



Coastal Housing Center
768 Virginia Ave Suite A
North Bend, OR 97459
Phone: 541-756-1000

Main Office
605 SE Kane St.
Roseburg, OR 97470
Phone: 541-673-4909

March 25, 2021

The Honorable Senator Lee Beyer, Co-Chair and
Honorable Representative David Gomberg, Co-Chair
Joint Subcommittee on Transportation and Economic Development

Re: House Bill 5011

Co-Chair Senator Beyer and Representative Gomberg and members of the Joint Subcommittee on Transportation and Economic Development, I am Michelle Martin and live in Coos County, Oregon. I am the Director of Community and Economic Empowerment for NeighborWorks Umpqua which is also one of the forty-five (45) member organizations from across the State that makes up Housing Oregon.

I am here today to speak with you about the importance the \$6.4 million dollars that Oregon Housing and Community Services is seeking to assist in helping to close the digital divide across our state and potential impact that it will have. This investment will be paired with the broadband infrastructure investment through Business Oregon and a school broadband investment through the Oregon Department of Education.

As a service provider for affordable housing in Southern Oregon and as an organizational member of Housing Oregon, we would like to request these funds be approved and that OHCS be allowed to administer these funds across our state.

When the COVID pandemic hit our communities this past year, the true level of disparity in the digital divide became apparent. NeighborWorks Umpqua had already been in discussions about providing broadband at each of our properties with the intent of helping families with children to access education, helping individuals working to obtain their GED do so at their homes, helping individuals do job search or work skills development at their homes, and helping seniors stay in contact with their families outside of the area. The closure of our community room spaces due to COVID restrictions quickly removed access to broadband for many residents. As students were pushed to remote learning situations, families are often sharing a limited number of technologies to complete their coursework. With both parents and children competing for bandwidth, many struggled to fully engage in their work at hand.

According to the Pew Research Center in a study completed in 2019, communities of color are 13 to 18% less likely to have broadband service at home and families or individuals making less than \$50,000 per year are up to 36% less likely to have broadband at home.

Research is clear that low-income families and individuals and communities of color have disproportionate access to broadband services and many of those families who do have





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broadband access are using this service through a mobile device and not a laptop or desktop computer.

It has grown increasingly clear in the work that we do, both as an affordable housing provider and a provider of financial empowerment tools and resources, that the lack of access to broadband has a significant and negative impact on our communities. Our seniors struggle with staying connected to their families, while being required to social distance, and not being able to access important medical appointments through telehealth appointments. Our children don't have the bandwidth to be able to join their virtual classrooms.

Many in our community would not be able to join this meeting today via video conferencing for these reasons.

One important partner that is working on digital inclusion is Rural LISC (Local Initiatives Support Corporation). They are creating digital navigator model through their Financial Opportunity Centers. NeighborWorks Umpqua recently became a Financial Opportunity Center, and we are looking forward to how we can continue to provide tools and resources to our community that work to address these issues. As more of our daily activities move online a reliable and affordable home broadband internet connection is just one step in the right direction to address the digital divide across our state.

Thank you for your attention and allowing me time to share with you today.

Michelle M. Martin
Director of Community & Economic Empowerment
NeighborWorks Umpqua
mmartin@nwumpqua.org



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