

**DISSENTING STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER JESSICA ROSENWORCEL**

Re: *Bridging the Digital Divide for Low-Income Consumers*, WC Docket No. 17-287; *Lifeline and Link Up Reform and Modernizations*, WC Docket No. 11-42; *Telecommunications Carriers Eligible for Universal Service Support*, WC Docket No. 09-197

The future belongs to the connected. No matter who you are or where you live you need access to modern communications to have a fair shot at 21st century success. But the fact of the matter is that today too many Americans lack access to broadband.

Last year, the FCC decided to do something about it. It took a hard look at the Lifeline program, which got its start in 1985, when President Reagan was in the White House and nearly all communications involved a cord. It updated this program—which was about helping low-income households secure access to telephony—and refocused it on broadband. I think this was the right thing to do. I think this was the modern thing to do. That’s because Internet connections are the dial tone of the digital age.

If you want an object lesson in why this is true, consider kids and homework. Today, seven in ten teachers assign homework that requires broadband access. But data from the FCC show that as many as one in three households do not subscribe to Internet service. Where those numbers overlap is what I call the Homework Gap. According to the Senate Joint Economic Committee, the Homework Gap is real. By their estimate, it affects 12 million children across the country.

Let me tell you what it looks like. I have sat with students in Texas who do homework at fast food restaurants with fries—just to get a free Wi-Fi signal. I have listened to students in Pennsylvania who make elaborate plans every day to head to the homes of friends and relatives just to be able to get online. I have heard from high school football players in rural New Mexico who linger in the school parking lot after games in the pitch-black dark because it is the only place they can get a reliable connection. These kids have grit. But it shouldn’t be this hard. Because today no child can be left offline—developing digital skills is flat-out essential for education and participation in the modern economy.

You know what could help the Homework Gap? The Lifeline program could help—if properly reformed and refocused on getting broadband to low-income households, including those with kids in school.

But instead of thinking about the future and doing something modern, today the FCC sets out to slash it from front to back.

Instead of honoring our statutory duty to support low-income consumers, we cast them aside and cuts them off.

Instead of taking into account the millions of dollars that have already been spent on a new system of national verification to reduce waste, fraud, abuse, we discard its possibilities before we even begin.

Instead of reviewing new in-depth audits, we toss them in the trash rather than use them to inform change.

Instead of recognizing that there are Lifeline enrollees in Texas, Florida, and Puerto Rico who are using the program to pull their lives back together after devastating storms, we seek to cut off their Internet and phone service.

Instead of consulting with Tribal authorities about changes to Lifeline that impact native communities, we hang up on the least connected.

Instead of helping out the veterans who rely on Lifeline for jobs, health care, and reacclimating to civilian life, we turn them away.

Instead of assisting the low-income elderly with access to modern communications, we deny them service.

Instead of helping kids do their schoolwork and navigate the Homework Gap, we disconnect their signal. We deny them a fair shot at future success.

This is not real reform. This is cruelty. It is at odds with our statutory duty. It will do little more than consign too many communities to the wrong side of the digital divide.

I dissent.