

*Written Testimony of Drew Garner, Director of Policy Engagement
Benton Institute of Broadband & Society
Before the Rhode Island Senate Commerce Committee
April 7, 2026*

Support for Senate Bill 2345

Chair Britto, Vice-Chair Sosnowski, and Members of the Senate Commerce Committee.

I would like to thank Sen. Ujifusa for her work as a member of State Connections, the national, bipartisan broadband working group of state legislators, and for her efforts to promote broadband in Rhode Island.

I am writing on behalf of the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society to express our support for Senate Bill 2345. These comments reflect the view of the Benton Institute itself, not necessarily its staff or advisors. The Benton Institute for Broadband & Society is a 44-year old nonpartisan non-profit dedicated to ensuring that all Americans have access to fast, reliable, and affordable broadband.

Broadband is essential for modern life. It drives household incomes and property values, increases business investment and agricultural production, enables government efficiency and public safety, and improves healthcare and educational outcomes. And its importance will only grow as more and more of our daily lives move online and incorporate connected technologies, like artificial intelligence.

Unfortunately, hundreds of thousands of Rhode Islanders struggle to subscribe to reliable broadband. According to the state's Broadband and Digital Equity Strategic Plan, 25% percent of residents do not subscribe to wired (cable or fiber-optic) internet subscriptions at home. That number increases to an astounding 50% percent in some parts of the urban core. These Rhode Islanders lack a service that is critical to success in the modern world.

According to the state's survey, the primary reasons Rhode Islanders struggle to get online are:

- **A lack of affordable service** — only 15% of survey respondents said service was affordable.
- **A lack of high-quality, affordable devices** — 20% percent of respondents do not have a laptop or desktop computer.
- **challenges using online services safely and effectively** — over 20% of respondents have experienced security issues.
- **A lack of choice between high-quality providers** — nearly 85% percent have access to fiber service, but many from only one provider.

Unfortunately, Rhode Island has a law that prevents the state from effectively addressing these issues. Per R.I. Gen. Laws § 39-28-3, no state entity *"shall enact, adopt, or enforce, either directly or indirectly, any law, rule, regulation, ordinance, standard, order, or other provision"* regulating broadband, leaving it unclear how Rhode Island will meaningfully oversee its critical broadband networks.

This is unusual. Neighboring states—New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts—are leading the nation with innovative policies to address all aspects of the digital divide. States across the country are advancing measures to sustain broadband offices and prepare for the decade-long process of overseeing networks and maximizing the return on investment from their Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) programs. These states recognize broadband's importance and are building policy frameworks to ensure their residents can get and stay online.

SB 2345 would help Rhode Island join them. The bill would allow the state to participate in this increasingly important policy space, it would build a foundation for Rhode Island to win and effectively utilize federal funding, and it would create a plan to ensure that all Rhode Islanders can succeed in our modern, digital world.

The Benton Institute for Broadband & Society supports Senate Bill 2345.