

Maine Broadband Coalition
Testimony in Support of LD 657: An Act to Modify the Law Governing Municipal
General Assistance by Designating Broadband Internet Access Service and
Wireless Access Point Technology as Basic Necessities
April 7, 2025

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services,

My name is Joe Oliva, and I offer this testimony on behalf of the Maine Broadband Coalition in support of LD 657.

The Maine Broadband Coalition represents a wide range of perspectives in Maine's broadband landscape but is fundamentally concerned with giving voice to internet users across the state to secure universal, affordable, and equitable access to broadband connectivity that serves both current and future needs.

Our support for LD 657 is based on the feedback that we hear on a daily basis from everyday Mainers – that the internet is an essential tool for accessing healthcare, education, and career opportunities.

The Affordable Connectivity Program was a federal subsidy designed to assist low-income Americans by reducing the price of internet connections. This program helped nearly 100,000 Maine households and families until its funding ran dry last spring. As the cost of everything rises on a nearly daily basis, we must find ways to support these households so as to lessen the gulf between haves and have-nots and give all Mainers a shot at accessing the services and opportunities essential for healthy and productive lives.

Further, we support the idea of amending the bill language to read as:

Basic necessities. "Basic necessities. "Basic necessities" means food, potable water, clothing, shelter, fuel, electricity, nonelective medical services as recommended by a physician, nonprescription drugs, telephone **and internet** where it is necessary for medical reasons and other commodity or service determined essential by the overseer in accordance with the municipality's ordinance and this chapter.

The proposed change to General Assistance (GA) language advanced by this bill would allow but not require municipalities to work with their residents on addressing this issue. While we understand and appreciate the argument that expanding GA to include the internet might increase municipal costs, we believe that access to the internet – with its ability to deliver essential services – is a necessity in the modern

world. Communities would not be required to expand GA for this purpose, but this bill gives them the opportunity to do so.

At the *very* least, internet service should not be categorized in GA as “misspent income”, and with improving technologies coming online, should be decoupled from the umbrella term of “cable”. Cable used to be considered entertainment and for the most part, it still is. But alongside cable, and often by the same companies, you have “Voice over Internet Protocol” (VOIP) phones and internet. It is the latter usages that allow people to be connected to society for telehealth, banking, and employment.

Affordable, high-speed internet is a resource that encompasses more than the ability to access social media and streaming services. Telehealth appointments mean that elderly Mainers or those living in rural areas can skip the sometimes day-long trips to see their doctor. Online educational programs and learning workshops mean that Mainers can gain the skills and knowledge critical to participate in the economy and in civic spaces. Remote work brings job opportunities and income into communities where they weren't before. Broadband internet opens the door to positive change in peoples lives that drive positive outcomes for municipalities, regions, and the state as a whole.

We are willing to assist the committee in any way that is helpful.