



May 14, 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: In the Matter of Bridging the Digital Divide for Low-Income Consumers — WC Docket No. 17-287

PETITION DELIVERY IN SUPPORT OF INCREASED LIFELINE SUPPORT DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

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

The COVID-19 crisis continues to wreak havoc on the physical and economic health of the nation. Tens of thousands of Americans have died and continue to die. Millions have been thrown out of work as the pandemic has forced many businesses to close. As a result, the unemployment rate reached nearly 15 percent last week, a number not witnessed since the Great Depression of last century.

Millions more have shifted to working from home. The education of our young has moved online. Those in need of medical care have been asked to utilize telehealth services as a safer option to in-person visits. All of these functions and more require access to a reliable and affordable broadband internet connection. Yet, too many Americans—some suggest as many as

one in four—either do not have access to a broadband internet service or cannot afford one.¹ Unfortunately, the current pandemic has exposed just how pervasive and persistent the digital divide is in 2020.

Last month, Access Now and Consumer Reports distributed an online petition with a simple ask:

We urge you to immediately expand broadband internet access in response to the coronavirus pandemic. Millions of people in the United States must stay home in order to limit the spread of COVID-19, and without internet access, communities at risk who were already struggling economically will be hit the hardest by this national emergency. It is up to you to ensure that everyone can afford critical communication services during this devastating crisis.

More than 63,000 concerned citizens signed our petitions and their names are attached to this letter for the record.

We appreciate the Chairman's early action to commit internet service providers, large and small, to the Keep Americans Connected Pledge, which, among other things, ensures consumers who cannot keep current on their monthly service bills will not see their service terminated. But more can and should be done.

In a letter sent to the FCC that was signed by hundreds of nonprofit public interest groups dated March 20, 2020, several proposals to bolster the Lifeline program to better serve Americans in dire need of assistance during the COVID-19 crisis were laid out for consideration.² The suggestion to create an emergency Lifeline broadband benefit bears repeating and we urge the Commission to act upon them immediately because decisive action is required to help the millions of Americans who are not able to get online at a time when communication tools have never been so critical. The FCC can and must do more to make broadband internet services available and affordable for those who need it most through existing programs like Lifeline.

¹ Monica Anderson, *About A Quarter Of Rural Americans Say Access To High-speed Internet Is A Major Problem*, Pew Research Center (September 10, 2018); available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/09/10/about-a-quarter-of-rural-americans-say-access-to-high-speed-internet-is-a-major-problem/>

² Access Now, et. al, Letter to the Federal Communications re: *Emergency Request For Increased Lifeline Support During The Covid-19 Crisis* (March 20, 2020); available at: <https://mediajustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Lifeline-Emergency-Request-Covid-19-3-20-20.pdf>

The current crisis has painfully laid bare the haves and the have-nots on either side of the digital divide. To be sure, those without reliable internet service need to be able to access education, work, and critical medical care online as much as anyone else.

We again strongly encourage the Commission to do more to help the most marginalized Americans access the internet which has become more essential than ever.³

Sincerely,

/s/ Jennifer Brody
Legislative Manager
Access Now

/s/ Jonathan Schwantes
Senior Policy Counsel
Consumer Reports

³ A nationally-representative survey conducted by Consumer Reports in April, 2020, found that “Most Americans (80%) agree or strongly agree that internet service is as important as electricity or water service.” Copies of this survey to review are available upon request.