



New England Connectivity and  
Telecommunications Association

## WRITTEN COMMENTS OF THE NEW ENGLAND CONNECTIVITY & TELECOMMUNICATIONS ASSOCIATION, INC. REGARDING H.75

July 13, 2023

Dear Chair Farley-Bouvier, Chair Moore, and Members of the Joint Committee on Advanced Information Technology, the Internet and Cybersecurity,

On behalf of the New England Connectivity and Telecommunications Association (NECTA), I appreciate the opportunity to submit testimony regarding **H.75 *An Act creating the Massachusetts digital equity broadband adoption program***. With unprecedented federal support flowing to Massachusetts for investment in broadband, legislative leaders have a once in a lifetime opportunity to close the digital divide in the commonwealth once and for all and the principles outlined in H.75 will help achieve that goal.

### **The Massachusetts Broadband Landscape**

In today's digital economy, particularly in the wake of COVID-19, we know high-speed Internet is critical to our daily lives. Fortunately for Massachusetts, we are starting from a strong position to ensure that everyone gets connected. Leadership from the Baker and Healey Administrations and the Legislature to foster partnerships with private broadband providers has already made Massachusetts a national leader in Internet connectivity. Today, over 98% of Massachusetts residents and businesses have access to high-speed broadband infrastructure, according to recently released mapping data from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) as the federal government is in the process of deploying \$42.5 billion under the Broadband, Equity, Access and Deployment (BEAD) program.<sup>1</sup> This high rate of broadband buildout can be attributed to the billions of dollars in investment in networks by private broadband providers across the state and the unparalleled success of the [Massachusetts Broadband Institute's Last Mile program](#), a public-private partnership that has put all the Commonwealth's previously unserved towns on a path to connectivity.

But even with one of the highest rates of high-speed broadband deployment throughout the nation, NECTA members understand that gaps in connectivity still exist. Income and housing insecurities, access to computing devices, lack of digital literacy or skills, or other challenges like language barriers have prevented too many families from adopting the usage of broadband. To help break down some of these obstacles, over the past decade, broadband providers in Massachusetts have invested millions of dollars in programs to help low-income individuals get connected to the high-

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<sup>1</sup> [Area Summary - Fixed | FCC National Broadband Map](#)

speed internet service available at their home. Highly subsidized programs like Comcast's [Internet Essentials](#) and [Internet Essentials Partnership Program \(IEPP\)](#), Charter Communication's [Spectrum Internet Assist](#) and [Stay Connected K-12](#), and Cox Communication's [Connect2Compete](#) are all designed to provide affordable broadband to low-income households and to ensure that municipalities, school districts, and community-based organizations can help students and families connect to the internet at little to no cost.

While these programs are making strides, we know there is still work to be done. H.75 seeks to address these remaining digital equity challenges and implement meaningful, long-term connectivity support for those in need.

### **Massachusetts Digital Equity Broadband Adoption Program**

As drafted, H.75 would create the Massachusetts Digital Equity Broadband Adoption Program (MDEBAP) within the Executive Office of Economic Development (EOED) which would provide financial support to eligible families to help subsidize their Internet connection and provide the equipment, tools and training to help them be successful online. To do this, the MDEBAP would partner with existing broadband providers and deliver support in four critical areas:

1. Support eligible families in need by subsidizing a low-cost, high-speed broadband subscription at home that allows families to work, learn and access critical services.
2. Subsidize installation costs and in-home equipment like routers and Wi-Fi extenders.
3. Provide subsidized computing equipment like a laptop or tablet.
4. Provide for digital literacy programming that delivers foundational and advanced digital literacy training to help families learn the tools and skills they need to be successful online.

Together, these four elements of broadband adoption would help remove all remaining barriers to access and ensure equitable service for all families by utilizing existing providers who have the infrastructure, proven technology, and customer support in place to make this program successful.

To maximize participation in the program, EOED would coordinate with the Department of Early and Secondary Education (DESE) to send information regarding the availability of this new financial assistance to each family in Massachusetts with students enrolled in grades K-12 with instructions on how to apply. While EOED would be responsible for determining eligibility for this program, anyone receiving benefits under Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, or whose household includes a child who is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch would be automatically eligible for financial assistance under this program.

### **Provide for Alternate Funding for MDEBAP**

While NECTA fully supports the broadband adoption goals set forth in H.75, we urge the committee reject the provision included in Section 2 that requires 50 percent of funds for the program to be derived from an assessment on broadband providers. With the influx of federal funding through the American Rescue Plan ACT (ARPA) and the BEAD program (programs that did not exist when the bill language was originally drafted), placing an additional fee on broadband providers to fund this initiative would simply equate to a consumer tax on the Internet, and would completely defeat the purpose of ensuring that affordable broadband is available to those in need.

NECTA's member's low-cost broadband plans are already highly subsidized by our member companies, however they are committed to keeping these price points as low as possible for their customers facing financial challenges. Placing an additional assessment on these companies for the purposes of funding a state broadband adoption program would be counterproductive.

**Coordination with the FCC's Affordable Connectivity Program**

Last year, the FCC opened enrollment to the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) codified in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021. Funded at \$14.2 billion, the ACP provides a discount of up to \$30 per month toward internet service for eligible households and up to \$75 per month for households on qualifying Tribal lands. Eligible households can also receive a one-time discount of up to \$100 to purchase a laptop, desktop computer, or tablet from participating providers if they contribute more than \$10 and less than \$50 toward the purchase price. The Affordable Connectivity Program is limited to one monthly service discount and one device discount per household.

The language of H.75 was originally developed prior to the creation of the ACP. Because the ACP provides a similar benefit that the MDEBAP program is seeking to provide, we would urge the committee to amend H.75 to align with the program structure of ACP so MDEBAP can either act as a backstop if the federal government ever fails to recapitalize ACP, or a supplemental program that complements the ACP and goes even further to close the digital divide. To date, **313,535 residents** in Massachusetts have enrolled in the ACP<sup>2</sup>, and those families could additionally benefit from the MDEBAP. We believe the goal of MDEBAP should not be to duplicate federal benefits, rather, complement the federal program and fill in any gaps not being provided when it comes to connectivity like robust digital literacy opportunities or additional computing devices to households. Maryland recently enacted a similar supplementary program where the state provides an additional \$15/month against a low-income household's internet service cost in addition to the \$30 provided by the ACP.<sup>3</sup> Massachusetts has a similar opportunity to lead on broadband adoption efforts by passing H.75 and creating the MDEBAP. NECTA and our member companies stand ready to partner with the Joint Committee on Advanced Information Technology, the Internet and Cybersecurity in these efforts.

We thank you for your time and attention to this testimony. Please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions.

Sincerely,

Timothy O. Wilkerson  
President

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.usac.org/about/affordable-connectivity-program/acp-enrollment-and-claims-tracker/#enrollment-by-state>

<sup>3</sup> <https://dhcd.maryland.gov/Broadband/Pages/Individual-Resources.aspx>

**About NECTA**

NECTA is a five-state regional trade association representing substantially all private cable telecommunications companies in Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont. Four NECTA members have a presence in Massachusetts, including Charter Communications, Comcast, Cox Communications, and Breezeline, which is headquartered in Quincy. Together, NECTA members invest over \$1.5 billion annually in the Commonwealth and employ over 6,000 residents throughout New England.