



FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
WASHINGTON

OFFICE OF
THE CHAIRMAN

August 14, 2020

The Honorable Jennifer Gonzalez-Colon
U.S. House of Representatives
1609 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congresswoman Gonzalez-Colon:

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 novel coronavirus. I'm committed to using every resource at the FCC's disposal to deal with this unprecedented national emergency.

To encourage access and continuity of all communications services for the people of Puerto Rico, the Commission coordinated with the Puerto Rico Governor's Chief of Staff, Antonio Pabón Batlle, encouraging the amendment of Puerto Rico Governor's Executive Order 2020-029 to classify communications technicians, call centers, and retail sites as essential to COVID-19 response activities. Furthermore, in collaboration with Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency Director Christopher Krebs, I sent a letter to the nation's governors (including the Governor of Puerto Rico) encouraging them to provide necessary access and resources to the communications workers helping to keep Americans connected during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is especially important to ensure that communications networks and services remain available to the public and first responders.

In order to ensure that Americans stay connected with broadband or telephone connectivity during the COVID-19 outbreak, I 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 Wi-Fi hotspots to any American who needs them. Over 700 broadband and telephone service providers across the country, including all of our nation's largest providers, took the Pledge and thus agreed to take these concrete steps to help Americans stay connected.

On April 30, I announced an extension of the Pledge, and asked providers to extend these offerings to consumers and small businesses until June 30, 2020. After that announcement, the number of companies covered by the Pledge increased, with over 780 companies taking the Pledge, representing the overwhelming majority of broadband and telephone subscribers in the country. Many of these same companies went above and beyond the Pledge and took additional

steps to maintain or extend connectivity during the pandemic. I commend these providers for stepping up to the plate during this unprecedented national emergency.

The Commission has also taken a number of steps to help meet connectivity needs through the Universal Service Fund (USF). The USF comprises four major programs: the Rural Health Care Program, the E-Rate Program, the Lifeline Program, and the High-Cost Program. Below, I discuss our activities within each.

To begin, 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, which administers USF programs on the FCC's behalf. The Commission's action will help ensure that rural healthcare providers have the resources and flexibility they need to promote telehealth solutions for their patients.

With respect to the E-Rate Program, we've announced extensions of key 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 also have taken other actions in this area, 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.

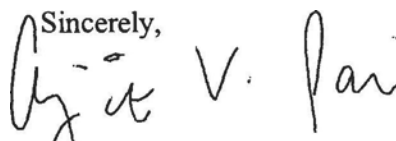
We've also been active with respect to the Lifeline Program, which provides monthly discounts on broadband and voice services to low-income consumers. To help ensure that Lifeline subscribers stay connected to these services during the COVID-19 crisis, the Commission waived several rules that could otherwise result in de-enrollment of subscribers from the program. We have also temporarily 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 Americans who recently lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic and who qualify for Lifeline to enroll in the program. In light of the ongoing pandemic, Commission staff have extended these waivers until August 31, 2020.

Finally, with respect to the USF High-Cost Program, 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.

Aside from USF-related actions, the FCC has been busy updating its rules to help consumers be better served during the pandemic. For instance, we 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 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 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 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. We also provided regulatory 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 broadband providers in order to work from home or access remote learning.

The Commission is also hard at work fulfilling its mission to protect consumers. For instance, we 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 several 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