

**Remarks of FCC Commissioner Mignon L. Clyburn (as prepared)**

**“The FCC’s War on the Poor”**

**Voices for Internet Freedom Coalition**

**Washington, D.C.**

**March 8, 2018**

Thank you to Francella for that wonderful introduction, and to Joe, the Voices for Internet Freedom Coalition, thank you for convening this briefing on the anti-consumer actions instituted by the FCC majority over the past year. I am proud to stand with you, Representatives Moore and Waters, as well as my colleague, Commissioner Rosenworcel, for voicing disapproval about what can only be categorized as an attack on the economically poor.

The last time we spoke, you kindly permitted me to go off-script, to talk about how the FCC is proposing to destroy the Lifeline program. Now that proposed rollback is centerstage, along with my key priority, inmate calling service reform.

But, I am heartened that the public outcry about the majority’s assault on Lifeline is coming from nearly every corner. The American Enterprise Institute, a bastion of free-market conservative thought, even criticized the majority’s proposed ban on resellers in the program saying, and I quote: “far from improving Lifeline, this proposal is likely to undermine the program and harm the vulnerable populations that the program seeks to serve.”

Then there are the consumers healthcare providers, telecommunications providers, librarians, and more, who put on the record in the Lifeline proceeding, scores of stories of why the majority is headed in the wrong direction. Whether it is the “poor tax” proposal that would ban free service offerings, the elimination of the Lifeline Broadband provider designation that makes it easier for competition to enter the market, or the funding cuts and punitive cap on the amount of money spent on lifting up the economically disadvantaged, parties opposed have weighed in and on the record, loud and clear.

Without Lifeline, where will people who cannot afford three meals a day turn, to get vital phone service that allows them to put a phone number on their resume? How would they pay for that critical broadband connection, so their child can do their homework? And for those who repeatedly suggest that some recipients would pay for service without the subsidy, did their research also include how many times that service was suspended for nonpayment, how much consumers owe that pay day lender to maintain service, or how many meals were missed during the course of a week?

And while it may be clear to those assembled here, that the FCC needs to pump the brakes on gutting Lifeline, what it does need to hit the gas on is inmate calling services reform. During the previous Administration, the FCC acted—amid fierce resistance—to rein in egregious rates and ancillary charges for inmate calling services. But amid a half-hearted defense in the courts last year and then a voluntary remand, we now have no comprehensive federal rules on the books protecting inmates and their families from a regime that puts families in the poorhouse and ossifies the cradle-to-prison pipeline. Even now, some areas of the country have rates as high

as \$24 for a 15-minute call and last year, during a Congressional hearing, Chairman Pai promised Senator Booker that he would act. We are all still waiting.

I am grateful to the states and localities that have enacted inmate calling reform. And today, Senators Duckworth, Portman, Booker, and Schatz have introduced legislation that should make a meaningful difference in the lives of inmates and their families. And I would be remiss if I did not also mention Congressman Rush, who has pushed on this issue for years. We must continue to raise awareness, and chip away at this tragic injustice bit by bit, but until those in power stop ignoring this issue, millions will continue to suffer and all of us will ultimately pay the price.

That is why I remain grateful to the Coalition, for convening today's discussion, and carrying on the fight for those who are so disadvantaged, that they cannot even afford to be heard. We cannot hang our heads, and wring our hands while those in need sink deeper into those digital canyons. And we cannot get discouraged or weary because the battle is not over when it comes to the fight for #PhoneJustice.

Continue to push back, against those seeking to close the door for civic and economic opportunities. Continue to make your voices heard. I, for one, am proud to stand with you and I join the faithful and the mighty in thanking you. That arc for justice is bent in our direction and we will keep pushing until those who have yet to enjoy justice are able to bask in it.

Thank you.