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**THE SENATE  
STATE OF ARKANSAS**

**CHAIR:**  
PUBLIC HEALTH, WELFARE AND LABOR

**VICE-CHAIR:**  
JOINT BUDGET

**MEMBER:**  
LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL  
INSURANCE AND COMMERCE  
EFFICIENCY  
JOINT PERFORMANCE REVIEW

May 21, 2020

The Honorable Asa Hutchinson  
Governor of Arkansas  
State Capitol Building, Room 250  
Little Rock, Arkansas 72201

Dear Governor Hutchinson:

As you laid out in your State of the State address for the 2020 Fiscal Session to the members of the General Assembly and to the citizens of our state, access to high-speed internet through broadband is essential to our future. We share this priority and believe it is the most important work we could do as government leaders to leave a lasting impact on the future development of our economy and for our citizens.

As this pandemic has unfolded, it is clear that many areas of our state were woefully underserved for the demands of transitioning to educating at home, working from home, and remaining safe from COVID-19.

Education, healthcare, agriculture, commerce (thank goodness we finally enacted the online sales tax before this hit), church, weddings, and just everyday connections for families who had to be separated all have depended in some way on access to high-speed internet. In 1936, Congress passed the Rural Electrification Act. We are now at that same juncture in history where our future depends on the ability to connect through broadband and high-speed internet.

Our entire healthcare infrastructure was saved from collapse in many instances probably thanks to the policies you issued through Executive Order. Telemedicine for phone to phone office visits, behavioral health, therapy, the ability to be paid for these visits, have allowed individuals, particularly the elderly, to stay at home and not be exposed unnecessarily to the coronavirus. Some homes have broadband and devices, but many in rural Arkansas do not. But neighbors and family members have rallied to assist.

K-12 education has been a huge issue as some areas were able to transition their students to online learning, while others simply relied on AMI packets. Many students in rural Arkansas do not have broadband at home and therefore, did not have the same level of education as others who did. Clearly, this is a huge concern for many of us. The only way we resolve this is to deploy broadband to homes and ensure every student has a device provided to them by their schools. One school we know of is utilizing their federal funding to purchase chrome books for their students; however, they cannot solve the issue of lack of broadband to their homes without our help. Without broadband, the Chromebooks cannot be fully utilized.

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And clearly, commerce has been greatly impacted and businesses in many sectors have had to transition to online services and capabilities. This demand is only going to increase, whether we are still living with the virus or not.

Time is of the essence, as there are looming federal deadlines for various grants that many areas in our state are eligible for under the current FCC maps. We cannot afford to wait. Using valuable state dollars to leverage the hundreds of millions of federal dollars available for our state is consistent with fiscal policy we utilize throughout our agencies. We also must use ALL resources available to us to solve this problem. There simply is not enough state general revenue alone to reach our goal.

This spring there were deadlines on our ability to weigh in on the FCC maps outlining broadband capacity, which defines our eligibility and could hamper the amount of money we could receive. We are unaware if we weighed in on this process or not, but this is one example of the critical timelines before us and why we need to move now to use all of our resources available to us to accomplish this priority.

Communities are meeting as we speak, including Lonoke County, Yell County, Perry County, Saline County and others throughout the state. We have engaged with the Municipal League, Association of Counties, Arkansas Farm Bureau, the Electric Cooperatives and some Rural Arkansas Telecom Providers who are helping communities around the state to organize and apply for the federal grants. They are ready to unleash their leaders to help solve this problem for our state. They need our help and the Rural Broadband ID Program is the help they need right now.

We are asking for you to fully fund the Rural Broadband ID Program at the request of \$2 million from the Rainy Day Fund, the Long Term Reserve Fund, the COVID-19 Rainy Day Fund or from the CARES ACT Funding. Appropriation for this request already exists with the passage of the special language amendment for the UAMS appropriation bill. The program, which is housed with UAMS, Office of Digital Health and Innovation, allows for them to use their expertise in assisting these communities and internet providers to help navigate the federal application process, identify the most reliable partners available to use for the due diligence requirements, such as feasibility studies, etc., and to issue the grants. We did not write an administrative fee component into the program for them; however, we recognize their value in this process. They received a generous administrative fee for the AR Rural Connect Program, but we do believe there is a need for an additional administrative / navigator fee needed for their work, which would need to be added to the \$2 million for the grants. This administrative fee would require an additional appropriation I believe. Dr. Curtis Lowery and his team have already engaged with many stakeholders, are working to implement this program and help our state meet the needs of our citizens. As he puts it, "We have climbed these mountains and we have to use our experience, expertise and knowledge to help others climb this mountain." He gets it. His team is incredibly passionate to combine their efforts for seeing that both of these programs are successful and we move our state from the bottom to the top in home broadband access.

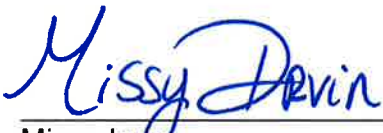
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We also believe the AR Rural Connect program will be important to meet the needs of the areas that are NOT eligible for the federal grants, and needs to be increased if possible. If the CARES Act funding can be used for the AR Rural Connect Program and the Rural Broadband ID Program, then lets do it as soon as possible. If only the AR Rural Connect Program can be funded through CARES Act and not the Rural Broadband ID Program, then please shift that expenditure from the Long Term Reserve Fund to the CARES ACT fund and use a state GR account to fund the Rural Broadband ID Program. These two programs are companion programs, as they have different purposes and compliment each other to create a wider path to accomplish our shared goals. Both need to be acted upon as soon as possible, especially as we approach the fall with K-12 and higher education demands with an unknown future of living with COVID-19.

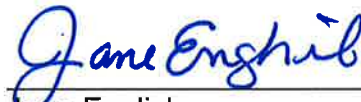
I believe the entire General Assembly is supportive of funding these efforts for increasing broadband access to homes. Act 198 from our 2019 Session, which prompted this program, passed with 99 votes. There was full support during the past 2020 Fiscal Session for the special language creating the Rural Broadband ID Program with both democrat and republican sponsors.

ALC meets next Wednesday and we believe this is an urgent need for our state. We also believe this will be a welcomed request by an overwhelming majority of our colleagues.

Sincerely,



Missy Irvin  
State Senator  
District 18



Jane English  
State Senator  
District 34



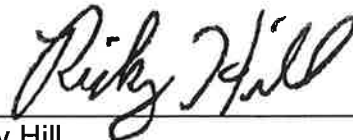
Linda Chesterfield  
State Senator  
District 30



Scott Flippo  
State Senator  
District 17



Breanna Davis  
State Senator  
District 16



Ricky Hill  
State Senator  
District 29

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Bruce Maloch  
State Senator  
District 12



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Dave Wallace  
State Senator  
District 22



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Bill Sample  
State Senator  
District 14

cc: Mr. Larry Walther, Chief Fiscal Officer of the State and Director of DFA  
The Honorable Jim Hendren, President Pro Tempore, Arkansas Senate  
The Honorable Matthew Shepherd, Speaker of the House, Ark. House of Representative  
The Honorable Cecile Bledsoe, Chair Arkansas Legislative Council  
The Honorable Jeff Wardlaw, Chair Arkansas Legislative Council  
Dr. Cam Patterson, Chancellor of UAMS