

Jake Varn, Officer, Broadband Access Initiative
The Pew Charitable Trusts

Rhode Island Senate Commerce Committee
Written Testimony
April 7, 2026

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

I am submitting this testimony in support of Senate Bill 2345. My name is Jake Varn, and I am officer on The Pew Charitable Trusts' broadband access initiative (BAI). The Pew Charitable Trusts is a nonpartisan, non-profit organization that applies a rigorous analytical approach to solving public policy problems. Since 2021, BAI has provided research to state and federal policymakers, researchers, and other partners to inform policy efforts designed to accelerate the nation's progress toward universal, affordable high-speed internet service.

Senate Bill 2345 requires that the Rhode Island commerce corporation, the entity responsible for managing federal and state broadband initiatives, produce a report identifying policies and funding necessary to establish a permanent broadband authority. This authority would strengthen the state's ability to ensure adequate broadband availability as the internet continues to evolve. The report, due within one year of enactment, would provide policymakers with information and recommendations regarding the authority's capacity, staffing, structure, and funding needs. Further, it would provide guidance regarding the activities necessary to ensure equitable access to high-speed, reliable internet access, including broadband planning, performance monitoring, data collection, and coordination with federal, state, and local partners. This would not only clarify the state's long-term role in overseeing the availability of broadband but strengthen the state's ability to effectively administer federal funds, monitor the progress of awards, and assess remaining gaps in availability.

While every state has designated an agency to serve as the administering entity for federal broadband funds, such as the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment program, not all state broadband offices were granted the same [tools and authorities](#). Some state broadband offices are solely tasked with the administration of federal funds, while other states have directed their broadband office to conduct additional activities, such as administering state-funded broadband and digital inclusion funds, coordinating with other state agencies on deployment and affordability or adoption related programs, data collection and monitoring of broadband availability and performance, and regularly reporting to the legislature on policy barriers and programmatic updates. Pew's research

has repeatedly concluded that states with [established broadband offices](#) are better positioned to [develop and implement policy solutions](#) that reflect the unique needs of their communities and internet service providers.

Further, Senate Bill 2345 recognizes the challenges of relying solely on federal data and proposes the state explore developing its own system to monitor progress on the digital divide. Pew's July 2025 [report](#) focused on the shortcomings of existing federal data. Challenges, such as the limitations in geographic and household-level data on internet adoption and price, and inconsistencies in key definitions and reporting fields, have severely limited the ability for policymakers and researchers to measure the impact of previous programs and where communities have been left behind. States that [empower their broadband offices](#) to conduct additional data collection and analysis may be able to correct these gaps in the available federal datasets and better target future policy interventions.

Many states already directly collect network information from broadband providers for grant reporting and monitoring availability and quality. For instance, [Virginia](#), [Wisconsin](#), and [South Carolina](#) all require broadband providers to submit data they file with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) directly to the state, rather than waiting on the FCC's public reporting process, increasing the access their states have to this critical information and on a more timely basis.

Finally, the bill seeks to adopt a definition of broadband based on the standards established by the FCC. Currently, the FCC defines the minimum download and upload speeds necessary for an internet service to qualify as broadband at 100 megabits per second download and 20 megabits per second upload (also referred to as 100/20 Mbps). The FCC [adopted this standard in 2024](#), increasing from the previous definition of 25/3 Mbps, which had been set in 2015. Analysis from Pew, including most recently in 2023, has found that states define broadband in a [variety of ways](#). If Senate Bill 2345 is passed, Rhode Island would join the 32 other states that have opted to either defer to the FCC's definition, establish their own standards, or empowered their broadband office or relevant oversight authority to update the speed standards as needed.

State-level [speed definitions](#) are a critical tool for ensuring efficient use of public investments, measuring the availability of internet services, and determining if consumers in the state can access the internet at speeds that are sufficient for modern uses. In [some states](#), these speed definitions are directly utilized to determine which communities are eligible for state-funded broadband deployment programs. By adopting modern speed standards in their state statutes, states with their own broadband programs have been able to award funding to programs that meet the needs of their communities.

New research published in the [Telecommunications Policy journal](#), funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, has found broadband speeds have direct impacts on local businesses, with the authors noting that "better broadband speeds generally lead to higher

odds of [business] survival.” Further, access to higher speeds can also support business growth and the creation of new jobs, especially in new and small businesses, with the authors noting that, “increases in broadband speed are associated with employment growth for businesses under 5 years old and with fewer than 10 employees, including sole proprietors.”

Pew applauds Rhode Island’s continued commitment to achieve universal access to high-speed internet infrastructure and ensure the effective administration of both state and federal funds.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony. We welcome members of the Committee to reach out with any questions or additional research needs.

Sincerely,
Jake Varn
Officer, Broadband Access Initiative
The Pew Charitable Trusts