Written Testimony for the Record of

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Before the

California State Assembly

Committee on Communications and Conveyance

Regarding

"Digital Equity and the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program"

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Chairwoman Boerner, Vice Chairman Patterson, and members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting Next Century Cities to be a thought partner on this important issue. We are a non-profit, nonpartisan organization born of the need to elevate community-level perspectives into broadband policymaking at every level of government. Our organization is made up of over 200 member municipalities in over 40 states, including 32 localities in California. The mayors and other local officials in our network have unique expertise in expanding digital infrastructure and developing broadband adoption programs since many have had to confront those challenges on their own.

Over the last four years, Californians have learned the critical role that affordable, high-speed Internet plays in completing tasks and accessing the essential services we often take for granted. Education, healthcare, public safety, economic development, and staying connected to friends and family are now directly related to whether a resident has a reliable broadband connection and the tools to benefit from technology.

In California, approximately 10% of the population does not have reliable broadband access. That means that over two million households and individuals cannot search for jobs, utilize telehealth, work, learn, or get emergency information from home.

The Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment, otherwise known as the BEAD program, will provide an unprecedented funding opportunity to California and its communities to help close their digital divides. California's share of this 42 billion dollars in federal funding will inject over $100 million into infrastructure deployment and digital equity and inclusion programs statewide. For the BEAD program to reach its full potential the Assembly and CPUC must work in close collaboration with municipalities across the state. Historically, municipalities have had to address deployment, adoption, and inclusion efforts alone.

Access in Long Beach

For example, The City of Long Beach was working to close its digital divide long before the pandemic. In 2017, with the support of the Long Beach Community Foundation, the Long Beach Media Collaborative was formed to help understand the city's disparities in connectedness. Their research found that the city's disparities in broadband internet access correlated with race. Almost one in five Latin American, Hispanic, and Black or African American residents did not have broadband access at home.

To combat this, the city designed, planned, and implemented a citywide fiber-optic network that connected city facilities and delivered fiber backbone within two miles of any location in the city, increasing broadband for public and private internet use. The city also launched a digital

inclusion initiative that held workshops and pop-ups to better understand the lived experiences of residents that may have contributed to the city's digital divide. Five years later, almost 90% of households have a broadband subscription, and 96% of households in Long Beach have a computer.

Digital Equity in Chula Vista

The BEAD program is not just for the deployment of network infrastructure. It also centers equity and adoption amongst its central tenets. In determining how state digital equity plans should be constructed or how BEAD applications could weave in equity considerations, both the Assembly and the CPUC should look inward to the California communities that are leading the charge on these issues.

Chula Vista is a national leader in civic innovation. In June of 2020, the City released its Digital Equity and Inclusion Plan. Chula Vista's plan took a holistic approach to digital equity. Not only did the plan address who was impacted by the digital divide, but it also explored what systemic issues prolonged disconnectedness. The City learned that the common drivers of its digital divide were affordability, access to devices, and a need for digital literacy skills.

The report recommended numerous ways in which data could continue to be collected, the City's resources could be leveraged to lead outreach and digital literacy education efforts, and how to connect, equip, and train its community.

In addition to these recommendations, the report also suggested potential success metrics the City could use to gauge success. These metrics include percentage of connected adults, the cost of Internet access, device ownership percentage, and number of monthly digital literacy courses provided by the city, among many others.

Local leaders didn't stop there. Just last month the City began hosting roundtable discussions to inform a new Justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion program. With dedicated partners like Chula Vista, the State and CPUC can learn what types of data collections have worked and how to promote participation in many of the digital equity initiatives the BEAD program is designed to help create.

Finally, communities are natural problem solvers.

The City of Gonzales realized that as unemployment insurance applications, educational opportunities, and other municipal benefits migrated online, many of the City's ten thousand residents were unable to access them. As a result, at the beginning of the pandemic, the City deployed two thousand Wifi hotspots to keep its residents connected to critical services.

Similarly, in the City of San Rafael, when 39% of Canal neighborhood residents did not have broadband access at home and 57% of people do not own a computer, local leaders recognized broadband access as a bridge to government services and other benefits. They understood that reliable and affordable service would also enable residents to access emergency information during power outages, especially when their television or radios weren't working or if cell towers were down.

Local perspectives make state policies more effective. Communities continually find ways to fill in broadband gaps, particularly in areas with low economic returns. State officials should take BEAD's requirement to work with communities seriously. Doing so would help this body and the CPUC develop a state grant program that generates new, or builds onto, existing broadband infrastructure.

Conclusion

The BEAD program is designed to support affordable, long-term, high-quality infrastructure and the digital inclusion activities necessary to complement deployment programs. As California works to determine the best uses for this monumental funding opportunity, close collaboration with local officials, Tribal leaders, and community organizations is imperative for designing a program that addresses the root causes of the digital divide.