



February 9, 2022

Chairwoman Deborah Ruggiero  
House Innovation, Internet and Technology Committee  
Rhode Island State House  
82 Smith Street  
Providence, Rhode Island 02903

**RE: H7083—Relating to State Affairs and Government—the Rhode Island Broadband Development Program**

Dear Chairwoman Ruggiero and Members of the Committee,

I write in strong support of H7083—An Act Relating to State Affairs and Government—the Rhode Island Broadband Development Program. On behalf of ONE Neighborhood Builders, as well as all of the Central Providence residents our nonprofit serves, I urge you to support this legislation to ensure that Rhode Island finally closes our digital divide. In this letter, I offer suggestions for proposed SubA changes to enhance this bill, and I urge this Committee to consider those recommendations as well.

Access to the internet is a gamechanger and an essential public utility. Especially at this time amid the global COVID-19 pandemic, when broadband access has become a crucial necessity for all Rhode Islanders, the State of Rhode Island would benefit from the creation of the “Rhode Island Broadband Development Program.” This program would help Rhode Island close our digital divide. This state has been playing catch-up with other states when it comes to broadband adoption, due in large part to the fact that we have not had a centralized effort to expand broadband access. I applaud this legislation and the idea that Rhode Island needs a Broadband Administrator and a Broadband Advisory Council.

ONE Neighborhood Builders (ONE|NB) is a nonprofit community development leader in the State of Rhode Island that is expanding its work to the broader Greater Providence area while maintaining its deep roots in its historic home of Olneyville in Providence. ONE|NB’s mission is to develop affordable housing and engage neighbors across Greater Providence to cultivate healthy, vibrant, and safe communities. When the pandemic began, ONE|NB became acutely aware that lack of internet access is dividing people even further along the wealth spectrum and that internet access is more important than ever for distance learning, working from home, and telehealth. When approximately 50 million students nationwide were sent home by school closings, more than 9 million lacked home internet access, principally because the household could not afford it. What was once a “homework gap” has been revealed as an education opportunity gap. The internet is no longer “nice to have.” It is critical.

Recognizing this urgent need, ONE|NB created the first free community wireless network in Rhode Island. ONE|NB chose to develop its free WiFi network in Olneyville because of this neighborhood’s

low proportion of in-home internet, the highest rates of poverty in Providence, and this ZIP code's experience with the state's highest number of COVID-19 cases. Olneyville is also located within the racially diverse 02909 ZIP code, where only 66.1% of households had in-home internet access between 2015 and 2019, according to the American Community Survey, well below the Providence average of 78.2%.

Our mesh network—called ONE|NB Connects—now provides high-speed broadband to more than 1,700 users in Olneyville. This network is just one example of what a collaborative of community partners can accomplish. If Rhode Island, like nearly every other state in the country, creates a focused, mission-centric entity to pursue federal funding for broadband access and coordinate our efforts, just imagine what we could accomplish.

At ONE Neighborhood Builders, we strongly support municipal broadband. However, after our experience building ONE|NB Connects, we propose that House Bill No. 7083 also include recognition that a mesh WiFi network is a strong solution for addressing digital equity. We firmly believe that SubA language should ensure that Rhode Island also invests in sustaining mesh networks alongside expanding broadband. A mesh network is a group of devices that act as a single WiFi network so there are multiple sources of connectivity (called points). In a traditional WiFi network, phones and laptops are connected to a single router, and all communication passes through that router. The farther the device is from the router, the weaker the signal. With a mesh system, the multiple points in the network mean users are never far from a point.

We agree that Rhode Island should create a Broadband Council, and we believe that the proposed list of who would serve on the Council appropriately names many of the state departments and statewide organizations that are central to these conversations about closing the digital divide. However, we urge this Committee to create room on the Council for a representative from a nonprofit entity that has been working to close the digital divide through programs such as ONE|NB Connects. We strongly believe that smaller entities that have created systems to help ordinary Rhode Islanders access the internet also deserve a place on this Council.

In closing, we urge this Committee to make appropriate changes to House Bill No. 7083 to allow for community mesh networks, in addition to the broadband options defined in the bill, to help people access the internet. We also urge the Committee to include a spot on the Broadband Council for a nonprofit internet provider to serve. We urge passage of this important legislation. If I may be of any assistance in revising this legislation, I am always eager to share what ONE Neighborhood Builders has learned by creating ONE|NB Connects. I would welcome this Committee reaching out to me and my team at ONE|NB if you seek more specifics about why we settled on creating a mesh network.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Jennifer Hawkins

Executive Director, ONE Neighborhood Builders