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Written Testimony of Drew Garner, Director of Policy Engagement

Benton Institute of Broadband & Society

Before the Rhode Island Senate Commerce Committee

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Support for House Bill 7333

Chair Joseph J. Solomon Jr., Vice-Chair William W. O'Brien, Vice-Chair Justine A. Caldwell, and Members of the House Corporations Committee.

I would like to thank Rep. McGaw for her work in broadband, both as a member of State Connections, the national and bipartisan broadband working group of state legislators, and as a member of the Rhode Island state legislature. I am writing on behalf of the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society to express our support for her proposal, House Bill 7333.

The Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, a 44-year old nonpartisan non-profit, believes that communication policy – rooted in the values of access, equity, and diversity - has the power to deliver new opportunities and strengthen communities. The Benton Institute works at federal, state, and local levels to bring open, affordable, high-capacity and competitive broadband to all people in the U.S. to ensure a thriving democracy. These comments reflect the institutional view of the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, and, unless obvious from the text, is not intended to reflect the views of its individual officers, directors, or advisors.

Broadband is critical for success in the modern world, generating higher household incomes and property values, increasing business investment and agricultural production, improving government efficiency and public safety, and driving better healthcare and educational outcomes. The importance of broadband will only grow as innovative technologies, such as artificial intelligence, assume increasingly central roles in our daily lives and economy.

Yet, according to the Rhode Island Broadband and Digital Equity Strategic Plan, “*twenty-five percent of Rhode Islanders do not subscribe to wired (cable or fiber-optic) internet subscriptions at home. In parts of the urban core, that number increases to an astounding fifty percent.*” These Rhode Islanders—over 200,000 people—lack the reliable broadband service that is essential to modern life.

There are many causes of Rhode Island’s digital divide, but the primary drivers, according to the state’s plan, are:

- a lack of affordable service (only fifteen percent of survey respondents said service was affordable),

- a lack of high-quality, affordable devices (twenty percent of respondents do not have a laptop or desktop computer),
- challenges using online services safely and effectively (over twenty percent of respondents have experienced security issues), and
- a lack of choice between providers of high-quality fiber broadband service (nearly eighty-five percent have access to fiber service, but many from only one provider).

Rhode Island has statutory language that effectively prevents the state from considering policy solutions to these issues. In contrast, nearby states—New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts—are discussing or actively implementing policies that would address broadband affordability, device access, digital skills, and broadband infrastructure.

Across the country, states are enacting measures to establish broadband offices and prepare for the decade-long process of implementing and overseeing the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program. These are critical actions to maximize BEAD's impact while still addressing the many issues BEAD cannot solve

Rhode Island should ensure that every home, business, and community institution can access and make full use of broadband and the technologies it enables. The state has detailed plans to make this a reality, but doing so will require strong and sustained commitment. Broadband is the critical infrastructure of the 21st century; Rhode Island should adopt a legislative framework that ensures all Rhode Islanders can fully participate in our increasingly digital society.