



FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
WASHINGTON

OFFICE OF
THE CHAIRMAN

April 24, 2020

The Honorable Edward J. Markey
United States Senate
255 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Markey:

Thank you for your letter regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. During this crisis, it is critical that Americans maintain connectivity so that they can stay in touch with loved ones, telework, participate in telehealth and remote learning, and maintain the social distancing necessary to slow the spread of the coronavirus. I'm committed to using every resource at the FCC's disposal to deal with this unprecedented national emergency.

As you may know, last month, the Commission asked Congress to provide us with emergency telehealth funding. At a time when our country is facing unprecedented challenges, telemedicine services have never been more important, and I'm thankful Congress included \$200 million in the CARES Act for the FCC to establish a COVID-19 Telehealth Program to help health care providers provide connected care services to patients at their homes or mobile locations in response to COVID-19. Following enactment of the CARES Act, I immediately presented a COVID-19 telehealth proposal to my fellow commissioners, and they unanimously voted to approve the item. On April 2, 2020, the Commission released the Order establishing the COVID-19 Telehealth Program which will provide immediate support to eligible health care providers responding to the COVID-19 pandemic by fully funding their telecommunications services, information services, and devices necessary to provide critical connected care services until the program's funds have been expended or the COVID-19 pandemic has ended. Our primary goal is to roll out the \$200 million on an expedited basis in order to help healthcare providers and patients alike. Using a streamlined application process, the Commission will make decisions on applications as rapidly as possible on a rolling basis, and in making funding decisions we will have a preference of awarding funding to areas hardest hit by COVID-19 as well as to projects geared toward high-risk and vulnerable patients, including those most in need of engaging in social distancing.

In just over three weeks, the Commission implemented new rules for this new program, created the application process, opened the application window, and provided invoicing guidance for applicants that receive funding commitments. The COVID-19 Telehealth Program application portal has been open since April 13, and at this time we have received hundreds of applications. Unsurprisingly, there's tremendous interest in and demand for COVID-19 Telehealth Program funding for connected care services. Consistent with my intention for the Commission to make funding determinations as expeditiously as possible, we've approved three sets of funding requests since April 13, supporting 17 health care providers in 10 states for a total

of \$9.5 million in funding. The Commission will continue to evaluate applications and will distribute additional funding on a rolling basis.

The Commission is also working to ensure Americans stay connected with broadband or telephone connectivity during the COVID-19 outbreak. Specifically, I have asked broadband and telephone service providers to take the Keep Americans Connected Pledge. The Pledge includes a 60-day commitment: (1) not to 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; (2) to waive any late fees that any residential or small business customers may incur because of their economic circumstances related to the coronavirus pandemic; and (3) to open a company's Wi-Fi hotspots to any American who needs them. To date, over 700 broadband and telephone service providers across the country, including all of our nation's largest providers, have taken the Pledge and thus agreed to take these concrete steps to help Americans stay connected for the next 60 days.

I have also asked companies to go above and beyond the Pledge and take additional steps to maintain connectivity during the pandemic. For example, I have asked broadband providers to improve their low-income broadband programs, relax data caps where appropriate, and enhance remote learning and telehealth opportunities. I am pleased with the response that I have received. For example, Comcast is increasing broadband speeds for Internet Essentials (low-income) customers from 15 Mbps to 25 Mbps, offering broadband service for free for 60 days to new Internet Essentials customers, and offering all customers unlimited data for 60 days. AT&T is providing all consumer home Internet wireline customers, as well as Fixed Wireless Internet customers, with unlimited Internet data. It is also expanding eligibility to its Access from AT&T (low-income) program to households participating in the National School Lunch Program and Head Start and offering new Access from AT&T customers two months of free service. Charter is offering up to 100 Mbps broadband service for free for 60 days to new households with K-12 and/or college students and waiving installation fees for such households. And Verizon is offering low-cost 200 Mbps broadband to low-income households, waiving voice and Internet charges for Lifeline customers for two billing cycles, and tripling the data usage limit for students in Title I schools that are part of the Verizon Innovative Learning Program.

The Commission has also taken a number of steps to help meet connectivity needs through the Universal Service Fund (USF). For example, the Commission unanimously adopted my February proposal to fully fund all eligible Rural Health Care (RHC) Program services for the current funding year with an additional \$42.19 million in funding. On March 26, we took additional action to assist RHC Program participants, including extending the RHC Program application window until June 30, 2020, easing competitive bidding requirements for health care providers with expiring evergreen contracts and extending deadlines for responses to inquiries from the Universal Service Administrative Company (USAC). The Commission's action will help ensure that rural healthcare providers have the resources, as well as the flexibility, they need to promote telehealth solutions for their patients.

The Commission provided relief and flexibility to hundreds of rural broadband and telephone providers to immediately waive consumer fees. This includes late payment fees as well as installation and cancellation fees for consumers signing up for or switching Digital

Subscriber Line (DSL) broadband providers in order to work from home or access remote learning.

We've also announced extensions of key E-Rate service implementation and filing deadlines to provide relief to program participants affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. Specifically, we waived the service implementation deadline for special construction for all funding year 2019 applicants and extended this deadline by one year to June 30, 2021. To further assist E-Rate participants, we previously extended the E-Rate application filing window for Fiscal Year 2020 to April 29, 2020 to address potential delays caused by COVID-19. These extensions will alleviate administrative and compliance burdens on schools and libraries and enable them to focus on transitioning to remote learning during the pandemic.

We have implemented other actions such as waiving our gift rules governing the RHC and E-Rate programs until September 30, 2020, to enable service providers to offer, and hospitals, schools, and libraries to solicit and accept, improved connections or additional equipment for telemedicine or remote learning during the coronavirus outbreak. And we have clarified that schools and libraries that are closed due to the COVID-19 outbreak are permitted to allow the general public to use E-Rate-supported Wi-Fi networks while on the school's campus or library property. These critical actions will make it easier for broadband providers to support telehealth and remote learning efforts during the pandemic.

The Commission also waived several rules earlier this month that could otherwise result in de-enrollment of subscribers from the Lifeline program, which provides monthly discounts on broadband and voice services to qualified low-income consumers. The order waived the Lifeline program's usage requirements and general de-enrollment procedures until May 29, 2020. We previously waived the Lifeline program's recertification and reverification requirements for participating low-income consumers. In total, we are attempting to ease burdens on Lifeline subscribers and allow Lifeline carriers to focus their efforts on assisting customers.

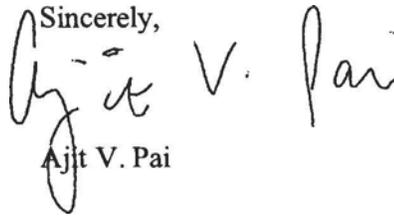
The Commission also took action to give certain carriers flexibility to focus USF money on hard-hit areas, allowing competitive eligible telecommunications carriers to use their high-cost legacy support in the service areas of any affiliated eligible telecommunications carrier in order to respond to the unprecedented challenges posed by COVID-19. The order waived the requirement that all legacy high-cost support must be used in a given area until June 30, 2020, at which time the Commission will evaluate whether an extension is warranted.

Moreover, we have quickly granted Special Temporary Authority to AT&T, Sprint, T-Mobile, U.S. Cellular, and Verizon as well as a large number of wireless Internet service providers to use additional spectrum to meet customer demand for mobile broadband across the United States, including Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. And we've provided relief to certain site-based and mobile-only wireless licensees with construction deadlines from March 15, 2020, through and including May 15, 2020. The Commission has granted Telecommunications Relay Service providers temporary waivers to better enable American Sign Language interpreters to work from home in order to maintain relay services during this national emergency for individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing, or deaf-blind, or have a speech disability. And we've also sent out a reminder to authorized alert originators, including state and

local governments, that the Wireless Emergency Alert system is available as a tool to provide life-saving information to the public during the COVID-19 outbreak.

The Commission is also hard at work fulfilling its mission to protect consumers. We recently launched a COVID-19 Consumer Warnings and Safety Tips webpage, <https://www.fcc.gov/covid-scams>, to alert consumers to the proliferation of scam phone calls and texts related to the coronavirus pandemic. Scammers are promoting bogus cures, offering fake test kits, sending hoax text messages, and generally preying on virus-related fears, and the Commission is doing all that it can to help consumers avoid these scams. And together with the Federal Trade Commission, we successfully demanded that three gateway providers stop bringing into the country COVID-19-related scam robocalls.

Finally, the Commission continues to work with Congress to secure the necessary authority and funding to enhance remote learning services and broadband connectivity in various cities and towns affected by the pandemic. I am thankful for this opportunity to work with you and your colleagues to serve the American public.

Sincerely,

Ajit V. Pai



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United States Senate
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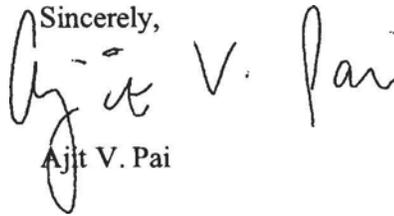
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