



CAFCA
Connecticut Association
for Community Action

**March 9, 2021 Public Hearing Testimony before the
Connecticut General Assembly's
Energy and Technology Committee**

Board of Directors

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In support of

House Bill 6442: An Act Concerning Equitable Access to Broadband

Distinguished Chairpersons, Vice-Chairpersons, Ranking Members, and Members, my name is Deb Polun, and I am the Executive Director for the Connecticut Association for Community Action (CAFCA), the state association that works with Connecticut's nine Community Action Agencies (CAAs), the state and federally designated antipoverty agencies serving nearly 200,000 low- and moderate-income people in all 169 cities and towns across the state.

I am here today to express our support for House Bill 6442, *An Act Concerning Equitable Access to Broadband*.

CAAs connect their customers to essential programs and services like employment and training, housing and shelter, energy and heating assistance, early childhood care and education, asset development, and food and nutrition. Through a holistic, comprehensive, multigenerational approach, CAAs work with those in need to plan, achieve, and maintain a realistic path to short and long-term economic self-sufficiency.

When COVID-19 hit and most of us were forced to work, learn, and socialize from home, it quickly exposed a vast, important issue that has been a problem for far too long: Connecticut's digital divide. According to a report¹ released last year, 23% of households and 36% of low-income households across the state lack access to high-speed internet in their homes. In Connecticut's eight major cities, that number increases to 40%. The connectivity deficit also disproportionately affects Black, Hispanic, and older adult residents.

In today's world, everything is digital. Dr. Nicol Turner-Lee, Brookings Institute, puts it this way: if someone does not have a computer, smartphone, broadband internet, or financial collateral, they are not participating in today's economy. "The more you have to choose between broadband and bread," she says, "the less likely you are to maintain a consistent connection."

Additionally, research shows that not being digitally connected overlays with a variety of systemic inequalities that affect low-income populations. It means they lack access to things like education, health care and government services, and even the ability to apply for jobs, as most applications must be completed online.

¹ Horrigan, John. *The Digital Divide in Connecticut*. September 2020. Connecticut Conference of Municipalities and Dalio Education. Available at: https://www.dalioeducation.org/Customer-Content/www/CMS/files/DigitalDivide_Report_2020_Final.pdf

While Connecticut has taken a notable step towards advancing digital equity by providing every school student with a laptop statewide, there is more work to be done. As it currently stands, the state's fiber and telecommunications infrastructure is not set up right to address the digital divide. H.B. 6442 works to address this issue by collaborating with cable companies, municipalities, businesses, and consumers to help close the broadband gap; grow the economy; lower broadband costs; and allow oversight of broadband facilities.

In 2021, there is simply no reason why some Connecticut residents – especially our most vulnerable and at-risk populations – continue to experience barriers to accessing the internet. And so, I strongly urge you to support H.B. 6442 and help all Connecticut residents reach their full potential. Thank you for raising this important bill and for your time and consideration.