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Comments on the need to expand rural broadband in Indiana, 9/14/17

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments the issue of broadband access, specifically related to rural areas of the state.

First, we want to thank members of the Indiana General Assembly for supporting a modest increase in funding for Internet Connectivity for libraries and schools in the 2017-2019 State Budget. Indiana residents depend on the internet available in schools and libraries.

Access and Affordability

As we understand, about one in six Hoosiers does not have access to broadband and many more cannot afford it. While broadband is available in many areas, the cost is simply too much for the household budget when a family is trying to pay for rent, utilities, food, healthcare and transportation.

Need

Allow me to share some specific examples that bring to life the need for expanded broadband access from our perspective in libraries. There are 235 public libraries with a total 428 branches in Indiana, over 1,000 schools and over 120 colleges or universities. Many of these institutions provide access to students, parents, future employees, and taxpayers to their broadband internet. High-speed internet is required to submit homework, research a paper, apply for a job or renew your driver's license online. In many areas of the state, even wireless cell phone service is spotty, much less wired broadband access.

Let me give you three examples of how libraries attempt to fill the gap.

- Mobile hotspots are some of the most frequently borrowed items in many public libraries. They are loaned out just like books. A mobile hotspot allows the student to complete the research assignment at home...or the working parent to search and apply for jobs online from home.
- School and academic libraries are providing internet access so that students may complete homework, conduct research and submit assignments. Please remember that other policy decisions about online textbooks and one-to-one tablets may be complicated by the lack of broadband access around the state.
- Many public libraries have amped up their wi-fi access so that people may access the internet *from outside and after-hours*. Drive by the parking lot of many libraries after-hours to find people using the internet while the library is closed. You may see parents helping their children submit homework on their Chromebook because the school has gone one-to-one and the family does not have access to the internet. You will see Hoosiers searching for and completing online job applications or skills tests. You will see the odd-shift worker or rural farmer renewing their driver's license or professional license or paying their taxes online.

Access to high-speed internet is critical for student success, for skilling up in employment through online training or distance education, for finding and applying for jobs, for completing government transactions and for participating in the modern economy. **As you explore solutions for expanding broadband, please consider all the types of needs for all types of residents, many who still will not be able to afford what has become an essential utility.**

We sincerely appreciate the Indiana General Assembly's support of Indiana's libraries for the role libraries play in providing internet connectivity for those without access and who cannot afford it.