



March 17, 2024

Chair Frentz and Members of the Senate Energy, Utilities, Environment, and Climate Committee:

On behalf of 300,000 union members who live and work in communities across Minnesota, we are writing to urge you to support raising standards for broadband installation, including requiring the use of a skilled, well-trained workforce to ensure worker and public safety, and to protect the integrity of existing public and utility infrastructure. SF 4742/HF 4659 will increase transparency, ensure use of responsible contractors, and incentivize high-road labor practices including requiring payment of living wages and provision of high-quality health and retirement benefits and hands-on training.

Reliable high-speed internet service is essential to Minnesotans well-being and access to education, health care, job opportunities, and other critical services. Over the next several years, the State of Minnesota hopes to receive and re-grant more than \$650 million in Federal funding to broadband providers, in addition to more than \$100 million in state funds, fueling well over \$1 billion in total investment in broadband infrastructure. We strongly support Minnesota's goal of providing universal high-speed internet connections to families and businesses in every corner of the state, but we need to do it right.

Many broadband installation workers are paid substandard wages, lack health and retirement benefits, and receive no formal training. Inexperience, lack of training and pressure to work quickly contribute to mistakes that jeopardize the safety of workers and members of the public along with the integrity of existing public utility infrastructure. Contractors that install broadband and other data lines are estimated to be responsible for thousands of incidents of third-party damage to public and utility infrastructure annually.

Minnesota's current broadband grant program lacks meaningful protections for workers and largely fails to consider job quality or investments in workforce development when awarding grants. In evaluating applications and awarding grants, Minnesota should give priority to applicants that commit to implementing industry workforce best practices such as payment of prevailing wages, provision of employer-paid family health insurance and retirement benefits, and skills training including hands-on instruction.

SF 4742/HF 4659 will strengthen safety for broadband workers and infrastructure. As we work to close the digital divide, we urge you to target public investment toward projects that provide family-supporting jobs and built to last.

Sincerely,

Bernie Burnham  
President

Brad Lehto  
Secretary-Treasurer