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Support Digital Access, Adoption, and Readiness in SB 5 by Nichols
Testimony to the Senate Transportation Committee on March 17, 2021

Thank you Mr. Chairman, and members of the committee, for the opportunity to provide written testimony in support of HB 5. My name is Ashley R. Harris, representing the United Ways of Texas (UWT), the statewide association of nearly 70 local United Ways across the state. UWT also leads the Texas WORKS Coalition, a bipartisan statewide coalition focused on advancing policies that strengthen support services and other safety net programs to support pathways to career and serves as chair of the digital inclusion committee of the Digital Texas coalition.

We are supportive of the goals of expanding broadband infrastructure as expanding broadband infrastructure and access is critical to ensuring that Texans can participate in important education, health, and workforce opportunities. In addition to expanding access to broadband, we also encourage the committee to address other key factors leading to the digital divide within this critical piece of legislation. **Today, I will highlight some key digital connectivity challenges faced by Texans and provide recommendations on SB 5 for the committee's consideration.**

Uneven and inequitable access to technology has prevented many Texans from participating fully in online opportunities. The pandemic has further highlighted inequities in access to critical technology infrastructure and SB 5 rightly prioritizes access to broadband internet. But even as access to broadband expands in our state, Texas students, workers, and families need support with adoption, digital device access, and digital skills to ensure they can capitalize on these infrastructure investments. Many Texans - especially low-income and people of color - face significant barriers.

Beyond having physical access to broadband, having the skills necessary to navigate online systems and new technologies effectively is a requirement for people to engage in increased online work, education, and training opportunities. Nearly one in three US workers – more than 48 million people – have limited to no digital skills, yet around 43% of those workers are in jobs that require moderate to advanced computer use.^v Workers of color are overrepresented among those with limited or no digital skills.^{iv} Critical workforce challenges can be addressed by ensuring that Texas workers have the digital skills necessary to compete for and succeed in middle- and high-skill jobs.

Additionally, families must have the financial means to subscribe to the internet at appropriate speeds, as well as the proper hardware to participate effectively in education and workforce opportunities. The cost of internet service, plus the requirements around financial status in setting up accounts (e.g. unbanked, credit check requirements), prevents many Texans from accessing the Internet.^{vi} Almost 25% of low-income teens do not have home computers,ⁱⁱ while 28% of adults living in households earning less than \$30,000 a year are “smartphone dependent” Internet users.ⁱⁱⁱ

We ask that SB 5 include digital connectivity, with a focus on adoption, affordability, and use of technology, as a key component of the work of the Governor's Broadband Development Council, Broadband Development Office, and the state broadband plan. Focusing on digital connectivity ensures that the important infrastructure investments of this bill and statewide legislation will be ensure all Texans have access to digital opportunities.

Specifically, we urge committee members to consider the following changes to SB 5:

The Governor's Broadband Development Council should:

- Research 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)
- Analyze how statewide access to broadband would benefit workforce development (in addition to economic development)

The Broadband Development Office should:

- Serve as a resource on digital connectivity (in addition to broadband deployment), engage in outreach to communities regarding affordability and use of broadband and other connectivity strategies
- Serve as an information clearinghouse in relation to federal programs providing assistance to local entities with respect to broadband service and addressing barriers to digital connectivity

The state broadband plan should:

- Establish long term goals for affordability and use of technologies in this state (in addition to access to just broadband)
- Be made in collaboration with nonprofit organizations that focus on technology access, adoption, and use (in addition to those that focus on broadband).
- Include exploration of regional and state approaches to addressing barriers to digital connectivity (in addition to broadband development)

Creating a state broadband office and broadband plan is critical to aligning resources and bringing key stakeholders together to solve challenges related to technology and is an important step taken by this bill. We appreciate the efforts of state leaders in addressing the digital divide and hope this bill will focus on all components of the digital divide.

By including digital connectivity in the scope of work, the office and, plan as outlined in SB 5, all Texans and communities will have the opportunity to gain the necessary infrastructure, devices, and skills needed to navigate and thrive in a digital world.

Thank you for your consideration and work to address all barriers to digital connectivity.