



Written Testimony of Elin Swanson Katz
Connecticut Consumer Council

Submitted To

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Energy and Commerce

Defining and Mapping Broadband Coverage in America

June 21, 2017

Chairman Blackburn, Ranking Member Doyle, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for allowing me to submit testimony and share my perspective on this important topic. As Consumer Counsel for the State of Connecticut, I serve as the consumer advocate on issues relating to energy, water, natural gas, and telecommunications, and lead the Office of Consumer Counsel (OCC), a small, independent state agency. I am also the agency head of the State Broadband Office, housed within the OCC. In this role, I have worked with many individual consumers, businesses, state and municipal officials, community-based advocacy groups, and industry stakeholders on identifying challenges and opportunities around broadband deployment in the State of Connecticut.

Our work in the state, and more particularly with municipal leaders, has highlighted the challenges faced by rural communities *as well as urban communities* in obtaining affordable broadband internet services for our citizens. While the challenges to rural communities are more widely documented and understood, the inability of many consumers in low-income urban centers, many of which have predominantly minority populations, to access affordable broadband internet service is less well-known or acknowledged, but is just as intractable a problem. National broadband policies and even the National Broadband Plan have discounted the importance of urban areas of low-income residents as being actually on a par with many rural areas for being restricted to low speeds at exorbitant prices. If there is a perceived “competition” for government funding between urban low income areas and rural areas of the US, in light of the obvious digital divide between persons of wealth or based on considerations of race, government support is equally important in urban areas because the high population density of cities has the potential to produce greater returns per dollar (i.e., “more bang for the

buck”). This higher proportional benefit to federal, state, and local governments should be seriously considered by this Committee in balancing the financial returns to the federal government and the social and economic effects on urban lower-income earners. Combined with the far greater proportion of persons of racial and ethnic differences found in many urban low-income areas, US government policy must not overlook the entire range of returns on investment that a focus on urban areas will yield.

For consumers without affordable broadband internet service, be they rural or urban, the lack of access impacts their lives in innumerable ways: it impedes their children’s ability to complete schoolwork and communicate with their teachers; prevents consumers from applying for jobs with the ever-growing number of companies that require online applications; serves as a barrier for critical governmental services that require online enrollment, such as Medicaid, Medicare, and unemployment benefits; and thwarts small businesses’ ability to develop websites, engage in online “e-commerce” and even provide basic services such as credit card processing, just to name a few impacts.

To document some of the challenges faced by our consumers, we commissioned the report, “A Brief Overview of Broadband Deficiencies in Connecticut,” published in January 2016 and linked [here](#). Specifically, we commissioned CTC Technologies of Kensington, Maryland, to conduct site visits at business locations in Connecticut and test available speeds to provide a small sample of broadband customer experiences. As detailed in the report, in Hartford, the state’s capital city, we received reports from city officials that many businesses and institutions within the city were limited to only low levels of service; hence, that was one of our focuses.

As just one example, Scotts' Jamaican Bakery is a commercial bakery with multiple locations in Hartford for food preparation and retail sales. At their central office located on Windsor Street in Hartford, speed tests found a download speed of 1.44 Mbps, an upload speed of 1.0 Mbps, a round-trip latency of 340 ms, and jitter of 364 ms. With these speeds and service quality – which are equivalent to dial-up internet service – the owner, Gordon Scott, reported that he does all but the most rudimentary Internet tasks from his house. He stated that it is frequently impossible to send or receive email at that location if the phones are in use.

The report also details other small businesses and a community-based organization in Hartford that faced similar challenges obtaining affordable broadband internet service, and were attempting to conduct their businesses on what amounted to dial-up speeds. These businesses are all located in low-income areas with predominantly minority populations.

Our report is not a comprehensive overview of rural and urban challenges with broadband access in Connecticut, but rather was intended to provide a “snapshot” of some small business experiences in select urban and rural areas, intended to spur dialogue about solutions. However, through my position as Consumer Counsel, both I and members of my office have interacted with over 100 municipal officials from the majority of our 169 cities and towns on the challenges faced by their consumers – individuals, businesses, community health care providers, community service providers, schools, libraries, and other stakeholders – in obtaining affordable broadband internet service.

The stories and anecdotes from the myriad of consumers demonstrates irrefutably that there is much work to be done to ensure that every citizen, including citizens in urban areas, has access to the digital economy. I commend the work of this Subcommittee, and thank you

for your attention to the topic of defining and mapping broadband coverage in America. We cannot solve this problem until we understand and acknowledge the full extent of the digital divide in our country and recognize that there are unique but distinct challenges for both rural and urban communities.