

Testimony in support of H.B.7333 - Rhode Island Broadband Oversight and Accountability Act of 2026

Dear Chairperson Solomon and Honorable Members of the House Corporations Committee,

On behalf of the Digital Equity Team—a part of the Brown Initiative for Policy at Brown University—we write to express our strong support of H7333 and to urge its passing by the committee.

Our team was established in the Spring of 2025 to address the ongoing gap in digital and broadband access, which significantly limits those in Rhode Island from vital resources. Our goal is to use research and data to support community partners and to ensure the accurate representation of broadband access across the state. Notably, we work with Brown University's Center for Technological Responsibility, Reimagination, and Redesign (CNTR) to conduct field work to collect internet speed data in different municipalities.

We have also been a part of ConnectRI's Connecting Communities Committee (formerly Digital Equity Working Group) since last spring, working closely with community partners to establish a collective goal and align efforts. This working group exemplifies the potential benefits of organized action. We believe that establishing a statewide broadband authority can provide further momentum toward creating more resources and reaching RI's 2030 goals of providing all Rhode Islanders access to broadband service of at least 100mbps download speeds and 20 mbps upload speeds.

Why digital equity is important to RI

Currently, we are behind on state goals. Research shows that various populations in our state have limited access to the internet and face significant challenges due to lack of a vital resource.

*The following statistics were drawn from the Benton Institute for Broadband and Society:*¹

- Affordability was the most frequently cited challenge to broadband access. Among Rhode Island Internet Connectivity Survey respondents, 15% cited service as affordable and 53% were dissatisfied with their current service. Only 64% of covered households are subscribed to broadband.
- Compared to statewide averages, those with **disabilities have lower broadband subscription rates (63% compared to 78%).**
- **Aging individuals have lower broadband subscription rates (69% vs 78%)** compared to statewide averages. Aging individuals needing support with 'smart home' technologies for independent living, as well as cybersecurity awareness to avoid online fraud and scams.

¹ Tepper, G. (2024, February 8). *A wholistic digital equity plan for Rhode Island*. Benton Institute for Broadband & Society. <https://www.benton.org/blog/wholistic-digital-equity-plan-rhode-island>

- 18 of Rhode Island's 39 municipalities are rural, with 29% of residents in rural municipalities considered aging individuals. Individuals of rural areas are dissatisfied with the affordability and quality of their current internet service, **16% percent reporting that their service is affordable and 67% reporting dissatisfaction** with their service.
- **Veterans have lower broadband subscription rates compared to the state average (72% to 78%).** Of particular importance, necessity of telehealth and assistive technology especially for disabled or wounded veterans.
- **Limited English proficiency has a lower broadband subscription rate (57%)** compared to statewide averages.

The following statistics are from BroadbandNow:²

- **12% of households lack any internet connection with 11% relying on cellular data only**, which is often insufficient for laptop-based tasks like video conferencing or large file downloads.
- **36% of households making under \$20,000 annually have no internet access**, with 15% of households making between \$20,000 and \$74,999 have no internet access.
- **11% with less than high school education** also reported no internet access.
- **26% of students in Rhode Island do not have access to adequate high-speed internet connection.³**

This research reveals that a lack of affordability and quality of broadband access disproportionately affects these listed populations: older individuals, low-income households, veterans, rural populations, non-native English speakers etc. Thus, digital equity needs to remain a top priority of this state to protect those most vulnerable.

How federal funding influences digital equity gaps

A key source of federal funding that sought to address digital equity gaps was the Affordable Connectivity Program, which provided low-income households with subsidies for internet access.⁴ However, funding of the ACP and further enrollment ended in June 2024, leaving behind a major gap in the digital equity landscape. Rhode Island was particularly impacted as it had the highest utilization of the ACP of any other state in New England, with 81,000 households relying on support from the ACP.⁵⁶ Though Rhode Island has robust internet

²BroadbandNow. (n.d.). *Internet access in Rhode Island: Stats & figures*. Retrieved February 2, 2026, from <https://broadbandnow.com/Rhode-Island>

³ Chandra, S., Chang, A., Day, L., Fazlullah, A., Liu, J., McBride, L., Mudalige, T., & Weiss, D. (2020). *Closing the K-12 digital divide in the age of distance learning* [Report]. Common Sense Media & Boston Consulting Group. https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/research/report/common_sense_media_report_final_7_1_3pm_web.pdf

⁴ Affordable Connectivity Program. (2025). Fcc.gov. <https://www.fcc.gov/acp>

⁵ Expanding Broadband Infrastructure and Digital Equity | Rhode Island 2030. (2026). Ri.gov. <https://rhodeisland2030.ri.gov/ri-2030-priorities/advancing-infrastructure-and-energy/expanding-broadband-infrastructure-and>

⁶ Ruggiero, D. (2025). *Opinion/Guest View: Time is running out on affordable internet*. Newport Daily News; The Providence Journal.

infrastructure, many of the digital equity challenges that the state faces have to do with enabling residents to access this infrastructure. This is a gap that the ACP had previously filled. Other federal sources of funding, such as the Broadband, Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) program, contain provisions to address this digital equity gap with funds earmarked for non-developmental funds. However, even this funding is in extreme flux with policy changes from the NTIA placing the distribution of non-developmental funds under consideration (4).⁷ This uncertainty around federal funding that would address an extremely pressing digital equity issue in Rhode Island is increasingly concerning and necessitates immediate action.

Why a plan for broader broadband oversight authority

Given the uncertainties around federal funding, a broadband oversight authority would be essential in navigating these challenges and ensuring that Rhode Island has sustainable access to all portions of BEAD funding. By planning for a broadband oversight authority, RI is building a strong, sustainable foundation for digital equity. Creating administrative capacity was a qualification of BEAD funding — not without reason. A broadband office is positioned to enforce any further legislation and initiatives regarding broadband access. There needs to be a lasting authority that can ensure that broadband connectivity remains reliable in the state of RI and funds are better managed.

Several other states have taken steps to provide this advantage to their residents, including our neighboring states, Massachusetts and Connecticut. Massachusetts, specifically, established a broadband institute to ensure high-speed, affordable internet is provided to its residents. The office works closely with both the state legislature and with stakeholders to fund and provide technical support for the design and deployment of last-mile networks in over 100 communities statewide.⁸ To ensure the same kind of resources are given to Rhode Islanders, we must establish a similar framework in our own state legislation.

There are significant digital equity gaps in Rhode Island, and it is absolutely imperative that action is taken to ensure that the state is equipped with the appropriate resources to address these gaps. For these reasons, we strongly urge you to support the passage of H.7333.

Sincerely,

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<https://www.newportri.com/story/opinion/columns/guest/2024/02/02/guest-view-time-is-running-out-on-affordable-internet/72436870007>

⁷ BEAD Restructuring Policy Notice.

<https://www.ntia.gov/sites/default/files/2025-06/bead-restructuring-policy-notice.pdf>

⁸ About MBI | MBI. (n.d.). <https://broadband.masstech.org/about-mbi>