

My name is Karisa Tashjian and I am a resident of West Warwick, RI and also Director of Programs at Digitunity, a national nonprofit organization focused on ending the technology gap.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony and for this momentous occasion of establishing a statewide position focused on Broadband. Digital inclusion issues topics that I have been working on in Rhode Island for close to ten years and it has been clear that a Coordinator will provide the essential leadership needed to bring the many assets and passionate people together in our state to address and provide our residents, especially those most marginalized, with the technology access and skills they desperately need and deserve. I am in support of House Bill 5148 "An Act Relating to State Affairs and Government - The Rhode Island Broadband Development Program" with modifications.

As a digital equity advocate and leader, I am well versed in the national landscape as it relates to the digital divide. It must be noted that these issues have been long standing - well before the pandemic. Working at the Providence Public Library for close to two decades, I saw firsthand, daily, the scores of RI residents in need of digital access. I also saw the amazing transformations that occurred when they got the access they needed. Residents of public housing without ever having touched a computer previously participating in technology classes and going on to employment in technology jobs. We need more of that to happen.

Access to the internet is not enough. 12.36% of residents in RI don't have a computer. Without a computer, having internet access is not going to make a difference. Without digital literacy, internet access is not going to make a difference.

Let's get this Bill right by seizing the opportunity that it presents. Expand the scope of this bill to coordinate digital equity issues statewide. We need a Coordinator of Digital Equity that can bring together the technology devices, digital literacy and Broadband to really make Rhode Island thrive.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my testimony.