

PUBLIC COMMENTS

HB 5

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON STATE AFFAIRS

Hearing Date: March 18, 2021 8:00 AM

Edna A. Okoronkwo

None /Self

Houston, TX

My house is badly damaged during the winter storm. I don't have water. I fetch water from my neighbor. I still boil water to use for bathing. My garage sheetrocks collapsed. It is hazardous to dwell. I need urgent help.

Lori Henning, Executive Director

Texas Association of Goodwills

Austin, TX

Texas Association of Goodwills is comprised of 15 separate Goodwill corporations around the state. Our mission is to serve people with disabilities and other barriers to employment, to become self-sufficient, contributing members of our communities. Goodwill offers an array of training and employment opportunities, to help people meet their goals and go to work.

Last year, Goodwill employed 10,544 Texans; and provided almost one million services to 78,875 people. Our economic output was \$1.3B for the state of Texas.

Goodwill Industries supports HB 5.

When the pandemic hit last March, Goodwill was serving thousands of Texans across the state who needed job training and placement services. Our programs came to an abrupt halt as we stopped all face-to-face services. Thankfully, Goodwill is an agile organization and quickly set up programming and services on a virtual platform. What we found, however, is in spite of having training available online, many of the people we serve, who are the most vulnerable Texans, did not have the right equipment or access to broadband, to continue with their programs. We also learned that this is not just a rural issue, but an urban, statewide issue.

Trina was referred to Goodwill from a substance abuse halfway house, where she was recovering from substance abuse issues. She had attempted to access Goodwill's program but her progress was undermined by slow internet speeds and poor connectivity. In this case, Goodwill was able to provide better equipment and hotspot access, which allowed her to complete her training program. She recently completed her program and is now sober and successfully employed.

Dyneshia wanted a better life for her three-year-old daughter. She contacted Goodwill but expressed concern about having the right equipment and access to broadband, to successfully complete the program. Goodwill purchased a computer for her and provided temporary broadband to ensure her success. She went from being a single mother with no income to an employee with Texas Health and Human Services earning \$29,000 annually, with benefits.

In both these cases, Goodwill was able to access the resources needed to help these people get the right equipment and broadband access to ensure their success. But Goodwill's resources are limited and there are thousands more people who are not successful because they are unable to access training due to lack of equipment and limited broadband. And this means, there are lot of success stories waiting to be told, when and if people can get the right equipment and access to the services they need to go to work.

Governor Abbott said that "access to broadband is not a luxury, but an essential tool." HB 5 will ensure that Texans have

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adequate access to broadband, to get the training they need, to compete in an ever-changing workforce, and get a job that leads to a successful career.

Katrina Fitzpatrick

Autism Society of Texas

Kyle, TX

The Autism Society of Texas supports the efforts of HB 5 as we think it will be good to study and evaluate state and local regulations pertaining to the development, deployment, and purchase of broadband services, and the identification of barriers to broadband access in underserved areas. Many people with autism live in areas where there are few or no therapeutic providers locally available. Studying ways to create improved accessibility to services and supports via telehealth would be welcome in our community.

Mallory Hart

Austin Tech Alliance

Austin, TX

Austin Tech Alliance supports efforts to encourage legislation that will increase affordable and reliable broadband connectivity across the state of Texas. We are encouraged to see broadband access as an emergency item for the 87th legislative session and support well-funded, long-term solutions to expand access to broadband and meet the needs of all Texans, including those living in urban and suburban communities.

We are a mission-driven organization that seeks to promote civic engagement in Austin's tech sector. Austin Tech Alliance advocates for technology to be used as a tool to help solve civic challenges. Access to broadband is key in the use of relevant technologies. We therefore support high-speed, adequate, reliable, and affordable broadband access to all areas across the state. We support legislation that will fill the gaps of the digital divide across all areas of the state of Texas – whether rural, suburban or urban.–

Signed by Austin Tech Alliance Board Members: Sarah Shields, Dan Graham, Josh Baer

Signed by Austin Tech Alliance Advisory Board Members: Tori Moreland, Liz Coufal, Erin K Burget, Erin Defosse, Matt Glazer, Jackie Padgett, Elisa Sepulveda

Wendy Woodland, Director, Advocacy & Communications

Texas Library Association

Austin, TX

On behalf of the Texas Library Association (TLA), thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on HB 5, related to the expansion of broadband services. TLA membership is comprised of almost 5,000 academic, K-12 school, public and special librarians from across the state of Texas. As community anchor institutions, libraries are essential to bridging the digital divide, providing not only access to technology (wi-fi, devices, hotspots), but also digital literacy skills training and support.

While infrastructure is important to expanding broadband access, it is equally important that the state address digital access, adoption, and use to ensure that all Texans have the tools necessary to navigate a digital world.

We urge lawmakers to:

Specify that the Broadband Development Council research the advancement of digital connectivity strategies across the state; identify barriers to residential and commercial broadband adoption and use in unserved areas (in addition to deployment); and analyze how statewide access to broadband would benefit workforce development.

Require the Statewide Broadband Development Office to serve as a resource on digital connectivity (in addition to deployment); engage in outreach to communities regarding affordability and use of broadband; and serve as a clearing house for federal

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programs aiding local entities in addressing barriers to digital connectivity and broadband service.

Specify that the State Broadband Plan establish long term goals for affordability and use of technologies, including broadband; collaborate with community anchor institutions, including libraries, that focus on technology access, adoption and use in addition to those that focus on broadband; and explore regional and state approaches to addressing barriers to digital connectivity (in addition to broadband development).

Digital access, adoption and use, and broadband infrastructure are essential to eliminating the digital divide and ensuring Texas' continued growth and success. Therefore, it is critical that statewide plans and initiatives go beyond infrastructure to address digital access, adoption, and readiness.

Thank you for your support.
Christina Gola, TLA President

Shirley Robinson, TLA Executive Director

Lindsay Munoz, VP, Public Policy
Greater Houston Partnership
Houston, TX

Chairman Paddie and Members of the House State Affairs Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony in support of House Bill 5, relating to the expansion of broadband services. For over a year, our state has been faced with a dual economic and health crisis. More than 740,000 Texans filed initial claims for unemployment insurance between March 15 and April 11, 2020, and in April 2020 more 51,000 Texas businesses were aided by over \$41 billion in payroll protection program loans that came to our state, all of which needed a reliable broadband connection to access.

In addition to the economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the state's broadband and digital connectivity shortfalls. When our public schools were forced to close their doors to in-person learning in Spring of 2020, over 3 million Texas students lacked the connectivity needed to access their online learning platform. We know that nearly one million Texans do not currently have broadband access and only 68% of households who have access are able to afford service.

We appreciate Governor Abbott, Lieutenant Governor Patrick, and Speaker Phelan for prioritizing the creation of a statewide broadband office and long-term broadband plan. We would also like to thank Representative Trent Ashby and the significant number of Joint and Co-Authors who have signed on to House Bill 5 for their leadership and hard work to address the infrastructure, adoption and affordability gaps throughout Texas.

We are in the midst of a fourth industrial revolution, but this time it is digital. This fundamental shift in our state and global economy necessitates a shift in how we address the digital divide and enable all Texans to actively participate in the new twenty-first century global economy. Broadband is the essential tool that provides everyone with the opportunity to achieve what they want in life, while bettering themselves, their family and community.

The pandemic and economic crisis Texas has endured has combined to accelerate our transition to online systems. It is time for us to adopt state policies and practices to bridge the digital divide, ensuring all Texans have the necessary tools to thrive in a digital world. We believe House Bill 5 by Representative Ashby achieves this critical first step by investing in a broadband office, long-term statewide broadband plan and funding resources. We ask for the continued support of this issue by State Affairs Committee members and all legislators. Texas's future depends on it.

Thank you.

Lindsay Munoz, Vice President of Public Policy
Greater Houston Partnership
lmunoz@houston.org, (512) 971-3775

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Martin Gutierrez, Director of Public Policy & Advocacy

San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce

San Antonio, TX

For over 91 years, the San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce (SAHCC) has been San Antonio's leading advocate for Hispanic businesses and Hispanics in business. We pride ourselves on five pillars of success: small business, economic development, international trade, education, and leadership. On behalf of the Hispanic Chamber's more than 900 members, I write to you today to express our support for HB 5, which will help expand quality high-speed broadband access across Texas. One of our top fifteen legislative priorities this legislative session is to work with the State and private internet service providers to explore the best options increase availability, adoption, and quality high-speed internet service in underserved areas where connectivity is needed the most.

When it comes to access to quality high-speed internet service, San Antonio is one of the least-well connected among large U.S. Cities, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas. The digital divide has serious implications for our more than 900 small, local and minority owned businesses. Lack of access to quality high-speed internet is a barrier to growth for small businesses. Having quality high-speed internet connection creates benefits such as new revenue, increased productivity, and strong online presence.

HB 5 is a great step forward to ensuring small businesses have access to all the digital tools needed to grow their business in the new digital economy. The San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce urges you to support HB 5.

Mary Faithfull, Executive Director

Disability Rights Texas

Austin, TX

Disability Rights Texas (DRTx) is Texas' designated Protection and Advocacy (P&A) agency. We provide a wide range of services for people with disabilities to ensure that their rights are upheld and that they are not discriminated against based on their disability. We also work to ensure that the needs of people with disabilities, including those with complex needs, are met so that they can live as independently as possible.

People with disabilities rely on technology to live independently. Access to reliable broadband means that people with disabilities can receive services like telehealth and virtual learning, and have access to important state and local messaging during a disaster. The need for access to reliable broadband has been highlighted due to COVID-19. HB 5 aims to create solutions to the challenges Texas faces in expanding broadband access, something that is sorely needed.

Broadband-dependent services like telehealth and virtual learning are critical for people with disabilities. Telehealth is a valuable resource for Texans with disabilities, allowing people to decide for themselves if it is too risky for their health to see a medical provider in person. Accessing healthcare services at home is thus of tremendous benefit to people with disabilities. To receive telehealth services, a person must have reliable broadband access, something that is currently out of reach for many rural communities, and some urban areas. Without reliable broadband Texans are not only unable to access telehealth, but also things like virtual learning, special education and communications services for the deaf and blind.

Improved broadband access would help people with disabilities during a disaster. During a disaster people with disabilities are left very vulnerable. Whether it is due to a reliance on technology, transportation or in-home care, the disability community suffers disproportionately. In a time of disaster reliable broadband would ensure individuals with disabilities have access to critical emergency notifications, and information about disaster services including evacuations and points of distribution for food and water. Reliable broadband would also allow people with disabilities equitable access to recovery funds and afford continuity of care via telehealth during a disaster.

A cornerstone of HB 5 is the Broadband Development Office tasked with, among other things, engaging in community outreach about broadband programs and drafting a state broadband plan. It is imperative that any decision-making by this office is done in an accessible, inclusive and equitable fashion, bringing to the table stakeholders with disabilities. When people with disabilities have access to broadband services, they are better able to make decisions about their health and can be as prepared for a disaster as their neighbors. Thank you for your commitment to these important issues. Please contact Tanya Lavelle with questions at tlavelle@disabilityrightstx.org

oliva oertega

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self

Pharr, TX

Dear Members

On this time of pandemic we have more time to be stuck at home And we have notice how important the internet has become we need it basically for everything connecting school online. Also that's how we find out of what is happening in the world. Since we are stuck at home and we cannot go out due to the pandemic. Also internet connects us with our family members doctors appointments .I think that our community needs a really good connection of internet for many reasons the most important would be for my kids to connect for their online classes. I live in hidalgo county south I have 3 kids in PSJA one that is in 12th grade, one in 10th street and another in 6th grade they go to PSJA district I also have 3 in the university and this is why I need fast internet very good signal so my kids can continue their education. My internet sometimes works and sometimes it doesn't work this is where my kids have to go to the library to finish their homework or other things they have to do. And another problem is the cars we don't have a lot of cars some of my kids work and my husband so their is no car available to take my kids to the library. And some of my kids have problems with the teacher because they didn't turn in their homework. This is why we need your help so we can have more internet access all my community is having problems and we care for our kids education.

Alma Muñiz

Self

Edinburg, TX

Dear members of the committee, due to this coronavirus pandemic, my daughter had to study from home, which we have never done. At school she had everything she needed like access to the internet, computers, and copiers. She attends Edinburg high school in the Edinburg Consolidated Independent School District and is a senior within a few months of graduating. Because we all use the internet at home and several times where she is in class and the connection goes off or the internet just fails and she slows down and causes her computer to disconnect and out of her class. The internet fails a lot because where we live we don't have very good internet companies. There are times when I have to talk to the school so that they do not mark her absent and have to explain to them that the internet at home is not very good. Theres been times where my neighbor who has her grandchildren has to come to my house because where she rents there is no signal and they do not have internet the children are in 2nd grade the devices that the Betts Elementary School lends them do not work and with the 3 f them connected to the internet hotspot, the signal cuts or gets too weak. For all these reasons we support Bill 5 of the House of Representatives on broadband.

Andrea Guzman

Self

Alamo, TX

My name is Andrea Guzman I am currently a full-time student at The University of Rio Grande Valley. I am majoring in Social work and I am on my 3rd to last semester of college. I am also a full-time employee, working at a hospital as a dietary hostess. Sometimes balancing my education and work becomes difficult, Before COVID we were already using technology to submit assignments and do our school work it was challenging but we managed. Now that COVID happened and we all had to quarantine and do online school what we thought was hard to balance both in addition to dealing with slow internet and the issues with broadbands became even harder. Like most college students who also work would agree that accomplishing assignments on time is challenging and most of the time the internet was not in our favor. Everyone needed to have access to the internet and most people were unable to afford it or their neighborhood did not reach a connection or simply the internet connection became slower and slower for everyone. This became an issue for every student but me personally at the university level using different programs to submit assignments, take exams, and access material was not so easy. When I was at work and had my hour break I would attempt to use my smartphone to access my classes and get ahead on my homework but most of the programs that we had to use my smartphone were not able to access. With slow internet as a student, we become anxious and stress because the page won't load fast enough and we have the constant thought that the internet might crash at any moment and we won't be able to access the exam anymore. This is a constant fear of mine because most of my professors only allow us to access the exam once and if we exit the page without finishing we can't access the page again. It's difficult and challenging but at the end of the day, we conquer!.

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Marco Lopez, Community Organizer

La Union del Pueblo Entero

McAllen, TX

To the Honorable State Affairs Chair Chris Paddie, Vice-Chair Ana Hernandez, and the rest of the members of the Committee:

I write to you on behalf of the more than 8,000 LUPE members across the Rio Grande Valley in support of House Bill 5. As a community based organization in colonias and neighborhoods across South Texas, we have a close ear to the ground on issues most urgent to this community. The lack of broadband and access to the internet is a major concern for a vast majority of unincorporated communities in our region, further exacerbated by the pandemic as hundreds of thousands of school children in the RGV were left to do schoolwork from home.

In recent years, the Rio Grande Valley and other rural border communities have been subject to the center of conversation around the digital divide. Numerous statewide and national media outlets and publications have highlighted the valley as an area heavily impacted by the digital divide, most negatively impacting unincorporated colonias across the region.

We understand that HB 5 doesn't present all the solutions to the digital divide issue, but do understand that it's an important step in creating the necessary structures to work with federal partners to provide the urgent funding needed in areas like the Rio Grande Valley and across the state of Texas. We would like to make sure that the language includes unincorporated areas so we can continue shrinking the digital divide and make sure everyone has equitable access in our modern world. Covid-19 showed us here in the valley that we were very unprepared and we want to make sure that the internet is not a privilege but a necessity as governor Abbott has previously mentioned.

Thank you for your time and look forward to continuing to support the connectivity of rural areas in the great state of Texas.

Marina Lizama

SELF

Edinburg, TX

Dear members of the committee on the Covid-19 pandemic, we have realized how much it is necessary to have a broadband connection. Our community needs a good reliable internet connection. I live in the county of Hidalgo north of Donna my children belong to the District of Donna. It has been difficult for us to connect to the classes at school. The school provided computers and portable connection for each one, the connection is too weak to be able to do homework or attend classes without fail. We have to disconnect the other devices at home but it is still very weak. We are outside the city limits and we have not had a Wi-Fi connection to work better, for that reason we cannot all connect at the same time. The connection is very slow for live class calls, download or google search. Before the pandemic we went out to find a better connection to the city library but due to the pandemic it is no longer possible. Even if the virus is stopped, students will still have a good connection due to the fact that they will be assigned additional tasks by teachers, which would occupy a strong connection. Today the internet connection is something very necessary at home, it is used for daily use for schools and students at home, that is why I agree with the bill 5 of the House of Representatives on broadband, so that our children achieve their studies without interruptions. Thank you for your time - Marina Lizama

Ramiro Salas

Self

Donna, TX

Before this COVID pandemic having internet was a luxury to many. However, now that our daily life's have become virtual in every aspect, we now require high speed internet. As a first year college student, having access to good internet is critical. For the past few month, I've had to drive to my aunts house where I would usually take my online classes since no internet company could enter our neighborhood. Making it difficult to me to even do assignments and homework every other day that I'm not able to drive to access the internet.

In my community there are many undergraduate students who have to attend online classes, but we like a reliable internet source,

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and for those who do have internet always have issues of faint or poor connection. My youngest siblings who have online classes struggle with joining their classes or even being connected through the whole class. Homework is a major problem to them since they can't download or access the online areas.

Before the pandemic, going to local places with free internet was very helpful to many students and workers but many of these places were shut down and even if these establishments were open, no one would risk going out and getting sick.

For these reasons we support House Bill 5.

Joshua Tutt

Self

Somerville, TX

Please support HB 5.

As a rural Texan in House District 13, I have struggled for an entire year to maintain stable and reliable internet connections during 2020. I was fortunate to be able to work from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, but some times I was unable to complete work or consistently be online during work due to unstable and unreliable internet connection options. Internet access for some rural Texans is not sufficient. When the internet infrastructure is stretched thing across too much area or too many users, the service diminishes for all users, causing instability, poor connectivity, and other reductions in quality. This is similar to how having too many faucets on can reduce water pressure.

The solution to this is robust rural internet infrastructure. HB 5 will bolster efforts to implement high speed internet service to underserved areas of Texas.

Please support HB 5.

Leticia Luna

Self

Hargill, TX

I live in Hargill Tx and have 3 children that attend Edinburg CISD.

Due to hard times with internet issues and my daughters staying behind I had to make a sacrifice for their education and send them to school although I felt it's unsafe for their health. My high school student has trouble connecting to the hot spot as well and communicating with his teachers. When he is able to connect there are some programs teachers require them to use that he had trouble connecting into.

I feel the schools need more state support to get them more advance in technology and more equipment to keep our children safe at school.

Susana Marez

Self

Hargill, TX

My name is Maria Sierra. It is important that my grandchildren have good connections to the internet. In our neighborhoods in the 'Colonias' we don't have a good broadband. When there are two or three children in the home, when one connects, the other can't. All the children needs good internet connections so that they can do their lessons and succeed academically.

Thank you.

Beth Brown

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Texas Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

San Antonio, TX

I support HB 5 and the efforts to expand broadband access. Over the last year I have spoken with many of the families we service and a major concern is reliable internet access. This has been an issue for our families in rural and urban communities alike.

Aurelio Montemayor, Senior Education Specialist

Self - education consultant

San Antonio, TX

Dear Committee Members,

I've been in education since I began as a high school English teacher in 1964. I currently work with families across the state on education issues. I'm listing below some of the key issues families and students have about broadband services, the internet and related matters.

Broadband Issues

Students

- Where you live determines the strength of the Wi-Fi connection. Poor neighborhoods have the worst access.
- Even when Hotspots are available, the bandwidth is not enough to support all of a family's internet connection needs.
- Along with good connectivity and appropriate laptops and tablets, broadband support should also have support for teaching students on the effective use of internet tools and resources.
- Slow and poor internet connections bar students from effectively carrying out and completing lesson assignments.
- Most college applications are online and have good internet connection is needed to properly complete them.
- For many households with low bandwidth, turning off camera is the only way students can complete work.

Families

- Elderly folks and others are challenged in filling out vaccine appointments which are mostly online, and they need good internet for many of their health needs.
- The isolation brought on by the pandemic was eased with online connections but those homes with low bandwidth and weak connections had trouble connecting with loved ones.
- The isolation caused by the pandemic increased the use of the internet for many purchases and tasks. Those with good bandwidth had a much better time doing these things than the many homes that didn't.
- Job searching online faced the same challenges as tasks listed above.
- Families needing to fill out food applications and those for other critical and necessary services all needed bandwidths not available to them.
- Without state support and inducement, Internet companies don't want to bring broadband to rural or poor areas.

As the legislature makes it decisions I heartily hope that you consider the critical resources and support our families needs regarding the internet.

Thank you

Ryan Franklin

Educate Texas at Communities Foundation of Texas

Austin, TX

Chairman Paddie and Committee Members: Thank you for this opportunity to provide written testimony on House Bill 5. We appreciate Representative Ashby's continued focus and leadership on the urgent issue of broadband access for Texans.

Educate Texas, an educational initiative of Communities Foundation of Texas, supports the vision that all Texas students, especially African American, Latino, or economically disadvantaged students, earn a college degree or credential that leads to a living wage and thriving communities. Broadband access for all Texans is essential to achieving that vision.

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Educate Texas convenes stakeholders in K-12, higher education, philanthropy, and business through its Texas Student Success Council, Texas Teaching and Learning Council, and funders' collaborative, Philanthropy Advocates. Across these diverse groups, broadband connectivity has been identified as a priority due to its far-reaching positive impacts on education, business, equity, and beyond.

The pandemic and the recent Texas winter storms further underscored how connectivity and access to reliable broadband are not a given, especially in underserved populations and both rural and urban communities. In at least 129 Texas counties, less than half the residents have broadband access. The robust broadband map as outlined in House Bill 5 will be critical to connecting these Texans to an essential resource that provides access to everything from education to employment to healthcare. The broadband map would help the state understand which regions, neighborhoods, and homes require additional intervention, outreach, and infrastructure.

Providing connectivity to historically underserved Texans will also require a Broadband Development Office with the experience and scope necessary to meaningfully engage the communities identified in the map. Outreach efforts should include best practices, such as demonstrations of effective local strategies that build infrastructure, supports for local governments to adopt and provide affordable broadband platforms, and the development of digital literacy resources for students and families.

By developing a coordinated, comprehensive, and cohesive broadband plan that includes these elements, we will demonstrate our state commitment to a thriving economy and robust education system that ensures every Texan has the tools necessary to contribute to the state's success.

Submitted by Ryan Franklin, Senior Director of Policy & Advocacy at Educate Texas

Jennifer Emerson

Texas Rural Water Association

Austin, TX

The Texas Rural Water Association supports HB5 by Representative Ashby.

Anthony Brown, President

ABB Solutions, Inc. / Wiser Wideband

Dallas, TX

Thank you, Chairman and members, for the opportunity to testify in support of HB 5

My name is Anthony Brown the CEO of ABB Solutions, Inc and Wiser Wideband.

I have over 30 years of experience working with large carriers like AT&T and Verizon and equipment manufacturers like CISCO and CIENA develop large networks.

I have been working to use technology to change the way people Live, Learn, Work and Play in underserve communities.

I have a pilot project at Dallas Housing Community (Frasier Development) in Dallas. We are deploying next generation technology (WIFI 6), Goal: Provide advanced speeds and enterprise Class Security in underserve communities.

Thanks

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Anthony Brown

Patrick Brophy, Mr.

North Texas Commission

Irving, TX

March 18, 2021

To: House State Affairs Committee

Re: House Bill 5

Position: Support

Chairman Paddie, Vice Chairwoman Hernandez, and Members of the Committee,

The North Texas Commission, on behalf of our Regional Chamber Coalition, represents upwards of 100 Chambers of Commerce across the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex. This vast network of community advocates spans a diverse range in geography, population, and economic status.

Access to, and adoption of, broadband are issues that cut across geographic boundaries and affect critical aspects of all Texans' daily lives. Access to education, health care, and commerce through the internet is necessary for the success, wellbeing, and betterment of all who rely on these services.

Without a suitable internet connection, Texas risks lagging behind other states who have implemented a broadband plan. Over 300,000 Texas households lack an adequate broadband connection, and nearly 90% of those who are disconnected live in rural areas of the state .

COVID-19 has exposed a long overdue need for the state to create a comprehensive broadband plan. Texas currently stands 35th in the nation for broadband adoption and is one of six states without a statewide broadband plan1.

The Texas Legislature must create the framework that allows for increased access and adoption across the state. When surveyed, 83% of Texas voters want to bring broadband to low-income and rural areas where it is needed most. Creating a Broadband Development Office is the first of many steps in expanding access and adoption. Once formed, this office must establish a statewide broadband plan that allows Texas to remain competitive with other states, have representation in proceedings at the FCC, administer broadband development grants, and create more detailed data maps to identify the areas of greatest need.

Sincerely,

Chris Wallace
President & CEO
North Texas Commission

Patrick Brophy
Manager, Stakeholder Relations
& Legislative Planning
North Texas Commission

Charlene Stark
Senior Advisor, Strategic Initiatives
North Texas Commission

North Texas Regional Chamber Coalition

North Texas Commission
Dallas Regional Chamber
Fort Worth Chamber
Frisco Chamber

Greater Arlington Chamber
Greater Irving-Las Colinas Chamber
McKinney Chamber
North Dallas Chamber

Plano Chamber
Richardson Chamber

Julia Grizzard

Bexar County Education Coalition

San Antonio, TX

Chairman Paddie and Members of the House Committee on State Affairs,

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The Bexar County Education Coalition (BCEC), which represents sixteen independent school districts (ISDs) that serve approximately 360,000 students, 63% of whom are economically disadvantaged, and are suburban, urban, fast-growth, recapture, military, and rural ISDs ranging in enrollment sizes from 1,000 to 100,000 students, supports House Bill 5 by Representative Ashby.

House Bill 5 takes a strong step forward to ensure our state has an accurate picture of broadband capabilities for the state as well as strengthens a critical relationship with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to hold all levels of government accountable in the expansion of broadband in Texas. With a more detailed picture of broadband access, BCEC districts are hopeful that the approximately 83,000 households with children without access to broadband across Bexar County will be accurately captured on future connectivity maps. Moreover, we appreciate the investment in the equitable infrastructure development programs by incentivizing public/private partnerships between providers and underserved areas.

BCEC especially appreciates Representative Ashby's attention to the role affordability has in the lack of adoption across the state. Of the 83,000 households without access, a significant number of those households lack access due to both affordability and lack of access to reliable broadband infrastructure. Additionally, we appreciate the creation of an essential partnership between the Broadband Development Office and the Texas Education Agency to prioritize the educational benefits of broadband.

While we hope the FCC and the Broadband Development Office will increase the speeds associated with the current definition of broadband to more accurately reflect the higher download and upload speeds our students need, we know House Bill 5 is a strong and solid first step in prioritizing broadband access for all Texans.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our support of this legislation.

Julia Grizzard
Executive Director, Bexar County Education Coalition

Alamo Heights ISD
East Central ISD
Edgewood ISD
Fort Sam Houston ISD
Harlandale ISD
Judson ISD
Lackland ISD
Medina Valley ISD
North East ISD
Northside ISD
Randolph Field ISD
San Antonio ISD
Schertz-Cibolo-Universal City ISD
Somerset ISD
Southside ISD
Southwest ISD

Stephanie Reyes, Vice President of Public Policy
San Antonio Chamber of Commerce
San Antonio, TX

The San Antonio Chamber of Commerce is proud to offer our support for HB 5, creating a broadband council to implement a long-term strategy to improve access across the state.

It is believed that more than 9 million Texans do not have a broadband internet connection, either because the infrastructure does not reach their homes or because they are not subscribed to a service. Adding to this problem is our state is one of six that does not have a broadband plan which corrects this issue.

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We know a great deal of attention is focused on a lack of infrastructure to connect rural areas with broadband internet, but it is also a problem for urban areas like San Antonio. In fact, the six largest counties in Texas have nearly 600,000 households without internet subscriptions. We respectfully request the challenges of both areas are not overlooked.

Our state's connectivity problems became more obvious during the COVID-19 pandemic. While online access for students is most often cited across the state, the lack of a broadband internet connection limits many other crucial services used by families and businesses. Digital technologies anchored by high-speed internet can help businesses across Texas generate sales, expand their reach in the global marketplace, recruit outstanding candidates, and connect to remote training opportunities for their workforce. Increasing connectivity creates more jobs for Texans. Broadband access is an important part of our economic recovery.

The San Antonio Chamber was pleased Governor Abbott listed broadband access as one of his priority items this legislative session, and we ask our legislative leaders to meet the challenge. Helping ensure all Texans have the necessary tools to navigate a digital world and strengthen our economy, we urge lawmakers to:

- Authorize the State Broadband Council and Broadband Development Office to identify barriers to adoption and use of broadband, apply effective connectivity strategies, and engage in community outreach on affordability and use of broadband.
- Ensure the state broadband plan establishes a timeline with goals to measure progress and incorporates the unique challenges of different regions across the state.
- Encourage collaboration between existing assets and institutions to support the deployment of broadband and assess future needs for access in all areas of the state.

Thank you for your consideration of our recommendations.

Richard Perez
President and CEO
San Antonio Chamber of Commerce

Shelby Tracy, Director of Policy and External Communications
Texas Association of Community Health Centers
Austin, TX

The Texas Association of Community Health Centers (TACHC) appreciates the opportunity to comment in favor of HB 5. These comments represent the perspective of the 73 federally qualified health centers (FQHCs) in Texas which provide high-quality, affordable, primary and preventive health care services to people who otherwise may lack access to medical care due to where they live, lack of insurance, language barriers, income level, or their complex health care needs. In 2019, Texas health centers served over 1.6 million patients in almost 600 clinic locations across 133 counties. FQHCs serve patients in rural and urban medically underserved areas across the state.

Adequate broadband access is essential to maintain and expand telemedicine, telehealth and other telecommunication services in health care, but also to address social determinants of health, including barriers to education and employment. According to a recent Governor's Broadband Council Report, as of July 2020, almost a million Texans do not have access to broadband at home. This not only impacts Texans in rural areas, but also in urban areas with limited infrastructure investment – the exact areas where health centers provide care to vulnerable populations.

The ability of health centers to connect with their patients through the use of technology increases access to care for Texans and has allowed health centers to continue providing services and keeping their patients healthy throughout the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. In the past year, 100% of health centers provided telehealth/telemedicine services compared to just 47% in 2019. Telemedicine/telehealth will remain an integral part of health center operations after the current public health emergency ends. But, health centers can only reach their patients via telemedicine/telehealth if they have reliable broadband access and adequate digital literacy to be able to use it. We encourage lawmakers to also consider strategies to address gaps in digital literacy.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments in support of HB 5. Please don't hesitate to contact Shelby Tracy (stracy@tachc.org) with any questions about these comments.

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Sincerely,

Jana Eubank
Executive Director, TACHC

Portia Bosse, Director of Public Affairs
Texas State Teachers Association
Austin, TX

TSTA supports this bill.

Sandra Haverlah
Texas Consumer Association
Austin, TX

Texas Consumer Association (TCA) supports House Bill 5. We are joining the multitude of voices today citing the many reasons that include the availability of broadband for individuals and businesses in underserved and rural areas of the state, the price of broadband for consumers, and the lack of choice for high-speed services - if services are offered at all.

The development of the pandemic in 2020 only illuminated the range of issues with broadband access faced by Texans as they tried to work from home, participate in school from home and conduct all personal shopping and appointments from home. Here we are one year later, and all those activities are still being conducted at home. We expect this lifestyle will continue, even after the pandemic.

Many rural Texans have been 'working from home' for decades and have faced the issue of no or slow broadband service since the beginning of broadband rollout. Left out of the initial buildouts, rural Texans relied on dialup provided local electric coops. Technologies have changed for farming and ranching, but these rural businesses are now forced to rely on wireless as the main mode of access simply because there is not an alternative.

TCA endorses the effort to address access to broadband in HB 5, whether it is in an urban, suburban or rural setting. The passage of HB 5 will improve the expansion of broadband service and aide in closing the infrastructure gap.

Rob Hughes
Texas Forestry Association
Lufkin, TX

Texas Forestry Association fully supports HB 5. There are 64 million acres of forestland in Texas and 12 million of those receive enough rainfall to support commercial forestry. The impact of Texas' working forests includes 168,000 direct and indirect jobs with all the wages and benefits that supports their families and communities. High speed internet access is not only needed, it's essential for family businesses located in rural forested areas for many business reasons including compliance with state mandated documentation available only online. Technology is advancing in the machinery used in the forest industry which makes the equipment much safer and efficient; the computer programs in this machinery require software updates and offer trouble shooting capabilities. Because there is not widespread internet access, these machine owners are required, at great expense, to load and haul this equipment to a maintenance shop losing many valuable hours of production. There has also been great advancement in forest management tools which require internet access for real-time data exchange. Internet access in rural forested areas will also drastically increase economic development. As in every industry, the safety of employees and the public at large is the top priority and having internet access for mobile phone coverage will greatly increase the probability that people will have timely access to emergency medical services, as well as, being able to pin point their location to receive that medical service. Thank you for providing this opportunity to provide public comments...online.

Rene Gonzalez
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Lit Communities

San Antonio, TX

Greetings Chairman Paddie:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a written statement on House Bill 5. HB 5 is an excellent starting point for addressing these aspects, with additional opportunities to consider:

In Section 1, (Sec. 490I.002(a)):

We recommend that one of the representatives have experience identifying solutions for expanding broadband to rural and urban areas of the state.

In Section 2, (Sec. 490H.006(a)):

We suggest that it is important for research to be inclusive of unserved and underserved areas of the state.

(Sec. 490I.0101):

We support the provision that permits the comptroller to increase the 25 Megabits per second (Mbps) download /3 Mbps upload threshold speed standard when the FCC increases the standard in 47 U.S.C. Section 1302.

(Sec. 490I.0103):

We recommend that the role should be expanded to include Digital Inclusion and Digital Equity in order to receive federal funding for State Digital Equity purposes. If the Broadband Office does not have Digital Inclusion or Digital Equity responsibilities in its purview, access to proposed State Digital Equity block grants might not be accessible.

(Sec. 490I.0105):

We suggest that the office update the proposed map semi-annually since the FCC collects data from internet service providers twice a year through data on Form 477.

The current FCC Form 477 data does not provide enough information to determine the number of households within the census block that have access to broadband service, there when designating census blocks as eligible or ineligible, we have concerns regarding the source of data for the Broadband Development Office to make that determination.

We suggest removing the language in Subsection (o) because the FCC does not publish a map with the level of granularity to meet the requirements in Subsection (c). If the FCC does not publish this type of map, then this language should be removed from the bill.

(Sec. 490I.0106):

By prohibiting the favoring of a particular broadband technology, we believe this is a missed opportunity to incentivize the industry to utilize the funding to deploy the technology of the future, not of the past.

We should not be investing today's dollars in technology that is already obsolete and not suitable for closing the digital divide.

We need to be proactive in encouraging providers to improve upload speeds that directly impact remote learning, teleworking, telehealth, and business cloud operations.

If we fail to incentivize the development of technology for tomorrow, we will need to double down the investment in less than 5 years.

This would be wasteful and impact the State's goal of achieving the goal of closing the digital divide. We should not be investing in copper wirelines.

(Sec. 490I.0107):

We recommend that the plan be inclusive of digital inclusion and digital equity in Subsection (a) and stakeholders and organizations in Subsection (b)(1).

Thank you.

Mercedes Bristol

TX Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

San Antonio, TX

This year it has been very difficult for my family because I am raising 5 grandchildren with limited internet connections. I had to purchase a higher broadband to be able to support our need and still had problems with having 5 computer's at one time.

I have a nonprofit that affected many of our Zoom internet participations because 80% of our participants do not have access to broadband or devices to help them get into the meetings. With this expansion in the out of city limits will help children and seniors stay connected with critical information. Thank you for considering this bill!

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