April 28, 2020

The Honorable Ajit Pai  
Chairman  
Federal Communications Commission  
445 12th Street SW  
Washington, DC 20554

Dear Chairman Pai:

We write to urge the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to work directly with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to help ensure the millions of people in the U.S. who are newly eligible for the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) or Medicaid, due to job loss or reductions in income, are informed of their eligibility for the FCC’s Lifeline program. The Lifeline program is the primary federal program charged with providing financial assistance to help low-income families obtain broadband and telephone services.

The ongoing pandemic has led to financial hardships for millions of Americans. At least 26 million Americans filed for unemployment benefits in the past month alone, and states are seeing a surge in applications for SNAP benefits. Medicaid enrollment is also expected to increase significantly as a result of these unprecedented job losses and health coverage. Non-essential businesses and schools have closed across the country to limit the spread of the coronavirus, leaving families to rely on the internet now more than ever to access public benefits, search for employment, learn from home, or access telehealth services. The need is greatest among low-income households forced to stretch limited resources to try to keep up with monthly expenses and put food on the table during the public health crisis. For these vulnerable populations, the FCC’s Lifeline program can help struggling families afford basic internet and telephone connectivity at a time when they need it most – but only if they know about it.

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Congress recently passed legislation to provide states additional funding and flexibility to streamline access to SNAP for people adversely affected by the economic impact of the coronavirus. Many of the at least 26 million Americans who have lost their jobs through no fault of their own in the last five weeks may also soon turn to the food assistance programs to feed their families and enroll in Medicaid to access necessary health care. This will likely lead to a significant increase in the number of individuals eligible for the Lifeline program.

Even before the pandemic, only 7 million out of the 38 million people who were eligible for the Lifeline program were enrolled. While we understand that the FCC has traditionally issued guidelines for states and telecommunications providers to advertise the Lifeline program, given the critical role of internet connectivity during the coronavirus pandemic, we urge the FCC to coordinate directly with USDA and HHS as well as states and stakeholders to help ensure people in need are informed about their eligibility for the Lifeline program. We also respectfully request responses to the following questions:

1. What is the FCC currently doing to work with the USDA and HHS to help ensure that people in the U.S. who are newly eligible for the Lifeline program are aware that they can receive subsidized communications services?

2. What data has the FCC collected on the number of people in the U.S. who are newly eligible for the Lifeline program since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic and how many of those newly eligible have enrolled in the program?

3. Please detail the additional resources and authorities the FCC needs to ensure qualifying people in the U.S. know that they are eligible for the Lifeline program.

Thank you for prompt attention to this matter. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator

Marcia L. Fudge
Member of Congress

Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator

Anna G. Eshoo
Member of Congress

Charles E. Schumer  
United States Senator

/K/  
Kirsten Gillibrand  
United States Senator

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Bernard Sanders  
United States Senator

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Edward J. Markey  
United States Senator

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Robert Menendez  
United States Senator

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Margaret Wood Hassan  
United States Senator

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Brian Schatz  
United States Senator

/K/  
Robert P. Casey, Jr.  
United States Senator

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Kamala D. Harris  
United States Senator

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Doug Jones  
United States Senator

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Mazie K. Hirono  
United States Senator

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Tammy Duckworth  
United States Senator

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Ron Wyden  
United States Senator

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Jacky Rosen  
United States Senator

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Benjamin L. Cardin  
United States Senator

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Michael F. Bennet  
United States Senator

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Richard Blumenthal  
United States Senator

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Sherrod Brown  
United States Senator
Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator

Cory A. Booker
United States Senator

Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

Patrick Leahy
United States Senator

Jack Reed
United States Senator

Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator

Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator

Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

Tom Udall
United States Senator

Tina Smith
United States Senator

Mark R. Warner
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Jeffrey A. Merkley
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Tim Kaine
United States Senator

Christopher A. Coons
United States Senator

Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator

Kyrsten Sinema
United States Senator

Thomas R. Carper
United States Senator

Martin Heinrich
United States Senator
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Anthony G. Brown  
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TJ Cox  
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Henry Cuellar  
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Danny K. Davis  
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Joseph D. Morelle
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Grace F. Napolitano
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Eleanor Holmes Norton
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Ilhan Omar
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CC: The Honorable Sonny Perdue, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture  
The Honorable Alex Azar, U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services