



Maryland  
Hospital Association

January 26, 2021

To: The Honorable Dereck E. Davis, Chair, House Economic Matters Committee

Re: Letter of Support- House Bill 97- Department of Housing and Community Development - Office of Digital Inclusion - Established (Digital Connectivity Act of 2021)

Dear Chairman Davis:

On behalf of the Maryland Hospital Association's (MHA) 60 member hospitals and health systems, we appreciate the opportunity to comment in support of House Bill 97.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted long-standing inequities nationwide, including the stark digital divide that harms access to education and health care. Marylanders without broadband internet or digital devices at home have been at a disadvantage during this period of remote learning and telemedicine.

About 520,000 Maryland households do not subscribe to wireline broadband service, and 18% do not have a desktop or laptop computer, according to a report commissioned by the Community Development Network of Maryland.<sup>1</sup> Entire ZIP codes in our state—from Western Maryland to the Eastern Shore to Baltimore City—have average Internet upload speeds that are half of what are needed for a group video call.<sup>2</sup> During the pandemic, Marylanders with limited connectivity relied on phone consultations as the sole option for care when an in-person visit was not possible.

HB 97 acknowledges the importance of reliable and affordable broadband. This bill would create the Office of Digital Inclusion and conduct a statewide audit to determine where resources are needed to close the digital divide. Broadband is no longer a luxury, but a necessity. Telehealth use by Medicaid and CHIP beneficiaries rose 2,600% in three months at the beginning of the pandemic. Maryland can't go backward. HB 97 would allow the state to leverage resources to ensure everyone has broadband. This step would help improve health outcomes, particularly for those who otherwise might lack access to care.

For these reasons, we urge a favorable report of HB 97.

For more information, please contact:  
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<sup>1</sup> The Abell Foundation. (January, 2021). The Abel Report: [Disconnected in Maryland: Statewide Data Show the Racial and Economic Underpinnings of the Digital Divide](#)

<sup>2</sup> Maryland Attorney General's COVID-19 Access to Justice Task Force. (2021). [Miscellaneous Dashboard- Map of Internet Upload Speeds by Zip Code](#).