

November 15, 2017

Mr. Ajit Pai
Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, S.W.
Washington, DC 20554

Dear Chairman Pai,

We are alarmed to learn of your recently circulated proposals that would eviscerate the Lifeline program and leave many of the most vulnerable people in the country without access to affordable communications. As you are well aware, the Lifeline program provides a modest monthly subsidy of \$9.25 to connect low-income Americans to phone and internet services. As broadband prices continue to soar and affordability continues to suffer, adoption gaps remain. The Lifeline program has proven critical for poor families and people of color who are caught on the wrong side of the digital divide.

Among the most troubling proposals you suggested are overall budget caps on the program that could shrink the size of all recipients' benefits, as well as a lifetime cap on individual users that could completely cut off those still in need. These caps are both extremely harmful, as these changes could inflict arbitrary limits on participation or slash funding to eligible participants; and unnecessary because the program has been shrinking for the past 5 years and payments are their lowest since 2009. In your dissenting opinion in the 2016 Lifeline Reform Order, you conceded that the reforms implemented in the 2012 Lifeline Order were working and as a result, spending for the Lifeline program has been on a steady decline.¹ Given the effectiveness of driving down program costs without undue harm to recipients, which unfortunately were not reflected in a recent May 2017 GAO Report on the program, there is no need to implement an arbitrary cap.

Another troublesome proposal would ban "non-facilities-based providers" from participating in the program. This would eliminate participation by 4 of the top 5 Lifeline providers, accounting for more than half of the program's current expenditures, and possibly zero out participation by carriers serving as much as three quarters of the current Lifeline subscriber base. In some parts of the country these are the only providers that offer Lifeline service. Shutting them out would leave Lifeline-eligible families in these regions with no viable way to get online.

The proposals would also end support for carriers that might offer only a standalone broadband product, requiring them to offer traditional voice service too. While we are in favor of continuing

¹ https://apps.fcc.gov/edocs_public/attachmatch/FCC-16-38A5.pdf

to support voice offerings, it is backward-looking and illogical to force carriers to provide it in order to qualify for broadband support.

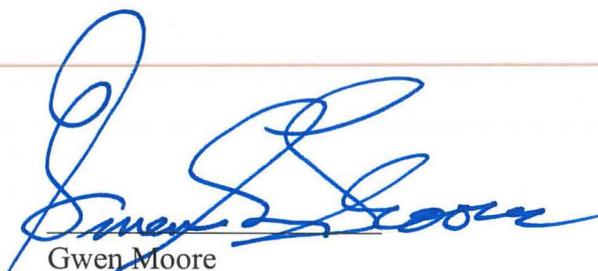
Lifeline was created 30 years ago by President Reagan, and updated in major fashion twice (under Presidents George W. Bush and Obama) to help ensure the most vulnerable people in America had access to lifesaving communications services. Recent updates—including the National Lifeline Accountability Database and the National Eligibility Verifier Program, which should be fully implemented by 2019—have successfully helped to both limit fraud and decrease spending.

If your newly proposed changes were implemented, they would jeopardize access for countless individuals who use the internet to look for employment and educational opportunities, to access social services, or to find crucial health information. You promised from your first day on the job earlier this year that you would aim to close the digital divide. Yet, taken together, these disastrous changes would constitute a huge step backwards in closing the digital divide. Thank you and we look forward to receiving your response.

Sincerely,



Gregory W. Meeks
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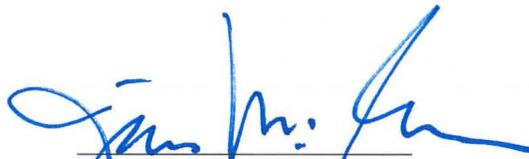
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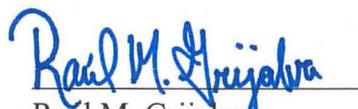
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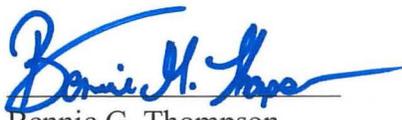
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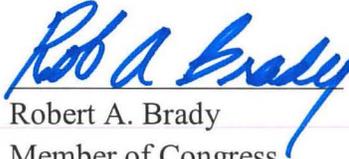
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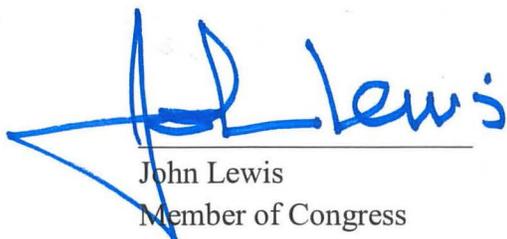
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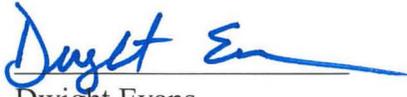
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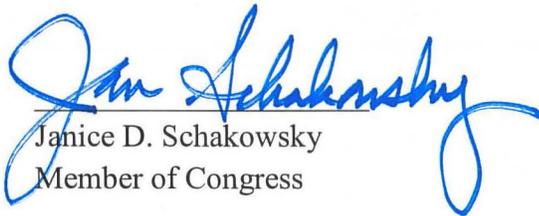
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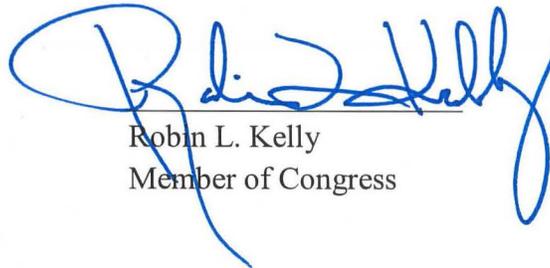
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