



OFFICE OF
THE CHAIRMAN

FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
WASHINGTON

January 15, 2021

The Honorable Albio Sires
U.S. House of Representatives
2342 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Sires:

Thank you for your letters regarding the Commission's efforts to close the digital divide and ensure Americans have access to affordable, high-quality broadband service. I agree with you that internet access is an essential service, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout my chairmanship, closing the digital divide has been my top priority and I am proud of the accomplishments that we have made since 2017.

We have worked to increase competition and speed deployment and those efforts have shown substantial results. Millions more Americans have access to the Internet today than in 2016. In both 2018 and 2019, the United States set records for annual fiber deployment. Average download speeds for fixed broadband have doubled since the end of 2017. The number of Americans enjoying more than two options for standard fixed terrestrial broadband service has increased by 52%. And compared to 2015, average consumers are paying 28% less for broadband in real terms while enjoying faster speeds. The Commission's recent Communications Marketplace Report provides substantial analysis of the broadband internet market and how more consumers than before have access to high-quality service with higher download speeds at cheaper prices. Our efforts to evaluate the availability of internet service through the Commission's Digital Opportunity Data Collection program will be further enhanced now that Congress has provided the Commission with the necessary funding to implement the Broadband DATA Act.

Of course, the global COVID-19 pandemic has had a substantial impact forcing Americans online for work, school, connecting with doctors through telehealth, and just being able to stay in touch with loved ones. From the very start of the crisis, the Commission has taken aggressive steps to ensure that consumers stay connected. As you note, last March, I called on broadband and telephone service providers to keep Americans connected, and hundreds of providers signed the Keep Americans Connected Pledge and went above and beyond for low-income American families. For example, Starry, Comcast, Cox, Verizon, and Ducor Telephone Co. offered free service to new or existing low-income customers, and Charter offered free service for new subscribing families that included students. Lifeline providers were able to go above and beyond the 3 GB minimum service standard, with T-Mobile, TracFone, Q Link, and Claro each offering an additional 5 GB of data per month for Lifeline subscribers, Smith Bagley offering an additional 10 GB of data for subscribers in Tribal areas, and Sprint offering one-time

deposits of 20 GB into subscribers' accounts. What is more, Sprint, T-Mobile, TracFone, and Q Link offered Lifeline subscribers unlimited voice minutes and texting.

The Commission has also taken repeated action to maximize the availability and awareness of the Lifeline program to aid low-income American families and veterans impacted by the pandemic. Beginning in March, the Commission waived several rules to increase flexibility in the enrollment process. These changes continue to facilitate access to Lifeline for low-income Americans who lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic, enable applicants residing in Tribal lands to begin receiving service while they complete the application process, and 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 recently extended these waivers until February 28, 2021. In addition to these waivers, the Commission has partnered with the Department of Health and Human Services (including the Administration for Children and Families, the Administration for Community Living, the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, the Health Resources and Services Administration, the Indian Health Service, the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration), the Department of Veterans Affairs (including the Veterans Health Administration's Homeless Programs Office and Office of Connected Care), the Department of Housing and Urban Development (including the Office of Field Policy and Management, the Office of Housing, and the Office of Public and Indian Housing), the Department of Agriculture, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Social Security Administration, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, the National Institute for Children's Health Quality, and the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners to promote Lifeline awareness during the pandemic to ensure that consumers who are newly eligible for the program have the information and resources they need to apply.

To be clear, I agree that more can be done. But with the tax that funds our universal service programs at an all-time high, major new funding initiatives must come from Congress. That's why I repeatedly called on Congress to establish a Remote Learning Initiative and ensure that every student in this country can access online learning resources as many schools continue to be fully or partially online. And that's why I have asked Congress for funding to keep Americans connected during the COVID-19 pandemic. I'm pleased that Congress responded to my call for action and included \$3.2 billion in funding for the new Emergency Broadband Benefit Program. This new program will reimburse participating companies for providing discounted broadband service and connected devices to eligible households during the COVID-19 pandemic. This program will go a long way to ensuring that low-income families and veterans are connected during the pandemic. We are already working to stand up the program.

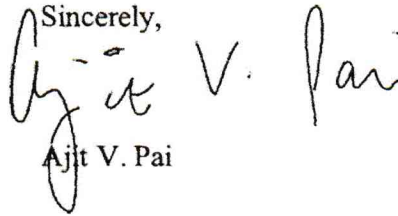
Finally, the Commission's Open Internet Transparency Rule requires providers to disclose both service descriptions (including, for example, expected and actual broadband speed and latency), as well as pricing (including monthly prices, usage-based fees, and any other additional fees that consumers may be charged). This information is available to consumers either through the provider's website or the Commission's portal. These disclosures empower consumers with the data they need to make informed decisions and enable consumers to strongly object to blocking where a provider is limiting the openness of the internet. Of course, if a

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provider engages in deceptive or unfair business practices when it comes to its pricing, the Federal Trade Commission has the authority to step in.

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

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ajit V. Pai". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "A" and a distinct "Pai" at the end.

Ajit V. Pai