

Testimony of
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State of Maryland
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Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and members of the House Committee on Economic Matters. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I am speaking here on behalf of the Communications Workers of America. CWA represents more than 9,500 employees in Maryland who work at Verizon, AT&T, and other public and private sector organizations in telecommunications, airlines, publishing, government, broadcasting, and manufacturing.

CWA enthusiastically endorses House Bill 1144. The measure would establish an innovative public-private partnership to promote high-speed broadband deployment and adoption in every region and community in the state. This partnership is modeled after the highly-successful Connect Kentucky program, an initiative that raised broadband deployment in that state from 60 percent to near universal coverage today and created 18,000 high-tech jobs.

To Assure Economic Growth, Maryland Must Have World-Class High-Speed Internet

High-speed Internet is the critical infrastructure of the 21st century. Advanced communications networks are absolutely essential to economic growth and job creation, as well as to improvements in health care, education, public safety, and other vital government services.

Maintaining the state's leadership in business development, education, and high-quality services depends upon a world-class communications system.

Yet, according to statistics from the Federal Communications Commission, only about half (58 percent) of all households in the state are connected to high-speed Internet, with a digital divide in rural and low-income communities.¹ While there are many reasons for this low penetration rate, one factor is certainly the lack of access to affordable broadband in many communities.

Further, the speeds of the broadband connections in Maryland lag far behind those in other countries and other states. According to a CWA report on Internet speeds in all 50 states, Maryland ranks 10th in the nation in Internet download speed and 20th in upload speed.² Since speed determines what is possible on the Internet, many Maryland consumers cannot make use of many Internet-based applications, such as two-way video.

HB 1144 Is the First Step in a Comprehensive State Broadband Policy

Clearly, Maryland must implement a comprehensive state broadband policy to encourage deployment and adoption of 21st century high-speed networks throughout the state. HB1144 is the first critical step in such a comprehensive strategy. HB 1144 would establish a public-private partnership with the goal of connecting every home and business in every region and in every community in the state to advanced high-speed networks. HB 1144 employs three linked strategies: improved broadband data collection, community technology planning, and market research.

¹ Federal Communications Commission, "High Speed Services for Internet Access," October, 2007 (based on data as of Dec. 31, 2006); Federal Communications Commission, "Comments of Consumers Union, Consumer Federation of America and Free Press," WC Docket No. 07-38, June 15, 2007.

² CWA, "Speed Matters: A Report on Internet Speeds in All 50 States," July 2007 (available at <http://www.speedmatters.org>).

In the first stage, HB1144 would require the state to develop a detailed map of broadband communications infrastructure at the census block level. Right now, we don't know which Maryland communities have broadband and at what speeds, and which communities have no broadband at all. Without this information, it is impossible to craft good solutions. Kentucky was the first state in the country to map its broadband infrastructure, and to make it available on the web in an interactive map. HB 1144 would collect this information from network providers – with adequate privacy protection – and make it available to citizens and policymakers in Maryland.

Next, HB 1144 would facilitate the creation of local technology planning teams in every county in the state. These teams would include all major community stakeholders, including local businesses, health care providers, educators, librarians, community-based organizations, agriculture, and telecom unions, among other stakeholders. These teams would use the mapping and other data to identify gaps and forge solutions by developing technology plans for their regions. Among the tools used in Kentucky was demand aggregation, which demonstrated to private providers that there was a strong business case for broadband investment in many unserved or underserved communities. In high-cost rural areas, the Connect Kentucky team of technical experts helped communities and providers apply for federal low-interest loans or grants to subsidize the costs of deployment. As a result of these efforts, household broadband coverage in Kentucky grew from 60 percent to 95 percent in just three years.

Finally, HB 1144 would fund market research designed to promote broadband solutions and to identify additional barriers to broadband use. In Kentucky, the research team discovered that many low-income families wanted high-speed Internet but could not afford a computer. As a

result, they launched a No Child Left Offline program to provide free refurbished computers to low-income eighth grade students.

Connect Kentucky has proven to be a cost-effective, comprehensive model to promote broadband deployment, bringing together resources of the private and public sectors. Other states have initiated similar programs to the one that would be created under HB 1144. These include Ohio, West Virginia, Tennessee, Illinois, and South Carolina. Last year, the U.S. House of Representatives unanimously passed legislation providing grants to states modeled after the ConnectKentucky program, and similar legislation is now pending in the Senate.

HB 1144 sets up a process to engage business, government, and the community in efforts to increase broadband deployment and productive use of technology. HB 1144 goes beyond data collection to facilitate creative community problem-solving. HB 1144 would put Maryland at the forefront of this national movement to forge public-private partnerships to accelerate broadband build-out and penetration. To maintain Maryland's economic leadership, promote good jobs, and to close the digital divide, CWA urges you to support this legislation