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For Immediate Release**FCC WAIVES RURAL HEALTH CARE AND E-RATE PROGRAM GIFT RULES TO PROMOTE CONNECTIVITY FOR HOSPITALS AND STUDENTS DURING CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC*****Waiver Will Enable RHC and E-Rate Program Participants to Obtain Free Broadband Connections and Devices for Telehealth and Remote Learning During COVID-19 Outbreak***

WASHINGTON, March 18, 2020—The Federal Communications Commission today announced important changes to the Rural Health Care (RHC) and E-Rate programs that will make it easier for broadband providers to support telehealth and remote learning efforts during the coronavirus pandemic. Specifically, the FCC’s Wireline Competition Bureau has waived the gift rules until September 30, 2020 to enable service providers to offer, and RHC and E-Rate program participants to solicit and accept, improved connections or additional equipment for telemedicine or remote learning during the coronavirus outbreak.

Commission rules prohibit entities eligible for the RHC and E-Rate programs from soliciting or accepting any thing of value from a service provider participating or seeking to participate in those programs. Today’s waiver will allow health care providers, schools, and libraries to accept improved capacity, Wi-Fi hotspots, networking gear, or other equipment or services to support doctors and patients, teachers and students, and librarians and patrons during the coronavirus outbreak. For example, some providers have expressed interest in providing free network upgrades for hospitals that need more robust connections to treat patients via telemedicine and free connected devices and hotspots for students who will be taking classes at home. This waiver will enable them to do such things.

“The increase in COVID-19 patients is presenting unique challenges to America’s hospitals and health care providers,” said Chairman Pai. “Telemedicine will play an increasingly critical part in treating patients and helping health care providers maximize their impact on their communities. Similarly, as the number of school closures continues to grow, schools are increasingly turning to remote learning for students who will be home for an extended period of time.

“By waiving certain FCC rules today, we are giving service providers the chance to step up and give health care providers more tools to fight the ongoing pandemic and serve patients more effectively, like increased capacity, more equipment, additional services, and other tools that will help them deliver the best possible patient care. And we strongly encourage service providers and equipment makers to partner with schools and libraries to provide mobile hotspots and other broadband-enabled devices to students to help bridge the digital divide during the coronavirus pandemic. I expect that these private-sector efforts will complement the Commission’s ongoing work with Congress to appropriate funds for a Remote Learning

Initiative and a COVID Connected Care Pilot—programs that would allow us to use federal funds to support in-home equipment for patients and students impacted by the coronavirus pandemic.”

Today’s waiver constitutes the latest step in the FCC’s efforts to ensure that Americans benefit from communications technologies in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. Last week, Chairman Pai announced the Keep Americans Connected Pledge, under which broadband and telephone providers committed to not terminate service to any residential or small business customers because of their inability to pay their bills due to the disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic; waive any late fees that any residential or small business customers incur because of their economic circumstances related to the coronavirus pandemic; and open their Wi-Fi hotspots to any American who needs them. Additionally, Chairman Pai called on all network operators to prioritize the connectivity needs of hospitals and health care providers and those that serve schools and libraries to work with them on remote learning opportunities.

For more information on the FCC’s actions related to the coronavirus pandemic, including the full list of signatories to the Keep Americans Connected Pledge, visit:

<https://www.fcc.gov/coronavirus>.

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