

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

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June 22, 2020

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

Dear Chairman Pai,

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) plays an imperative role in addressing the critical need for broadband access across the United States, especially in rural America. As you've witnessed in your trips to West Virginia in 2016 and 2017, the economic opportunity for communities in a rural state like mine can often hinge on the availability of true high speed internet service. In the last three months, the COVID-19 pandemic has acutely demonstrated the critical need for broadband access in rural communities. During the pandemic, I have heard repeatedly from state education leaders about the difficulties they see in teachers being able to connect with students so they can complete their year's coursework in a virtual setting. I've spoken with the leadership of our state's Department of Commerce about the challenges that many businesses are facing in having their employees attempt to work from home with insufficient connectivity. The pandemic has provided a tremendous opportunity to demonstrate the promise of telemedicine, but sadly many West Virginians, particularly senior citizens, have not been able to take advantage of this new method of visiting with their health care providers because they lack the connectivity at home. Simply put, this pandemic has highlighted the unsustainability of large portions of rural America not having access to broadband and the need for swift and direct assistance from the Federal Government.

Over the last five years, the Congress has successfully increased funding for existing programs and created new programs to increase the availability of broadband in rural communities. I am proud that West Virginia has seen dramatic increases in federal grant funding being awarded to local providers that are working with community leaders to extend broadband access to thousands of residents. As we continue to build on these successes it is imperative that future federal funding opportunities are deployed strategically and to partners that will work with local communities to provide them with levels of service that are requisite to compete in the modern economy. The largest opportunity that we have is the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF), which will provide funding over the next decade. As the FCC proceeds with the RDOF auction process, I write to urge your diligence as you review eligible census blocks that have been challenged in my state. According to the FCC, under RDOF, West Virginia has over 128,000 eligible locations that are initially eligible for RDOF and lack broadband at speeds of 25/3Mbps. It is imperative that as many census blocks are eligible for this funding as possible.

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I am especially concerned with the multiple filings made by Frontier Communications Corporation with the FCC. In April, Frontier filed a challenge to the FCC seeking to exclude close to 16,000 census blocks from eligibility in RDOF Phase I. In the subsequent months, Frontier has filed two separate letters trying to clarify their original filing, and just this week filed an additional amendment to their original filing. I urge you to closely scrutinize the veracity of these challenges as, if accepted by the FCC, they would leave many West Virginians with little or no access to broadband.

Thank you for your work to deploy reliable broadband across the United States, especially in rural America. I look forward to continuing to be your partner in our common goal of closing the digital divide.

Sincerely,



Shelley Moore Capito
United States Senator