



Testimony to the Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology

in support of

LD 1555, An Act to Fund Broadband Internet Structure for Marginalized Groups in the State

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Amy Winston, State Policy Director
CEI, Brunswick, Maine
Amy.Winston@ceimaine.org

Senator Lawrence, Representative Berry, and Distinguished Members of the EUT Committee:

My name is Amy Winston and I am the State Policy Director at Coastal Enterprises, Inc (CEI). I reside in Edgcomb and am testifying today on behalf of CEI in support of LD 1555, “An Act to Fund Broadband Internet Structure for Marginalized Groups in the State.”

CEI is a 43-year-old Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) with a mission of supporting good jobs, environmentally sustainable enterprises, and shared prosperity. We provide business advice and financing to approximately 2,000 entrepreneurs in Maine annually (3,000 in 2020), specializing in natural resource-based industries, such as farming, food manufacturing and fisheries, renewable energy, and downtown revitalization. CEI supports LD 1555 as a mechanism to closing the digital divide in Maine.

LD 1555 addresses the stark digital inequities that have become even more transparent and seriously urgent, with the coronavirus pandemic. Disadvantaged populations need affordable access to high-speed broadband, as well as the digital skills and literacy to be able to use it. Because the bill targets a wide range of populations, most of which are not geographically concentrated, it may be difficult to target investment in broadband infrastructure specifically to them. This may be possible for some of the tribal members. ho

In addition to physical network gaps, Brookings Institution attributes the digital hesitancy that is reflected in low subscription rates in rural areas and among underserved communities to limited digital skills and limited trust in digital resources as well as cost, which is cited as the #1 barrier to broadband adoption. Therefore, it is likely that a statewide digital equity program is needed to subsidize affordable use of existing infrastructure and provide hotspots to connect rural and low-income populations.

Fortunately, Maine already is a national leader in providing digital literacy skills. Classes and assistance in digital literacy are already available through the National Digital Equity Center. With largely private foundation support, this center serves all of Maine. Before the pandemic it was able to offer in-person classes. Currently, courses are focused on aging well, use of the internet at home, for education, and for work. To our knowledge, the center does not specifically partner with or tailor services to ethnically diverse, linguistically diverse, low-income, or other disadvantaged populations. Maine also has Give it,



[Get it](#), which offers an Affordable [Equipment](#) Program that provides no cost or low cost tablets and digital literacy classes to low and moderate income Maine residents.

In 2010, the National Broadband Plan¹ warned that “digital exclusion compounds inequities for historically marginalized groups,” and that “the cost of digital exclusion is large and growing.”

Vulnerable populations are at special risk of being excluded from the digital economy, due to skills gaps that have been exacerbated by rapid technological change. It is important for digital literacy instruction to be designed with inclusion and specific workforce needs in mind. Even when there is access to information and communication technologies and affordable connectivity, low-income and historically disadvantaged communities face significant challenges in acquiring the digital skills necessary to compete economically.²

Emerging literature on the appeal and efficacy of digital literacy instruction that show why people participate and the short and long-term benefits can be helpful for designing programs in Maine.^{3,4}

With the shift to “remote everything,” the coronavirus pandemic has increased the costs of exclusion. Other states and localities have statewide and municipal offices for Digital Equity and Inclusion that Maine could compare in determining how best to center equity objectives in its buildout of broadband infrastructure and services.^{5,6} A Maine Office of Digital Equity and Inclusion could be located within the proposed *Maine Connectivity Authority*, which would amend [LD 1484](#), *An Act to Enhance the ConnectMaine Authority’s Capacity to Provide World-class Internet*.

We support Grow Smart Maine’s recommendation that the state build on the foundation we have in Maine and work with regional and municipal organizations that know their communities the best. This work must be done collaboratively with historically disadvantaged groups in Maine to build trust and create interventions that directly benefit them.

Thank you for considering our testimony in support of LD 1555.

¹ https://nul.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/NUL%20LL%20DEIA%20041421%20Latimer%20Plan_vFINAL_1136AM.pdf?utm_source=sendgrid&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Newsletters

² <https://www.g20-insights.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/t20-japan-tf7-9-bridging-gap-between-digital-skills-employability.pdf>

³ Lev-On, A., Steinfeld, N., Abu-Kishk, H. and Pearl Naim, S. (2020), "The long-term effects of digital literacy programs for disadvantaged populations: analyzing participants’ perceptions", *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society*, Vol. 19 No. 1, pp. 146-162. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JICES-02-2020-0019>

⁴ <https://news.ku.edu/2019/01/16/researchers-develop-test-program-boost-digital-literacy-skills-populations-most-risk>

⁵ <https://www.brookings.edu/research/bridging-the-digital-divide-through-digital-equity-offices/>

⁶ [National Telecommunications and Information Administration \(NTIA\)](#)

