



**Hartford Foundation for Public Giving Testimony in Support of
Senate Bill 0514, An Act Establishing A Net Equality Program.
General Law Committee
February 19, 2025**

Good afternoon Senator Maroney, Representative Lamar, Senator Cicarella, Representative Rutigliano and distinguished members of the General Law Committee. **The [Hartford Foundation for Public Giving](#) is grateful for this opportunity to submit written testimony in support of Senate Bill 0514, An Act Establishing A Net Equality Program.**

Since 1925, the Hartford Foundation has proudly served as the community foundation for the 29-town Greater Hartford region. This year, the foundation celebrates 100 years of service and remains committed to building an even greater Hartford region. Over the past two years, we have distributed more than \$100 million in grants to promote equitable opportunity for all residents in our region. Made possible by the gifts of generous individuals, families and organizations, the foundation has awarded grants of more than \$1 billion since its founding.

As part of our strategic priorities to dismantle structural racism and advance equity in social and economic mobility in Greater Hartford's Black and Latine communities, the Hartford Foundation supports basic human needs in our region, applying an equity lens to the systems and programs that address access to food, stable housing, physical and mental health care, and the digital divide.

As you know, there has been a lack of access to computers and the internet in low-income communities for many years, which became more visible and acute during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2018, the Hartford Foundation awarded a three-year, \$297,00 grant to the [Hartford Public Library](#) in support of its "Crossroads to Connectivity" Project which was intended to increase internet access to low-income adults and local businesses. At the time of the award, more than 20,000 households and businesses in Hartford had no internet access. The Hartford Public Library reported that many individuals relied on accessing the internet at local branches to search for job listings, file online job applications, drivers' licenses, SNAP benefits, health insurance or to prepare for the GED. Internet access at the library is only available when the library is open, and users are limited to two-hour sessions. The movement to make more government services only available online added urgency to the need for easy and affordable access to the internet.

In some Hartford neighborhoods, small and medium-sized businesses were severely constrained by the lack of broadband infrastructure, limiting the quality and consistency of services they could provide to the community. Field surveys identified several businesses in Hartford's North End without access to reliable, high-speed internet. The Hartford Public Library project explored two strategies to narrow the digital divide in Hartford, with a focus on Hartford's North End. The project allowed low-income adults currently enrolled in a high school diploma or certificate training program to borrow a digital device and Wi-Fi hotspot from the library along with training on how to use it. The second strategy was to



use TV White Space technology to bring broadband access to Hartford’s North End, where slow and unreliable access stymies the success of small, locally owned businesses. TV White Space technology, also known as “super Wi-Fi,” performs much like regular Wi-Fi, but uses broadcasting wavelength frequencies to cover greater distances than wireless hot spots or cellular service. While this effort was modestly successful in connecting more people to the internet, it failed to address the large number of Hartford residents and businesses lacking access.

In July 2020, at the height of the pandemic, the Hartford Foundation, Dalio Education, and the City of Hartford launched \$3.8 million effort to install an extensive network of outdoor wireless access points across the city, providing a minimum of LTE-standard speed throughout the city at all times and at no cost to residents. This effort acknowledged that internet connectivity is not a luxury, but rather an essential part of people’s lives to support their education, employment and daily activities. The project sought to provide greater internet connectivity in the Northeast neighborhood and Frog Hollow and gradually extended into the North End, the South End, and the West End of the city. Unfortunately, supply chain disruptions and technological barriers prevented the project from being fully implemented.

While the pandemic has subsided, it has made permanent changes to how we live, and all of us are increasingly reliant on internet access to access vital services. We need to expand our definition of basic human needs to respond to the stark digital divide in our state. This is particularly true in Hartford where many neighborhoods have little to no access to high-speed internet connectivity. The foundation was proud to support the Hartford partnership and to see what it takes to expand connectivity. and we know more must be done to address the lack of access to internet services in our urban communities, but also rural areas as well.

The Hartford Foundation supports the intent of Senate Bill 0514 which bill establishes the "Net Equality Program" to ensure affordable broadband internet access for low-income households in Connecticut. The foundation recognizes the need to ensure that families with lower incomes have access to affordable broadband services, and this bill offers a thoughtful approach to addressing this need. While the foundation cannot speak to some of the specifics of the bill, it is incumbent that the state and internet service providers collaborate to ensure that all of Connecticut residents have the opportunity to have access to broadband services in an affordable and equitable manner.

Rising costs for housing, food, energy, medical needs and transportation exacerbate the ability of many low-income residents to cover their basic human needs. This measure will help alleviate some of the pressure as we know that lacking internet access only ensures that families fall further behind.

The foundation looks forward to continuing its work with policymakers, nonprofits, philanthropy, and residents to develop effective long-term policies that will ensure all Connecticut residents have basic human needs including access to broadband internet.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact our staff at policy@hfpg.org or 860-548-1888.