



**Testimony submitted to the
Joint Committee on Advanced Information Technology, the Internet and Cybersecurity
In support of H.74/S.34, An Act to modernize funding for community media programming
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The League of Women Voters of Massachusetts (LWVMA), representing 44 local Leagues throughout the Commonwealth, strongly supports H.74/S.34, which would ensure sustainable funding for local community media programming by modernizing the way we fund this important community asset.

It is of the highest priority that we secure the funding future of community media programming to preserve this resource. Your constituents, their municipalities, and the Leagues of Women Voters who serve them rely on community media programming to ensure active and informed participation in, and transparent knowledge of, their local government.

It's no surprise that media consumption is rapidly changing; consumers are constantly searching for faster, cheaper services. Streaming services have been able to fill that demand by providing 24/7 instant access to media on our phones, tablets, computers, and TVs at a fraction of the cost of cable.

Predictably, as more consumers switch their subscriptions from cable to a streaming service, the revenue for cable providers drops. This decline in cable television revenue threatens the financial stability of local community media programming—our local community access stations. Historically, these stations and the infrastructure that supports them have been funded via a federally-mandated percentage of the cable providers' revenue.

In contrast, streaming services use the infrastructure that was put in place to deliver cable and internet service to our homes and businesses, yet neither funds the infrastructure nor contributes funds to our local community media.

The citizens of the Commonwealth rely on their local community access stations to stay informed and to participate in local government. The disappearance of local newspapers in many communities has made local community access stations an increasingly important source of information for our residents.

In recent years, local community access stations have expanded their portfolio of viewing options to include not only live and recorded cable broadcasts, but also subscription-free, live-streamed programming and video-on-demand options via the Internet. This has increased public access by allowing viewers to access content for free on any device, anywhere throughout Massachusetts—or even the world—where they have access to an Internet connection.

The impact of this upgrade is profound. Business travelers can stay connected to important local meetings from around the world. Students and teachers can access content from their classrooms. A constituent in the hospital can watch a public hearing from their phone or tablet. Residents of limited income can access programming from a local library computer. Residents with disabilities can use devices and assistive services that help them to access the content. Busy working parents can watch school committee meetings

on demand during their morning commute on the commuter rail.

Municipalities rely on community media programming to serve their residents and to protect and support the citizens' right to know. Municipalities rely on local community access stations to broadcast, stream, record, and preserve Town Meetings, town forums, public hearings, and innumerable board, committee, subcommittee, commission, and council meetings.

During the worst of Covid, municipalities depended on local community access stations to facilitate and support the rapid transition to remote municipal meetings. Post-pandemic, community access stations will be integral partners in the transition to innovative hybrid formats that combine in-person and remote participation in municipal meetings, hearings, and forums. Increased access to local government depends upon this municipal partnership with local community access stations.

Similarly, the Leagues of Women Voters around the state rely on their partnership with local community access stations to produce and make widely available programs that support an active and informed electorate. League candidates' forums consistently rank among the community access stations' highest-watched video-on-demand programming, and voters frequently report that candidates' forums and other League programming had a direct impact on their voting decisions. In Sudbury, the programs for the most popular contested races typically receive around 400 on-demand views each year—in addition to the cable broadcast views—for elections in which fewer than 2,000 voters cast their vote.

The League also encourages active participation in local government by partnering with their local cable access station to produce and make widely available programs that help potential candidates understand the process for exercising their right to run for office. The Sudbury League's "How to Run for Office" program has received 1,888 on-demand views since 2018 and has been viewed by both those interested in becoming candidates and local teachers supporting civics education in our public schools.

In addition, the League's partnership with local community access stations allows the Leagues of Women Voters in Massachusetts to provide a wide range of informational programming related to issues of direct importance to their communities. Past forums have included information and resources on urgent issues like youth mental health, opioid addiction, racial and social justice, environmental justice, and gun violence prevention.

The League of Women Voters believes that democratic government depends upon the informed and active participation of its citizens at all levels of government and that governmental bodies must protect the citizen's right to know by giving adequate notice of proposed actions, holding open meetings, and making public records accessible.

Community media programming is integral to achieving these goals but will not survive unless the way in which we fund it is updated. The League of Women Voters of Massachusetts and our 44 local Leagues serving over 100 communities from Cape Cod to the Berkshires urge you to report H.74/S.34 swiftly and favorably out of committee to ensure adequate funding to support the survival of this vital community asset. This is an urgent and intelligent investment in the future of our democracy.

We thank you for your consideration.