



September 13, 2017

PROTECT THE LIFELINE PROGRAM

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Anti-Defamation League

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Vanita Gupta

Dear Senator:

On behalf of The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, a coalition charged by its diverse membership of more than 200 national organizations to promote and protect the rights of all persons in the United States, and the undersigned organizations, we urge you to protect and defend the Lifeline program against threats to weaken and eliminate it. The Lifeline program allows our nation's most vulnerable and chronically underserved communities to obtain broadband Internet and telephone service that would otherwise be unaffordable. Cost is the primary barrier to broadband adoption and Lifeline is the only national program dedicated to helping low-income families bridge that gap.

Our nation's communications policy is based on the fundamental principle of universal service for good reason: people need affordable communications services to connect with their communities for job opportunities, medical services, educational advancement, 911 emergency response, and civic participation. In the 21st century, Internet access is necessary in order for children to get a good education and to have a fair chance to succeed and to fully participate in our nation's political, social, and economic life. In the information age, home broadband is essential for children to do their homework and for workers to be competitive in a global economy.

Thus, it is no surprise that there is widespread bipartisan support for the need to provide broadband for all people in the United States:

- 75 percent of the public agree that everyone needs the Internet in the 21st century economy
- 70 percent of the public agrees that the federal government should assist low-income families to help them afford the cost of Internet access.¹

Lifeline is a successful public-private partnership, with more than 12 million participants as of last year, at least 3.5 million of whom are receiving broadband after the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) modernized the program. In 2016, the FCC—after significant support from the civil rights, public interest communities, and business community—modernized its Lifeline program to include broadband services, offering, for the first time, a modest financial subsidy to low-income people who cannot afford access to the Internet. There continues to be a great need for the Lifeline program. Even among low-income families who are connected, huge numbers suffer from low-quality service, intermittent service, or are cut off when they cannot afford the cost.²



While critics have focused on alleged fraud and abuse as a reason to eliminate or limit the program, these critiques ignore the reforms already adopted that safeguard the program. Lifeline modernization involved sweeping reforms, including minimum standards obligations, additional cost-control measures, and a budget of \$2.25 billion annually. These reforms are rapidly being implemented and are the most effective way to safeguard the program and ensure that program funds go to families in need. Implementation of the newly adopted independent eligibility verifier begins this year and will be complete by the end of 2019. Other reforms designed to admit additional broadband providers to the program will promote competition in order to improve quality of service and lower costs.

However, FCC Chairman Ajit Pai has taken steps that are jeopardizing the Lifeline program rather than strengthening it. For example, under his direction, the Commission revoked approvals for Lifeline Broadband Providers (LBPs) —blocking innovative business models for low cost high quality services for low-income people that the Lifeline modernization order intended to spur.³ Until the Commission addresses the Lifeline broadband ETC approval process, Lifeline broadband providers are on hold. In addition, Chairman Pai’s FCC has refused to defend last year’s Lifeline order in court.⁴

Broadband is rapidly replacing voice service as the basic communications tool for our era. The FCC should defend and implement the modernization adopted last year and act quickly to add stability, predictability, and competition to the program. Broadband non-adoption still hovers at between 20 and 30 percent of the U.S. population, depending on the survey, and on the types of wired and wireless connections defined as broadband. The non-adoption rate is even higher for seniors, Latinos, African-Americans, and recent immigrants. Increasing broadband adoption will improve the economic well-being of those populations as well as the economic competitiveness of our country as a whole.

We urge you to protect and defend Lifeline and to reject the spate of unsubstantiated and outdated attacks on the program. Please contact Leadership Conference Media/Telecommunications Co-Chair Cheryl Leanza, UCC OC, Inc., at 202-904-2168 or Corrine Yu, Leadership Conference Managing Policy Director, at 202-466-5670, if you would like to discuss the above issues.

Sincerely,

The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights
Access Humboldt
Advocates for Basic Legal Equality
American Civil Liberties Union
American Library Association
Appalshop
Asian Americans Advancing Justice – AAJC
Benton Foundation
Center for Media Justice
Center for Rural Strategies
Common Cause
Common Sense Kids Action
Communications Workers of America



Free Press Action Fund
The Greenlining Institute
Hollaback!
Institute for Local Self-Reliance
KRSM Radio
Media Alliance
Media Mobilizing Project
NAACP
National Consumer Law Center, on behalf of its low-income clients
National Digital Inclusion Alliance
National Guestworker Alliance
National Hispanic Media Coalition
Native Public Media
OCA - Asian Pacific American Advocates
Open Access Connections
Open Technology Institute
OpenMedia
OVEC-Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition
The People's Press Project
Public Knowledge
United Church of Christ, OC Inc.
Urbana-Champaign Independent Media Center
Working Narratives

¹ Freedman Consulting, New Poll – Americans Support Increased Internet Access, Affordability, and Competition (July 10, 2017) available at: http://tfreedmanconsulting.com.routing.wpmanagedhost.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Tech-Policy-Poll-Summary-Final_20170710.pdf

² Victoria Rideout, Vikki Katz, “Opportunity for All?” at 5 (Joan Ganz Cooney Center, 2016).

³ Letter from the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights to Chairman Ajit Pai, WC Docket Nos. 09-197, 11-42 (March 16, 2017).

⁴ Statement of Chairman Ajit Pai (March 29, 2017).

http://transition.fcc.gov/Daily_Releases/Daily_Business/2017/db0329/DOC-344129A1.pdf