TESTIMONY ON
RURAL BROADBAND

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The County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania (CCAP) is a non-profit, non-partisan association providing legislative, educational, insurance, research, technology, and similar services on behalf of all of the commonwealth's 67 counties.

We appreciate the opportunity offer our remarks on the importance of expanding broadband access to all of Pennsylvania's residents. Counties are a key partner with the state and federal government in solving the technological divide, and we appreciate the continued attention of the General Assembly on this issue.

Broadband expansion has been a top priority for counties since 2019, long before the current distanced, digitally-reliant environment in which we find ourselves. We recognize that high-quality communication infrastructure is essential to our communities and critical for education, employment, economic development and the provision of efficient and effective services to our residents. High speed and reliable internet access have become a necessity for all Pennsylvanians, regardless of where in the commonwealth they are located. Rural, urban and suburban communities alike cannot continue to wait for infrastructure that is critical to our economic vitality and our personal quality of life. Without broadband, a significant number of Pennsylvanians are missing access to opportunities, while rural areas find it harder and harder to attract and retain residents and encourage business development.

Every citizen in the commonwealth deserves the access to broadband. Without broadband access, opportunities are missed; access to broadband increases access to healthcare, education, and business. Whether it is a farmer seeking advice from an extension office, a senior studying to graduate, students and parents navigating virtual education, or an individual seeking counseling, all benefit from broadband access. The void in broadband is eroding cornerstones to healthy growth for thousands of citizens. Through the pandemic, communities had to adapt and develop new alternatives to access education, work and telehealth through broadband, further exposing the lack of availability and the need of Pennsylvanians for high speed and reliable internet access. Some individuals get to experience continuity and healthy growth, while others wait and potentially whither. Broadband, or the lack of it, is creating an arbitrary divide based on geography and economics. To create a viable and vibrant future with a healthy and educated public, high speed broadband access throughout Pennsylvania is necessary.

The need for access to broadband continues to be echoed at all levels of government as one of the biggest hurdles of the 21st century. Counties have been engaging in their own local solutions to provide internet connectivity for their residents, especially in rural areas, and better bandwidth capacity statewide. In many rural parts of the state, internet service providers have to build the infrastructure over long distances for few customers, which is often cost-prohibitive. County initiatives piloted throughout the state include leveraging of existing structures, investment in dark fiber and development of centralized community location hotspots. From innovators to investors and funders, counties convene stakeholders and act as support systems to give our communities this basic need.

To help capture information, identify and share those county best practices surrounding

broadband expansion and deployment initiatives, CCAP worked with Penn State Extension to develop a survey to better understand county approaches to broadband development. Results from the survey have been culminated into a report that will help inform the commonwealth's plan for broadband development and bridging the digital divide.

The report aims to demonstrate the work of counties by discussing county projects and methodologies, themes, best practices and lessons learned, which will inform further discussions about broadband expansion and the county role in this critical service deployment. From information collected through the county surveys, the report states three primary findings. The first is that counties are engaged and investing in broadband expansion initiatives on a broad scale, with more than two-thirds of counties involved in broadband expansion and access projects. The report also demonstrates there is truly no one-size fits all solution to bridging the digital divide in terms of partnerships, financing, project methodology, technology used or even project size and need. Also, the report affirms that counties cannot solve the issue of broadband expansion and access alone, and strategic, coordinated investments and partnerships are critical. In order to move Pennsylvania forward together, coordination between all levels of government and industry is critical to avoid overbuild and ensure commonwealth residents have adequate and affordable access to broadband now and for the future.

Along with a summary of findings that note the need for multi-partner investments, the report dives into technology and infrastructure, funding and investments, partnerships and providers, as well as key takeaways, lessons learned and advice for deployment for counties and other entities that want to engage in broadband expansion initiatives.

Counties understand how critical this issue is and so we keep searching for solutions. For instance, Pennsylvania's counties have partnered with the National Association of Counties (NACo) to assess broadband download and upload speeds to better provide data about broadband coverage across not only the commonwealth, but the entire nation. NACo's Understanding the True State of Connectivity in America synthesizes information from the TestIT app, which measured broadband upload and download speed information to create more accurate broadband speed maps nationwide.

Through NACo's initiative, data from more than 78% of the nation's counties was collected over a year, and showed 76% of counties averaged cellular connections below the FCC's minimum of 25 mbps download and 3 mbps upload, and 59.6% of counties were experiencing fixed-wireless internet below the FCC minimum. In addition, more than 65% of counties were experiencing the internet at speeds slower than the levels reported by the industry.

The report also focuses on what the lack of connectivity and discrepancies in service mean for different aspects of life including challenges to economic development, education, workforce development, health and human services, justice and public safety, and agriculture. It further identifies reasons for gaps in coverage, including incomplete and inaccurate data, prohibition of local solutions and the high cost of deployment. While this report does not solve the broadband issue, it is one step in the path to solving the issue of access to broadband.

CCAP supports moves toward closing the technology access gap and looks forward to working with the General Assembly on issues related to accessing technology more broadly. As we continue to discuss the road forward on deployment of high-speed broadband across the commonwealth, counties must have a seat at the table as a partner in these discussions. The commonwealth must also develop partnerships among federal, state and local government, as well as the private sector, that can help to deploy the resources and data needed to make meaningful progress on rural broadband expansion. The state can also learn from the best practices and innovative ideas, such as regional cooperative models, that have seen success in Pennsylvania and throughout the country. With historic investments being made at all levels of government and the private sector for broadband deployment and infrastructure, we are at a critical moment to make meaningful, life-altering change. This issue cannot be tackled unless government and industry partner together to make broadband availability a reality.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments. We would be pleased to follow up on any questions you may have.