



House Bill 97

*Department of Housing and Community Development - Office of Digital Inclusion -
Established (Digital Connectivity Act of 2021)*

MACo Position: **SUPPORT**

To: Economic Matters Committee

Date: January 26, 2021

From: Drew Jabin

The Maryland Association of Counties (MACo) **SUPPORTS** HB 97. This bill would establish the Office of Digital Inclusion in the Department of Housing and Community Development to ensure that all Marylanders are supported by high-quality broadband internet access at an affordable price and have the tools necessary to use and take advantage of the internet.

Access to affordable, high-speed internet is vital for Maryland residents and the COVID-19 pandemic has clearly illustrated the necessity of being connected. Lack of broadband access continues to hurt Marylanders in their mission to move out of poverty, find jobs, obtain health care and social services, access distance learning, and advocate for community change. Access to broadband also supports a better-informed electorate, a responsive government, and enhanced civic engagement.

Broadband access is a public health issue, and one that is being recognized more often as a social determinant of health. The Abell Foundation's "Disconnected in Maryland" report shows that more than 500,000 Maryland households do not currently subscribe to wireline broadband services. MACo and county government stand ready to work with state policy makers to bridge the divide and provide residents the access they deserve.

While MACo understands the necessity of establishing an Office of Digital Inclusion that will work across all Maryland jurisdictions to provide support in increasing broadband adoption, we would like to acknowledge the importance of the current Office of Rural Broadband. Maryland's more rural jurisdictions face special challenges in terms of providing broadband access to remote and hard-to-serve areas and subscription rates in rural areas generally continue to lag behind rates in urban areas. MACo encourages the Committee to keep this in mind when moving forward with any legislation aimed at solving the digital divide in Maryland.

HB 97 takes an important step in furthering the State and counties' goal of providing broadband access to all residents. Accordingly, MACo urges the Committee to issue a **FAVORABLE** report on **HB 97**.