



Testimony of Matt Netto, AARP Rhode Island
In support of House Bill 7157
House Committee on House Innovation, Internet, & Technology
January 25, 2024

Chairwoman Baginski and members of the House Innovation, Internet, & Technology Committee:

My name is Matt Netto, and I am the Associate State Director of Advocacy for AARP Rhode Island. AARP is a nonpartisan, social mission organization with 38 million members nationwide and nearly 125,000 members here in Rhode Island. We advocate on behalf of issues that impact older adults, and we appreciate the opportunity to offer our support for House Bill 7157 that would provide for the hiring of a Broadband Community Outreach Coordinator to assist state residents interested in learning more and/or applying for, the federal Affordable Connectivity Program.

Achieving digital equity ensures that everyone – regardless of age, ability, income, level of English proficiency, or whether they live in communities of color, low-income communities, tribal lands, or rural areas – has access to affordable high-speed internet (also known as broadband) and to the equipment and digital skills required to use the service effectively.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that access to high-speed internet is not a luxury; it's a necessity. Americans without access to high-speed internet are losing out and being left behind when it comes to:

- Work: Teleworking, looking for jobs online, and professional development
- Education: Virtual classrooms for kids and adults, when necessary
- Health Care: Virtual visits with doctors and nurses
- Isolation: Connecting with family and friends

The ACP is a \$14.2 billion federal broadband benefit funded by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) that provides eligible households with a monthly discount of up to \$30 per month – up to \$75 per month for households on qualifying Tribal lands. It can also provide a one-time \$100 discount toward a laptop, desktop computer, or tablet.

The recently released draft Rhode Island Digital Equity Plan found that affordability was the most frequently cited challenge to broadband access as plan writers surveyed and conducted focus groups across the state. Affordability is certainly a key barrier preventing older adults from getting online. Many older adults are on fixed incomes and when adding transportation costs, groceries, health and medical costs, and other living expenses it can be difficult to manage an additional bill for broadband.

This helps explain why, in Rhode Island, 42% of households enrolled in the ACP program include people 50 or older.

The draft Rhode Island Digital Equity Plan states that just 46% of eligible residents in Rhode Island are currently enrolled in the Affordable Connectivity Program. We must do better. The creation of a Broadband Community Outreach Coordinator will help to ensure that the over 100,000 eligible Rhode Island households are aware of and signed up for the Affordable Connectivity Program. AARP Rhode Island strongly supports House Bill 7157 because it will help to make broadband more accessible to residents who need it.

It should be noted, however, that as of right now the Affordable Connectivity Program stands to run out of funding on April 1, 2024. Without an extension it may end. We recommend amending the language of the bill so that in the case of the Affordable Connectivity Program ending, this position would remain viable. We propose the following amendment:

39-28-8. Broadband affordability community outreach coordinator ~~—Affordable connectivity program—~~

There is hereby established, within the division of public utilities, a broadband affordability community outreach coordinator to assist state residents interested in learning more and/or applying for, ~~the federal Affordable Connectivity Program—~~ state and federal assistance programs.

Thank you for allowing us to testify in support of this important piece of legislation, and we ask that you recommend passage.

Thank you again and have a wonderful evening.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Matt R Netto". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Matthew Netto
Associate State Director - Advocacy, AARP-RI