

April 24, 2020

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

Dear Chairman Pai:

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has thrown into stark relief the digital divide in our country. As millions of Americans work from home, chatting over video with colleagues thousands of miles away, sending emails, and going about their lives and livelihoods, there are still tens of millions – including thousands in our states of West Virginia and Maine – that lack access to even reliable cell service. While the lack of reliable broadband access has often been presented as a long-term infrastructure issue, the current pandemic has made the short-term challenges imposed on businesses, families, and others from mandatory school closures and business interruptions even more acutely felt. Seniors in can't reach a doctor, students can't finish a lesson, and small business owners can't complete an order. Mobile broadband hotspots are uniquely capable of meeting these immediate needs now while we continue to work together on addressing the longer-term challenges.

We recently helped lead the charge for significant funding through the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) for the purchase of Internet accessible devices, including mobile hotspots and associated connectivity for libraries in rural and low-income areas. Local libraries are often the only source of free Wi-Fi in our rural communities, and seniors, homeless individuals, and students all rely on libraries for access to essential services that can be accessed online. While we applaud IMLS's swift distribution of the first \$30 million of the \$50 million that was allocated in the CARES Act (P.L. 116-136) to help states expand digital network access, purchase internet accessible devices, and provide related technical support, much more work remains to be done.


We also appreciate the actions you have taken in response to COVID-19 to encourage companies to do their part to address these challenges through the Keep Americans Connected Pledge. The private sector can and must play an important role in helping Americans maintain connectivity throughout this crisis by waiving late fees and maintaining broadband and telephone service, expanding low-income broadband programs, and opening up hotspots to Americans who need

access. We have been encouraged by the more than 700 companies and associations that have signed the pledge and the broadband providers that have opened up their fixed Wi-Fi hotspots for public use or offered free mobile hotspots to schools and customers to assist in distance learning and telehealth efforts. These are all important steps in the right direction.

As this pandemic continues, however, it becomes increasingly likely that social distancing and other essential measures to keep Americans safe will remain a major part of our daily lives for the weeks and months ahead. Without access to reliable, affordable broadband the strains on Americans will become even more evident. We must coordinate the voluntary efforts of broadband service providers with the targeted investments of federal, state, and local governments to ensure that efforts are focused on those who need our help the most. We urge you to work with the companies that stepped up to take the Keep Americans Connected Pledge to provide a comprehensive report on the distribution of hotspots by April 27<sup>th</sup> – so we understand where hotspots have been deployed, where they will be deployed, and where they could be deployed with a little help from the federal government to improve access for more Americans who lack connectivity.

Hot spots are inexpensive and easily deployable, and we want to work with you and the participating companies to secure additional federal funding for the provision of these devices in the next coronavirus aid package. This funding must be focused on the areas with the most need, and we look forward to working with you to deliver on the promise of universal service for all Americans.

Sincerely,

  
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Joe Manchin III  
United States Senator

  
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Susan Collins  
United States Senator