AARP Testimony in Support of
H.B. No. 6442
AN ACT CONCERNING EQUITABLE ACCESS TO BROADBAND

Energy and Technology Committee

March 9, 2021

AARP welcomes the opportunity to testify today in support of H.B. No. 6442, An Act Concerning Equitable Access to Broadband.

AARP is a nonpartisan, social mission organization with an age 50+ membership of nearly 38 million nationwide, and approximately 600,000 members here in Connecticut. AARP supports livable communities for all ages, aging in place initiatives, and financial opportunity and resiliency for everyone as they work age and retire. We are before the General Assembly every year on a multitude of bills that support these issues.

AARP supports H.B. No. 6442 because it includes multiple, well-articulated measures to facilitate broadband progress throughout the state. The bill is important to AARP because, among other things, it would help Connecticut achieve the important goal of ensuring that older residents have access to affordable, reliable, high-speed internet access.

Equitable access to broadband is essential to telecommuting and learning from home. That has become clearer than ever during the pandemic. During this time of high unemployment, it is essential to job searching and applying for work. It also enables older residents to age in place safely. Among other things, high-speed internet access allows older residents to overcome social isolation through virtual visitation with friends and family, and staying connected to houses of worship, senior centers, libraries and more. In multigenerational households, broadband services enable grandchildren to learn remotely. Broadband services enables telehealth, which is particularly important for those living in rural areas, far from medical services, as well as those throughout the state for whom receiving health care in person may present challenges, and for those who can benefit from remote monitoring and diagnostics.
The COVID-19 pandemic has put a spotlight on the essential nature of high-speed internet access and the shortcomings of the current network in Connecticut. Even after the pandemic fades, affordable, ubiquitous and reliable high-speed internet access will be as important as ever to older persons and those in distressed areas. H.B. No. 6442 creates a visionary blueprint to guide Connecticut toward a broadband-connected state.

**Among the bill’s strong points are:**

- **Consumer protection measures.** The bill includes various important consumer protection measures such as credits for outages; directives to enhance pricing transparency; and oversight of consumers’ complaints regarding broadband services. These are all important directives. It can be confusing to understand the wide array of fees, one-time charges, monthly prices, equipment fees, bundled and unbundled options, and contract terms. Transparency regarding pricing is critically important so that consumers understand the services they are purchasing.

- **Measures to enhance broadband reliability.** The bill includes network resiliency requirements, including, among others, a mandate for a proceeding to examine the resiliency of telecommunications and broadband networks and services. Given the essential nature of broadband service, it is critically important that broadband networks be resilient and reliable.

- **Data-driven policy-making.** The bill would contribute to more effective and equitable use of public monies by bolstering the state’s mapping capabilities. It is well recognized that accurate information about which households, businesses, and communities have the option to subscribe to broadband service and which ones don’t is critically important to the prudent use of any local, state, or federal subsidies for broadband deployment. In addition, the Act requires broadband providers to file an annual report to various state agencies and the Legislature concerning their operations within the state. The report must include information about the availability of service, speeds in each service area, service outages, and other requirements that PURA determines. **This mandate could be greatly enhanced by requiring providers to submit data regarding numbers of subscriptions, in a geographically granular way – to assess any areas of “non-adoption”**.

- **Digital equity.** The important goal of digital equity is implied in the bill, which seeks to “ensure that broadband Internet access service is available and affordable on a nondiscriminatory basis for all segments of the state’s population, regardless of income, race, ethnicity, and religion.” **This language could be modified slightly to encompass the concept of geography, that is, regardless of where people live; they should have affordable, available high-
speed internet access. The bill appropriately direct state agencies, “in carrying out the provisions of this act” to consider, among other things, “the extent to which their programs or policies provide for affordable, high-speed broadband Internet access service that is vital to the welfare and development of our society.” AARP welcomes this mandate, which implicitly incorporates the important goal of digital equity in the state’s vision for broadband. As a related point, the Act could be modified to refer specifically to the term “digital equity” – this is a concept that has gained significance and recognition throughout the country. Again, AARP recognizes that the Act implicitly reflects the goal of digital equity (if the Act is modified to include a reference to geography/location).

Ways to improve the bill:

AARP has identified various ways that the bill could be strengthened, including some that are italicized above. We identify some of those here today. However, let me add that although we have specific suggestions for how to improve the bill, we believe that the strengths of the bill outweigh its weaknesses and are hopeful that the Legislature will adopt our recommendations.

- **Broadband is an essential service.** The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated unambiguously that broadband is an essential service. The bill should make that finding.
- **Granting explicit oversight.** The bill’s language could be strengthened by explicitly granting state oversight of broadband service providers. For example, AARP agrees that providers should be consulted in the development of reporting requirements, but the bill should require providers to submit information requested by the Office of Policy and Management. As AARP interprets the bill, providers’ submission of data is voluntary.
- **Broadening the data collected and analyzed.** AARP fully supports the accurate and detailed mapping of broadband availability that the bill requires, but recommends that the mapping mandate encompass adoption data. It is important not only to identify those parts of the state where broadband is unavailable, but also to identify those communities where the adoption rates are low. This is important to tailor public policies appropriately (e.g., subsidies, and digital literacy).
- **Consumer input.** The bill could be strengthened by including a mechanism for consumer input in broadband policymaking (e.g., through consumer representation on an advisory council).
• **Provisions to enhance broadband affordability.** The bill appropriately recognizes affordability as an element of the state’s broadband future. However, the bill lacks mechanisms and programs to achieve affordability. The high price of broadband service deters many from adopting broadband even where it is available. AARP offers two suggestions for addressing this gap in the bill:
  o The bill could include language mandating relevant state agencies to monitor and analyze Connecticut’s experience with the recently established federal Emergency Broadband Benefit Program to assess ways in which Connecticut can learn from and build off this foundation for achieving affordability goals.
  o The bill could either assess broadband providers a small fee to support subsidies for low-income broadband users, or, in the alternative, require relevant state agencies to assess the feasibility of such an assessment and to report to the Legislature within one year.

• **Digital Literacy.** In order to achieve digital equity, the state should offer grants to libraries and community organizations to offer digital literacy training, with the training tailored to the relevant broadband users (e.g., people of various ages, English proficiency, and abilities).

**Summary**

AARP supports the H.B. No. 6442 because it is comprehensive, recognizes the importance of and sets forth a blueprint for achieving ubiquitous affordable high-speed internet, and delegates the determination of some technical matters to the appropriate state agencies. AARP urges the Legislature to adopt AARP’s specific suggestions on how to strengthen the bill yet further.