalition found that one in four school districts surveyed in southeastern Ohio have no internet access. Broadband inequities are similarly pervasive in our urban communities as well. In 2019, 30.7% of Cleveland households had no access to broadband internet of any type, including cellular data, and 45.96% had no wired connection, making it the worst-connected city with more than 100,000 households in the United States. In the list compiled by the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA), there were five Ohio cities with populations of 65,000 or more where more than 20% of households had no broadband access: Cleveland, Lorain, Canton, Youngstown, and Dayton.

An investment in affordable access to broadband across the state in both our rural and urban populations will help Ohio's children thrive and succeed. A statewide strategy for increasing the



percentage of Ohioans with broadband access and narrowing the digital divide should devote significant attention and resources to ensuring that Black and Latino households have access to affordable broadband. Inequitable access means that our children will be deprived of opportunities critical to their wellbeing—education, health, economic stability. This is an opportunity to provide essential infrastructure that we know can deliver on health and equity benefits to our communities.

Ohio needs committed investment in rural broadband deployment, where existing networks don't provide high-speed access for rural and tribal communities. But as a state, we must also fund digital inclusion initiatives, including affordable access strategies, affordable devices, and community-based training and support to narrow the digital divide in both our rural and urban communities.

S.B. 8 is a step in the right direction providing for \$20 million to support expanded access through the establishment of a residential broadband expansion program in Ohio. While an estimated \$2 billion (or more) is needed to fully address the broadband gaps in rural and urban areas throughout Ohio, this legislation will start to help to address these gaps. However more must be done beyond connectivity, in terms of devices, service and affordability, and digital literacy.

Support a comprehensive and regional approach to creating a statewide Broadband infrastructure. The key to creating a robust strategy is ensuring that they are locally driven and address local needs while advancing a statewide effort. This can be accomplished by working with regional councils in a public/private partnership. This approach will also allow for a level of coordination and planning in accessing federal funds through the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). The biggest barrier facing communities in accessing these grants is the ability to raise a local match, which is set anywhere between 15-30%. The actual statewide cost for building out a Broadband network that provides accessibility to all Ohioans will be in the billions of dollars. An assessment of rural needs pegged the estimated costs at just north of \$2 billion with development over ten years. According to the Regional Councils, local matches of \$30M (regardless of source) have the potential to leverage over \$200M in each fiscal year.

The state of Ohio released \$50 million in CARES Act funding for school districts, private schools, ESCs, and JVSs, and DDs to provide hot spots, internet-enabled devices, and public and mobile Wi-Fi spaces. Related to these efforts, local municipal governments and philanthropic partners have also partnered to supplement these efforts to ensure accessible for educational purposes. Ongoing support is needed until a statewide network addressing these issues is developed.

Create internet utility programs to address affordability issues.



On average, internet service costs \$60/month, however the state of Ohio has negotiated low cost service at price points of \$10-\$20/month. Policy recommendations include state funding to support these services, similar to LHEAP.

Ohio should also explore piloting an internet subscription cost subsidy. One of our partners has called for an appropriation of \$3.6 million to fund internet subscription costs to connect thousands of households to telehealth, jobs, distance learning, workforce training, higher education, etc.

On behalf of Children's Defense Fund-Ohio, thank you again for your work on this critical issue and on behalf of Ohio's children and families.