

**STATEMENT OF COMMISSIONER JESSICA ROSENWORCEL FEDERAL
COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION ON AGENDA MEETING
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It is hard to put into words the anxiety that is gripping us across the country. I know because I feel it, too. This cruel pandemic has crashed our economy, filled our hospitals, emptied our public spaces, and tested our communications like nothing before. Millions of Americans have applied for unemployment benefits. Millions more are balancing an impossible load of work, school, and childrearing as we keep tabs on the news and strive to create some new normal. Again, I know because that's my life, too. It has also become a routine part of my life to wake every morning and express gratitude that my family is healthy and safe.

This is an uncertain time. But here's one thing I know for sure: We are more resilient than we feel. It may be the curse of the optimist, but I believe that in the United States when we fall we rebound, when we see crisis we mobilize, and when we are challenged we overcome with uncommon courage and extraordinary grace.

If you need proof, you will find it in people all around us—the nurses and doctors on the frontlines; the men and women working in our grocery stores, delivering to our homes, and cleaning our shared spaces; the public safety officials who are always on call; and the 911 operators who organize response to this crisis.

We are grateful, too, for those who keep communications up and running. We are thankful for those who broadcast the news and the broadband providers that have opened their networks, lifted data caps and fees, and promised not to discontinue service.

Above all, I want to give thanks to the dedicated employees of the Federal Communications Commission, noting especially Matthew Berry and Mark Stephens, who have led the staff response to COVID-19. I know we have tragically already lost one member of the FCC family. So to our staff: Know you are in our thoughts and prayers. We hope you are hand washing and social distancing, because this crisis has given us truly urgent work to do together. This nation is online like never before and counting on communications like never before. So kudos to those providers that have worked with this agency, expanding service offerings and committing to not cut any customer off. And good for this agency when it has waived rules in our programs to make it possible for more people to get the communications services they need. These are positive things.

We can do more.

It's not time to be timid. We need to use all of our powers in this crisis.

We have the authority right now to extend the reach of broadband and close the Homework Gap so we connect millions of children who desperately need to get online for school. We have the authority right now to track network outages so when gaps in capacity exist, we can manage them. We have the authority right now to extend the Keep Americans Connected pledge so those with pre-paid plans are covered too. We have the authority right now to extend Lifeline to all those who are newly in need. We have the authority right now to require

that new funds for our telehealth initiatives are distributed fast and fair, without playing favorites—as I fear we are seeing elsewhere in the national response.

I hope we can do this. I hope we can move forward together. I hope we can meet this moment. Because the future belongs to the connected and I want to see this agency help all of us get there.

It's a tall order. So here are five ideas about what the FCC can do right now to keep us moving forward.

First, as more Americans are told to stay home, the FCC should study how broadband networks are faring under the stress of more intensive use and publish these findings daily. Broadband providers are facing unprecedented pressure to deliver reliable connectivity as more of our economy shifts online. The changes in broadband consumption may reveal weak points in the complex ecosystem of companies, services and products that make up the Internet. The FCC should use this opportunity to understand how our networks are performing and stay ahead of potential problems—because if we wait for those problems to be reported to us, it is already too late.

Second, the FCC should advocate for keeping our telecommunications workforce safe. The Department of Homeland Security correctly listed telecommunications workers as essential during the coronavirus response. But right now, it's hard for frontline field personnel to get the protective equipment they need to do their jobs safely—things like masks, sanitizer, gloves, and more. We need to start thinking now about how to fix that if we want our networks to stay up and running.

Third, the FCC should extend any upcoming and non-essential deadlines so that everyone can focus on what matters most right now—responding to this crisis. No one should be prevented from having their opportunity to participate in an FCC proceeding as a result of this public health emergency. To that end, I am pleased to see that the FCC has extended the time for the public to prepare for and participate in its upcoming auctions of the 3.5 GHz band and construction permits in the FM broadcast service. But these same challenges are impacting Tribal communities too, and I would like to see the FCC extend the 2.5 GHz Rural Tribal Priority Window as well, so that every rural tribal community has an equitable opportunity to receive spectrum licenses too.

Fourth, the FCC should work with providers to eliminate data caps and overage fees. Many providers have committed to doing so already, but we should build on and expand these efforts. With Americans working from home, videoconferencing, playing games, chatting with friends, and streaming movies, we must rethink how we count bandwidth and data usage.

Fifth and finally, we should use all of our universal service powers to meet this crisis head on. The FCC has rightly extended some deadlines for its E-Rate and rural healthcare programs, made certain the amount of rural health care funding available for the current funding year, and relaxed its gift rules. This was good, but there's more that we can do.

We can work with health care providers to ensure essential telehealth services are available for hospitals, doctors, and nurses treating coronavirus patients and those who are quarantined. Congress just directed \$200 million to the FCC to assist with telehealth. We need to move fast and be fair with getting this funding out the door where it is needed. As the news makes all too clear, now is not the time to play favorites when it comes to federal resources. This effort can make a real difference. In fact, one hospital in Washington state is already sending some patients home with a thermometer and pulse oximeter so that doctors can remotely monitor their condition. This is smart because it frees up hundreds of beds and reduces exposure to health care workers and other patients. So I look forward to getting this effort underway. As the agency simultaneously tackles its Connected Care Pilot, we should also be mindful that the effectiveness of telemedicine can best be demonstrated if the FCC is fair in its selection of projects all across the country. Again, it's not time to play favorites.

We can explore other changes to put the Rural Health Care program to work. This begins by getting decisions for the last funding year out the door immediately and considering whether there's more that we can do to confront increased bandwidth demands. Moreover, we need to get to work on connecting hospitals and patients just as the FCC did in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and just as Senator Maria Cantwell has asked us to do. We should also consider whether other changes such as modifications to the discount rate and budget will be necessary, as Senator Brian Schatz and other Members of Congress have suggested.

We can take direct action to close the Homework Gap. There are over fifty million students that have been sent home from school as a result of the response to coronavirus nationwide. Millions of these students fall into the Homework Gap because they do not have broadband access at home. The stories are everywhere. Last week, *The New York Times* featured a heartbreaking story about Allia Phillips, a ten-year old honor student in New York, who is struggling to keep up with her classwork because the homeless shelter that she resides in does not have Wi-Fi. While Allia and her family are piecing connectivity together for her schoolwork where they can find it, they are not alone. Across the country the virtual classroom is locked for millions of students. School has shuttered but they can't join class online because they do not have internet access at home. We need to do everything in our power to help these students get the connectivity they need. We have a sound statutory basis to do so through the E-Rate program. In fact, this agency has even done this in the past on a trial basis. That means today the FCC could use E-Rate to provide schools with wi-fi hotspots to loan out to students who lack reliable internet access at home just as Senator Ed Markey and other Members of Congress have urged us to do. Their call has been echoed by AASA—the Superintendents Association, the American Federation of Teachers, the American Library Association, the Association of Educational Service Agencies, the Association of School Business Officials International, CoSN—the Consortium for School Networking, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the International Society for Technology in Education, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Association of Independent Schools, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the National Association of State Boards of Education, the National Catholic Education Association, the National Education Association, the National PTA, the National Rural Education Advocacy Consortium, the National Rural Education Association, the National School Boards Association, State Educational Technology Directors Association, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and many other organizations, not to mention over 7,500 teachers, principals, superintendents, school board

members, and education technology directors. In short, we can fix the Homework Gap. We can make sure no child is left offline.

We also can do more with our Lifeline program. Last week, it was announced that 3.3 million people filed unemployment claims. That's a record. As the coronavirus places new strains on our economy and households across the country, we need to make sure that no one is left behind when it comes to communications. While the FCC has rightly taken action to avoid loss of service for individuals presently on Lifeline, there's more that we can do. Now is the time to take meaningful steps to make sure that the program is available to all who need it and delivers the service that this moment demands. Just as hundreds of groups have recommended, we should look to increase the availability of voice and data as well as consider other emergency measures to support greater broadband access during this time of crisis.