

**STATEMENT OF
CHAIRMAN AJIT PAI
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION**

**TELECONFERENCE FORUM ON CRITICAL CONSUMER PROTECTION, BROADBAND,
AND SPECTRUM ISSUES RELATED TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

**BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS AND TECHNOLOGY
OF THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE**

MAY 19, 2019

Chairman Doyle, Ranking Member Latta, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for hosting this briefing on the FCC's efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic. I hope that you, your families, and your staff are staying safe and healthy during these unprecedented times.

Since becoming FCC Chairman in January 2017, my top priority has been to close the digital divide. And with the coronavirus pandemic, Internet connectivity is more important than ever. Americans are relying on broadband to telework, take classes online, consult with doctors remotely, and stay in touch with loved ones they can't see in person.

That's why, on March 13, three days before the White House issued its social distancing guidelines and six days before any state issued a stay-at-home order, I called on our nation's broadband and telephone service providers to pledge that for 60 days, no consumer or small business would have service cut off or be charged late fees because of disruptions caused by the pandemic. I also challenged them to open up their Wi-Fi hotspots to anyone who needs them. I called it the Keep Americans Connected Pledge, and in a big win for the American people, more than 700 providers serving the vast majority of broadband and telephone subscribers answered this call.

Based on the feedback we've received, the Pledge has been critical to maintaining connectivity for millions of Americans. So that's why, on April 30, I announced an extension of the Pledge beyond the original 60-day commitment, to June 30. I'm pleased that we have even more companies (774) committed to this extension than for the initial Pledge.

I also urged these providers to go above and beyond the commitments in the Keep Americans Connected Pledge, and I'm grateful that so many have done so. Many companies, large and small, have offered free or discounted service for low-income Americans and students, lifted data caps, and increased broadband speeds at no cost to meet the increased demand for telework and distance learning.

Now, network usage from telework and distance learning, not to mention gaming and binge-watching, raises the question: How are networks performing? I am pleased to report that our networks in the United States are handling this surge in demand very well.

One reason our networks have been able to handle the traffic increase is that we've seen significant investments and improvements in our broadband infrastructure in recent years. Since 2016, for example, Internet speeds are up over 80%. The percentage of homes with access to 250 Mbps broadband has doubled, and we broke records for fiber deployment in each of the past two years. Indeed, all of the infrastructure deployment that we've seen over the last three years has been critical to keeping our country running during the pandemic.

Moreover, since the pandemic began, the Commission has taken targeted actions to boost the performance of our wireless networks, and those decisions are paying dividends. We quickly granted

several wireless providers Special Temporary Authority to use additional spectrum to meet customer demand for mobile broadband across the United States. And just last week, new independent data was released showing faster download speeds in April for carriers using this spectrum, even with increases in traffic.

Another big priority for the Commission has been our COVID-19 Telehealth Program. First, let me say thank you to members of this Subcommittee and Congress for establishing this program as part of the CARES Act. The Commission quickly stood up this program, and we've already funded 82 health care providers in 30 states. In Pennsylvania, for example, we awarded funding to the UPMC Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh to provide telehealth services to children who have received organ transplants and are thus immuno-compromised, putting them at high risk for COVID19. By enabling remote health services, we increase the number of people who can access care while reducing the risks for patients and healthcare providers. We're still receiving and quickly processing applications, a top Commission priority.

We're also working hard to fulfill our consumer protection mission. Unfortunately, scammers are promoting bogus cures, offering fake test kits, sending hoax text messages, and generally preying on virus-related fears. The Commission is doing all it can to help consumers avoid these scams. Last month, together with the Federal Trade Commission, we successfully demanded that three gateway providers stop bringing COVID-19-related scam robocalls into the country. They did so within 24 hours. And we've launched a COVID-19 Consumer Warnings and Safety Tips webpage to alert consumers to pandemic-related scam phone calls and texts.

The last thing I'd like to mention is that, even though the Commission shifted to mandatory telework in early March, we've continued to operate smoothly. This is a tribute to our talented and dedicated staff that continues to prove every day that they are the agency's greatest asset. In addition to all of our work to address the COVID-19 pandemic, we've also continued to move forward on longstanding initiatives, like opening up the 6 GHz band to unlicensed operations and thus increasing the amount of mid-band spectrum available for Wi-Fi by roughly a factor of five. I am profoundly grateful to our staff for their ability to get all of this work done in the face of the numerous challenges, including childcare, that they have been facing during these difficult times.

Thank you again for this opportunity to be with the Committee. I look forward to working with you to meet the connectivity needs of the American people during this challenging period in our nation's history.