FREE GEEK

Including everyone in our digital future

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Dear Chair Barker and Members of the House Committee On Business and Labor:

My name is Sara Rasmussen and I am the Digital Inclusion Manager at Free Geek in Portland. I'm here to testify on the critical importance of House Bill 2688 to Oregon's communities. Why does Free Geek care about House Bill 2688 (Right to Repair)? Because it will help Free Geek in the mission of closing the digital divide. For those who haven't heard: The digital divide is the gap between folks who have a personal computer, broadband internet, and digital skills— and those who don't. This divide affects many people: children, rural families, people with disabilities, recently arrived refugees, seniors—the list goes on.

Free Geek provides devices and digital skills training to our vulnerable community members. That includes Kimberly, a single mom who received a laptop she's using to go back to school at Portland Community College. We're connecting refugees like Peh with a laptop to learn English online, and seniors like Vasiliy, with a laptop to video chat with grandkids far away. Vasiliy, who I met at classes hosted with Rockwood Library, said to me, "Computers are your ticket to the whole world!" Technology is essential to everyday life, no matter who you are, and we all stand to benefit from it.

So, what does this have to do with Right to Repair? Currently, Free Geek must reverse-engineer every new type of device that we we receive. Through this process, we often break devices in order to understand them. It's not logical, it's unnecessarily challenging, and it's simply a waste of resources.

By contrast, Right to Repair helps Free Geek in closing the digital divide, as it allows us to do our work as a technology refurbisher more effectively. Free Geek is diligent: We have a rigorous testing and quality assurance process. We offer an excellent warranty and a return policy for our products. But we're servicing technology with no manual. We're driving with no map. Right to Repair will help us save time and costs as a nonprofit making the most of the limited resources we have. It will also help Free Geek source parts. We have closets of useable computers without the right battery. I'm just waiting to give these devices to low-income kids in our community, ensuring they have the tools to complete their homework at home. The barrier? It's incredibly difficult and expensive to source the right battery. Right to Repair would solve this challenge for us.

Looking towards the future: Right to Repair will exponentially grow Free Geek's ability to refurbish smartphones and tablets. With access to schematics, diagnostics, manuals, and parts sourcing, we could reuse more mobile devices with genuine parts, and get them into the hands of people who need them. These devices are the future, and as technology evolves, Right to Repair will help us continue to serve our community. Ultimately, it's not just about batteries or the laptops we're putting them in. Right to Repair can contribute to closing the digital divide.

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Finally, repair is a viable job pathway, and Right to Repair opens a door to more jobs. We hire Oregonians as refurbishment technicians—and we pay them a living wage. Moreover, Free Geek's Tech Support Services are essential to keep computers going for the people who rely on them. We provide hands-on training in a structured Tech Support internship to dozens of people every year. Our interns gain meaningful customer service, troubleshooting, and of course, repair skills. They go on to pursue careers in IT or even start their own business in device repair. One of our interns, James, completed his 6-month internship and was recently hired by local IT service company. It's a cycle that serves our clients, and our trainees, too.

Right to Repair will protect and foster the critically important digital equity services Free Geek provides to our community. Thank you for your time.

With gratitude,

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