



**TESTIMONY ON
BROADBAND EXPANSION**

Presented to the Senate Communications and Technology Committee

By
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Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to talk about the county experience in regard to increasing access to broadband in the commonwealth. My name is Rod Ruddock and I am a county commissioner from Indiana County in southwestern Pennsylvania. I have been a commissioner since 2004 and in my role have been discussing issues of broadband and communication access over the past 15 years.

I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of CCAP 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.

Rural broadband expansion is a top priority for counties in 2019. 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, and our rural communities cannot continue to wait for infrastructure that is critical to our economic vitality and our personal quality of life. Even agricultural work has become increasingly dependent on connectivity as technology is added to traditional farm equipment and new tools such as drones help improve productivity. 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.

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, where 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 into 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.

Here in Indiana County, we have been trying for 18 years to make much of the same efforts. We began the build out an integrated broadband system, but with a lack of leadership and funding, the project was never completed to the last mile and services could not reach our communities. We have sought grants to help extend service out to the last mile, looked into fiber technologies, and even tried to utilize the statewide 911 radio project as a source of infrastructure. We quickly moved to provide broadband fiber connection to link our existing tower sites, but unfortunately, interest from industry has lingered. Between a lack of funding, installation obstacles and stalled partnerships from industry, the work of the county has been unsuccessful up to this point, despite our best efforts.

Counties understand how critical this issue is and so we keep searching for solutions. For instance, Pennsylvania's counties are partnering with the National Association of Counties (NACo) to assess broadband download and upload speeds to better provide data about

broadband coverage using NACo's new *TestIt* application for mobile devices, which will compile broadband speed data of users across the nation to provide a better picture of where service may be overstated and/or underfunded. The test is similar to one counties helped distribute on behalf of Penn State and the Center for Rural Pennsylvania in 2018. NACo is working with Penn State on the rollout and release of the *TestIt* data and information, expected to be released in the coming months.

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. 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.