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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council  
Committee on Business, Consumer, and Regulatory Affairs  
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Public Hearing:  
B21-648, the "WiFi Task Force Act of 2016

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## **Introduction**

Good morning Chairman Orange and members of the Committee on Business, Consumer, and Regulatory Affairs. My name is Michael Villafranca. I am a Policy Associate at Children's Law Center<sup>1</sup> and a resident of the District. I am testifying today on behalf of Children's Law Center, which fights so every DC child can grow up with a loving family, good health and a quality education. With 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono lawyers, Children's Law Center reaches 1 out of every 9 children in DC's poorest neighborhoods – more than 5,000 children and families each year.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding the "WiFi Task Force Act of 2016." In today's society, access to high-speed Internet connections has never been more important. Access to some form of broadband connection is extensively available in the District;<sup>2</sup> however, there is a disparity between those with useful access and those with little to no access at all, commonly known as the "digital divide". As you stated in your press release, Chairman Orange, "the District should be aggressively pursuing ways to eliminate [this] digital divide,"<sup>3</sup> and we agree.

The District's low-income residents are impacted the hardest by the digital divide, especially our families in Wards 7 and 8. These families are often unable to afford home internet services, having to instead focus efforts on paying for more basic needs, such as food, housing, and transportation. Children within these low-income families are at a particular disadvantage when it comes to education, as more and more

school-related activities are going digital.<sup>4</sup> The use of free wireless internet access to reinforce educational programs could potentially have long-term benefits for the District's children. A municipality wireless network could also benefit job-seekers in DC by increasing their ability to access employment-related search engines and apply for jobs.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to education and employment, the ability to access government services is essential as federal, state, and local governments are continuing to move an increasing number of their services online. For example, according to the Pew Research Center, the Census Bureau is on track to go digital in its 2020 census survey.<sup>6</sup> In fact, if all goes as planned, they won't even send paper questionnaires to most households. Instead, its letter will include a unique security code and will urge people to use it to respond online.<sup>7</sup> For the District's low-income residents with limited means of accessing the internet, this could potentially lead to the underrepresentation of low-income DC residents in the data produced by the Census.

As you can see, the Internet can have a dramatic impact on the quality of life for residents in DC. Studying best routes to free wireless internet access is a step in the right direction toward narrowing the digital divide, here in the District of Columbia. We are hopeful that the task force created by the bill, if passed, will provide a comprehensive plan best fitted for the District, especially for those living in poverty.

## Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I welcome any questions.

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<sup>1</sup> Children’s Law Center fights so every child in DC can grow up with a loving family, good health and a quality education. Judges, pediatricians and families turn to us to be the voice for children who are abused or neglected, who aren’t learning in school, or who have health problems that can’t be solved by medicine alone. With 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono lawyers, we reach 1 out of every 9 children in DC’s poorest neighborhoods – more than 5,000 children and families each year. And, we multiply this impact by advocating for city-wide solutions that benefit all children.

<sup>2</sup> National Broadband Map, District of Columbia Summary, NTIA, data as of June 30, 2014, accessed April 2016. <http://www.broadbandmap.gov/summarize/state/district-of-columbia>

<sup>3</sup> See, Press Release (March 1, 2016), *Councilmember Orange Introduces Bill to Form WiFi Task Force*

<sup>4</sup> DC Office of the Chief Technology Officer, Connect.DC Digital Inclusion Initiative. (2015). *Building the bridge: A report of the state of the digital divide in the District of Columbia*, p. 8. Retrieved from [http://connect.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/connect/page\\_content/attachments/State%20of%20the%20Digital%20Divide%20Report.pdf](http://connect.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/connect/page_content/attachments/State%20of%20the%20Digital%20Divide%20Report.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Id.

<sup>6</sup> Cohn, D. (2016, February 24). For 2020, Census Bureau plans to trade paper responses for digital ones. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/24/for-2020-census-bureau-plans-to-trade-paper-responses-for-digital-ones/>

<sup>7</sup> Id.