



FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION  
WASHINGTON

OFFICE OF  
THE CHAIRMAN

June 22, 2020

The Honorable Tom Udall  
United States Senate  
531 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Udall:

Thank you for your letter on behalf of the Navajo Nation and Smith Bagley, Inc. regarding the Commission's Lifeline program. As I've seen for myself—from the Navajo Nation in Arizona to the Rosebud Sioux Reservation in South Dakota, from the Coeur D'Alene Reservation in Idaho to the Jemez and Zia Pueblos in New Mexico—the digital divide is most keenly felt in Indian Country. I agree that now, more than ever, it is critical that all Americans, including those living on Tribal lands, 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. The Lifeline program, which provides enhanced support of up \$34.25 per month for consumers on Tribal lands, plays an important role in helping low-income households stay connected.

Under my leadership, the FCC has taken aggressive action to help ensure that low-income consumers stay connected during this crisis. For example, we have waived certain Lifeline program rules through August 31, 2020 to facilitate Lifeline enrollment for those hardest hit by the impacts of COVID-19. With respect to Tribal lands, on June 1, the Commission's Wireline Competition Bureau allowed Lifeline applicants residing in rural areas on Tribal lands to begin receiving Lifeline service even if their application failed an automated check and the applicant is still in the process of providing documentation to confirm their eligibility. Given the unique challenges that residents of rural Tribal areas face in submitting documentation—including the need to travel long distances to send mail, lack of electricity, and absence of road infrastructure in some areas—this relief will allow service providers to begin quickly providing Lifeline service to these consumers while they complete their applications.

On April 29, the Commission's Wireline Competition Bureau waived the requirement that consumers seeking to qualify for the program based on their income must provide at least three consecutive months of income documentation. This relief will make it easier for low-income Americans who recently lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic to enroll in the program.

Additionally, in March, the Commission's Wireline Competition Bureau waived several program rules that could have otherwise resulted in the involuntary removal of subscribers from the Lifeline program during the pandemic. These de-enrollment rules are in place to ensure that Lifeline program dollars are directed toward qualifying low-income consumers. The Bureau

found that it was in the public interest to waive these requirements for a limited period of time to ensure that no current Lifeline subscriber involuntarily loses service during this unprecedented, nationwide public health emergency. In light of the ongoing pandemic, Commission staff have extended these waivers until August 31, 2020. They will monitor the situation and determine whether any additional extensions of our Lifeline waivers beyond August 31, 2020 are needed.

The Commission and the Universal Service Administrative Company (USAC), which administers the Lifeline program, have also undertaken numerous efforts to promote Lifeline awareness during the pandemic to ensure that consumers, including those on Tribal lands, have the information and resources they need to apply. These efforts have involved coordination with a variety of other government agencies, including the Bureau of Indian Affairs and several offices which oversee Tribal programs within the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Through this outreach, we have shared Lifeline materials for distribution to Tribal consumers, presented program information to agency employees interested in learning about and promoting awareness of the program among Tribal consumers, and organized customized training sessions for agency stakeholders who provide direct support to low-income individuals on Tribal lands.

USAC also regularly hosts training webinars for social service agencies, consumer advocacy groups, and other organizations that wish to help consumers learn more about applying for Lifeline. USAC has conducted five consumer advocate training webinars since May, two of which were designed for consumer advocates serving residents on Tribal lands who may need assistance in applying for enhanced Lifeline support. We expect that our Lifeline outreach and coordination efforts will continue in the coming months to ensure low-income families, including those who live on Tribal lands, get and stay connected to broadband and phone services during this critical time.

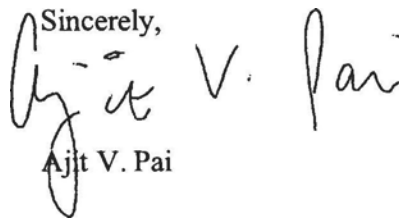
In sum, during this crisis, we are working to keep existing Lifeline subscribers connected, ease burdens on consumers seeking to enroll in the program, and raise awareness of the program among those populations who need it, including low-income consumers on Tribal lands.

At the same time, I have called on the broadband and telephone service providers that have signed the FCC's Keep Americans Connected Pledge to go above and beyond the Pledge and expand existing or develop new low-income broadband offerings during COVID-19. I commend the dozens of providers that have heeded this call and made new or improved low-cost offerings available to low-income consumers during the pandemic, and I continue to urge other providers to do the same.

The Commission has also taken numerous other steps to help meet connectivity needs of all Americans during the pandemic. For example, at a time when our country is facing unprecedented challenges, telemedicine has 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. We have already approved eleven sets of funding requests since April 13, approving 367 funding applications in 45 states and Washington, D.C., for a total of \$128.23 million. Notably, the Commission has awarded

\$954,990 to the Navajo Nation Department of Health, in Window Rock, Arizona. The health care providers serving Tribal land will use this funding to provide home health care and remote monitoring services to patients throughout the Navajo Nation during the pandemic. In April, the Wireless Telecommunications Bureau granted an emergency Special Temporary Authority request filed by the Navajo Nation to use unassigned spectrum in the 2.5 GHz band to provide wireless broadband service over its reservation as part of its emergency COVID-19 pandemic response. In addition to supporting emergency relief to meet increased broadband demands during the pandemic, the Commission continues to accept applications from eligible Tribal entities for licensed access to unassigned 2.5 GHz spectrum over their rural Tribal Lands in the Rural Tribal Priority Window, which closes August 3, 2020.

Please let me know if I can be of any further assistance.

Sincerely,  
  
Ajit V. Pai