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Testimony of Assistant House Majority Leader Rachel Talbot Ross presenting
LD 1555, An Act To Fund Broadband Internet Infrastructure for Marginalized Groups in the State

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology

Senator Lawrence, Representative Berry and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology, my name is Rachel Talbot Ross. I represent House District 40, which includes the Portland neighborhoods of Parkside, Bayside, East Bayside, Oakdale and the University of Southern Maine campus. Thank you for the opportunity to present **LD 1555, An Act To Fund Broadband Internet Infrastructure for Marginalized Groups in the State**.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored and exacerbated so many of our society's structural inequities, including the so-called "digital divide." As work and school have moved online, the already alarming gap between those who have adequate access to broadband technology and those who do not has widened.

LD 1555 seeks to close that gap. It would appropriate \$15 million in funds to the ConnectME Authority to be used specifically for the benefit of marginalized groups, who are disproportionately impacted by a lack of access to broadband and necessary devices. It also directs ConnectME to consult with representatives of those communities in order to best determine how these funds should be used.

We often think of broadband access as an issue that only impacts rural, working class Mainers, and it absolutely is a pressing need in many rural areas. But, too often, we fail to recognize that a person's access to broadband, as well as the technology and the digital literacy needed to fully benefit from it, can be an issue no matter where you live in this state. Whether that's due to your street address, your background or your income, it is just as detrimental to your ability to access education and training, job opportunities, health care and more.

We are in the unique position of having the resources to truly address the digital divide, and I know that broadband access is a top priority for many of you on this committee. I ask that you support LD 1555 but also that you consider the digital divide and its impact on marginalized groups as you examine all broadband and access-to-technology proposals this session and in the future.

I appreciate your time and attention, and I look forward to working with the committee to address this important issue of equity in our state. I also want to note that I recognize we may need to provide more specifics around how these funds will be used and what partners should be at the table, and I am currently working with stakeholders to identify a path forward. Thank you.