

WRITTEN TESTIMONY

AARP PENNSYLVANIA

IMPROVING ACCESS TO BROADBAND SERVICE

**PENNSYLVANIA SENATE
COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS AND TECHNOLOGY**

SEPTEMBER 23, 2019

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony to the Senate Committee on Communications and Technology regarding improving access to high-speed internet, also known as broadband, service in the Commonwealth. AARP has a strong interest in bringing broadband service to unserved and underserved areas of Pennsylvania. Many of our 1.8 million members live in areas where service is currently not sufficient for their needs, whether they own a small business or are utilizing physicians or specialists through telemedicine services.

There is wide acknowledgement that broadband service is not sufficient for the needs of Pennsylvanians. This is not a partisan issue – members from both sides of the aisle in the General Assembly as well as the Governor have taken strong positions in favor of addressing this concern. Many of the arguments advocating action have focused on the economic benefits of improving access to high-speed internet. But there is also a human factor, and older Pennsylvanians are among the residents of the Commonwealth who would benefit from improving access to broadband service.

Many older Pennsylvanians have limited mobility and aren't able to travel to other communities. This can restrict their access to friends, families, and personal interests and increase isolation. Better access to broadband service can address these situations by opening up the ability of these individuals to connect to various internet services. But perhaps more critically, access to high-speed internet can improve health outcomes for these individuals. The potential of telemedicine services to help those with mobility restrictions, and their family caregivers, gain access to specialists and advanced medical care can only be achieved if broadband speed is sufficient to accommodate the data and technology utilized in telemedicine.

A complete solution to improving access to high-speed internet service is elusive. But there are steps we can take to begin the momentum. AARP feels providers of fixed or mobile broadband services could be incented to deploy broadband to unserved or underserved areas if they were allowed to attach their facilities to state-owned infrastructure, such as poles and other real estate structures located in these areas. Creating a specific mandate to inventory state-owned property and identify real estate structures and assets that could support fixed or mobile broadband services deployment to unserved and underserved areas would advance this objective (though there are no guarantees that private, for-profit companies will choose to invest in rural unserved or underserved areas). Such an inventory would also facilitate compliance with recent FCC mandates regarding the expeditious processing of applications for location of wireless broadband facilities on public infrastructure. We do believe, however, that any bill must ensure that Pennsylvania (on behalf of its taxpayers) is compensated fairly for the use of that infrastructure by commercial broadband providers.

We believe that legislation currently before the Senate State Government Committee would be a first step toward addressing the gaps in broadband service that exist in Pennsylvania. SB 470, introduced by Senator Kristin Phillips-Hill, and a companion bill, HB 305, which has passed the House unanimously, would inventory state assets in order to facilitate access to those assets by private providers who seek to provide broadband to unserved and underserved areas.

AARP understands how important high-speed internet is in helping older adults avoid isolation from family and friends and remain independent as they age. We believe SB 470 and HB 305 offer a path to improving access to this critical need, and we look forward to the State Government Committee considering this legislation. Moving forward, we hope the General Assembly and the Administration will continue the conversation about how to ensure that more and more Pennsylvanians have the high-speed internet service they need and deserve.

Thank you again for your work on expanding broadband service in Pennsylvania and please do not hesitate to contact AARP Pennsylvania for more information on our views on this, or any other issue.