

March 20, 2020

Chairman Ajit V. Pai  
Commissioner Michael O’Rielly  
Commissioner Brendan Carr  
Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel  
Commissioner Geoffrey Starks  
Federal Communications Commission  
445 12th Street, SW  
Washington, DC 20554

Re: Docket Nos. 11-42, 09-197, 96-45, 17-287

EMERGENCY REQUEST FOR INCREASED LIFELINE SUPPORT  
DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Dear Chairman Pai, Commissioners O’Rielly, Carr, Rosenworcel and Starks:

As the United States is facing an unprecedented emergency, with almost all Americans—old and young—required to work, learn, and function while staying at home, the need for connectivity across the country has never been greater. Internet and telephone access are extremely urgent at this time as families stay at home to protect public health and struggle to recreate their lives online. Existing disparities in communications access are only being exacerbated during this national emergency. The Chairman’s Keep Americans Connected Pledge and Federal Communications Commission’s (“FCC” or “Commission”) decision to temporarily waive recertification and reverification requirements for existing Lifeline customers were laudable first steps in the early days of the crisis, but more is needed as the extent and length of the emergency becomes evident. The undersigned organizations therefore request the FCC immediately take the following actions to adapt the Lifeline program to meet the COVID-19 crisis:

- Immediately prohibit disconnections of Lifeline consumers;
- Within no more than one week, require Lifeline providers to offer unlimited voice minutes and unlimited texting and commensurate voice-only financial support; and
- Within no more than 21 days, create an emergency Lifeline broadband benefit.

Lifeline is the only existing program designed to help low-income consumers afford essential communications services. The program design can quickly be ramped up to provide additional services and benefits to help households acting in accordance with national directives to maintain social distance while also receiving health care, continuing work, participating in distance learning and providing mutual aid and support.<sup>1</sup> Immediate action is needed. Our organizations are hearing urgent requests from frontline public health providers, legal services, public housing authorities and others that highlight the public health threat from limited Lifeline minutes. For example, just this week a community health care professional was alarmed to see many low-income patients coming in-person to the clinic because they could not afford to use voice minutes to call ahead. And public housing authority workers reported elderly Lifeline tenants rationing their Lifeline minutes to their detriment. Public health and the economy will be severely impacted if millions of low-income people do not have access to adequate telephone and Internet connections.

The Commission has ample precedent to take this action to protect the most vulnerable members of our society. In 2005, the Commission acted in response to Hurricane Katrina. Six

weeks after Hurricane Katrina hit, the Commission issued an emergency order making support available for wireless service for the first time and drawing upon existing emergency designations to determine who was eligible for support.<sup>2</sup> The Commission should draw on this precedent to take the steps described below to adopt emergency measures starting immediately and ending 30 days after COVID-19 emergencies cease.<sup>3</sup>

***Prohibit disconnections of Lifeline customers.*** Lifeline customers should not lose access during the COVID-19 crisis and for a reasonable period (e.g., 120 days) after the crisis. The Commission should immediately eliminate the non-usage rule and should continue its waiver of the recertification and reverification requirements for the full length of the emergency.<sup>4</sup>

***Unlimited voice minutes, unlimited text and commensurate voice-only support.*** Within one week, the Commission should immediately require unlimited voice minutes and unlimited texting until the crisis is over. At the same time the Commission must also temporarily increase voice support to a level sufficient to cover the increased minutes. Further support for phones that can tether or offer hotspots would also ameliorate current limits on broadband access.<sup>5</sup> A monthly benefit of \$25 would be sufficient support all three increases.

***Emergency Lifeline Broadband Benefit.*** Within no more than 21 days, the Commission should create an Emergency Lifeline broadband benefit for low-income households for \$50 per month to fill in the gaps once the initial corporate commitments for 60 days of free service end. An adequate broadband service to the home would provide 100 megabits per second downstream/10 megabits per second upstream to allow for multiple members of the household to have the connectivity necessary for two-way video.<sup>6</sup> To be eligible, such products should not include any waiting period for service or prohibitions for consumers with arrearages. The Commission should forbear from the obligations that broadband providers be designated ETCs.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to these actions, emergency Lifeline assistance should easily be available to households that have experienced a sudden drop in wages due to the COVID-19 crisis. While federal benefits programs are likely to see a rapid influx of participants and thus many will be able to rely upon existing program eligibility rules, the Commission should adopt rules that will streamline access for households impacted suddenly by the COVID-19 emergency.<sup>8</sup>

The temporary expansion of Lifeline benefits described here will fulfill the Communications Act, advances the Congressionally mandated goals of universal service and is in line with Commission precedent.<sup>9</sup> Millions of people in this country must stay home in order to limit the spread of the coronavirus and it is in our country's national interest to continue as much of our economic and civic life as possible during this time. In the near-term telephone and Internet access will be necessary for health care, employment, the national census, primary elections, education and more. We strongly urge the Commission to act immediately. Our organizations are willing and able to collaborate to ensure these actions are as timely and successful as possible.

Sincerely,

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<sup>1</sup> Presidential Coronavirus Guidelines for America, available at [Coronavirus.gov](https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-declaring-national-emergency-concerning-novel-coronavirus-disease-covid-19-outbreak/); Proclamation on Declaring a National Emergency Concerning the Novel Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Outbreak, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-declaring-national-emergency-concerning-novel-coronavirus-disease-covid-19-outbreak/>.

<sup>2</sup> In the Matter of Federal-State Joint Board on Universal Service et al., 20 FCC Rcd 16883, Docket Nos. 96-45, 02-6, 02-60, 03-109, FCC 05-178 (2005) (“*Katrina USF Order*”). The Commission drew upon the universal service goals in Section 254(b) and made a finding of good cause shown under its rules. *Id.*, ¶¶6-7 (citing 47 U.S.C. § 254(b); 47 C.F.R. § 1.3; *Northeast Cellular Telephone Co. v. FCC*, 897 F.2d 1164, 1166 (D.C. Cir. 1990)). The Commission authorized \$130 for a minimum of 300 minutes and an additional \$30 benefit for initiating service to any person approved for individual FEMA housing assistance or determined by FEMA to be eligible for such individual housing assistance. *Id.*, ¶¶11-14.

<sup>3</sup> If the emergency is located in various regions of the country in the future, rather than nationally, the Commission should make these emergency benefits available in any state or locality where an emergency has been declared.

<sup>4</sup> Wireline Competition Bureau, *Covid-19 Lifeline Order*, WC Docket No. 11-42, DA 20-285 (rel. Mar. 17, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Increased data for devices offering hotspots where wired Internet is not available should also be considered.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Sallet, *Broadband for America’s Future: a Vision for the 2020s*, (Benton Institute for Broadband & Society), [https://www.benton.org/sites/default/files/BBA\\_full\\_F5\\_10.30.pdf](https://www.benton.org/sites/default/files/BBA_full_F5_10.30.pdf). The Commission should also consider supporting access to devices as it authorized support for handsets in the *Katrina USF Order* at ¶¶17, 22.

<sup>7</sup> The *Katrina USF Order* used Section 10 forbearance to adopt a streamlined certification process in lieu of eligible telecommunications carriers (ETCs) designation so additional carriers could receive universal service support during the crisis. *Id.*, ¶¶19-21.

<sup>8</sup> For example, program participants could demonstrate eligibility if they can document a layoff or an unemployment application, combined with a self-certification that it is connected to the COVID-19 crisis.

<sup>9</sup> The Communications Act’s goal is to “make available, so far as possible, to all the people of the United States, without discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, or sex, a rapid, efficient, Nation-wide, and world-wide wire and radio communication service with adequate facilities at reasonable charges, for the purpose of the national defense, for the purpose of promoting safety of life and property....” 47 U.S.C. §151; “Consumers in all regions of the Nation, including low-income consumers and those in rural, insular, and high cost areas, should have access to telecommunications and information services....” 47 U.S.C. §254(b)(3).