

February 15, 2021

Rep. Deborah Ruggiero  
Chairwoman  
House Committee on Innovation, Internet and Technology  
State House  
Providence, Rhode Island

Dear Chairwoman Ruggiero,

Re: Support for H5148

I am pleased to support H5148, An Act Relating to State Affairs and Government – The Rhode Island Broadband and Development Program. The bill would establish a broadband coordinator position in the Commerce Corporation and a Broadband Council. I applaud your insight in sponsoring this legislation as Rhode Island is one of only two states lacking such a coordinator or entity. Absent such a state designated position, the state has missed out on numerous opportunities for accessing substantial federal funds.

Too many Rhode Islanders lack access to broadband. The current pandemic has demonstrated that digital access should be available to all. It has magnified the need for Rhode Island residents to be able to affordably access dependable internet services in order to carry out necessary activities of daily life – working, shopping, banking, connecting with family, and obtaining healthcare. Yet, too many lack such access.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, I have been working with our Office of Healthy Aging on its digiAGE project whose goal is to bridge the digital divide for older adults. According to a recent study commissioned by the Humana Foundation and Older Adults Technology Services, *Aging Connected: Exposing the Hidden Connectivity Crisis for Older Adults*, over 40 percent of adults over age 65 lack broadband access in their home. At the same time, an estimated equal number of older adults impacted by COVID-19 were unable to access needed online resources, such as health information, and food delivery. The data shows that digital inequities are far worse among communities of color and those living with a disability, in poorer health, with less education, in a lower-income neighborhoods and more rural areas.

It is critical for the state to move forward to develop a strategic plan for increasing the use of broadband in the state. Working collaboratively with a broad cross section of the community including its municipalities, business and industry, academia, healthcare providers and insurers, the Broadband Council created under this proposed law will provide impetus and direction for such a plan. I urge the Committee to recommend its passage..

Sincerely,

Maureen Maigret