

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS**

Congress defined universal service as an “evolving level of telecommunications services.” As times change, so must the Commission’s efforts to ensure that all Americans have access to services at just, reasonable and affordable rates. True to statutory intent, today we adjust and recalibrate some of our policies to improve the effectiveness of our low-income support mechanism.

I support this action. I am pleased that for the first time we expand the federal default eligibility criteria to include income-based criterion. This should make it easier for households that no longer participate in qualifying assistance programs to participate in Lifeline and Link-Up. It also should make it simpler for households that are subject to the time limits associated with several federal public assistance programs under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act.

The potential of our Lifeline and Link-Up programs is bound closely to the combined outreach efforts of carriers, states and the Commission. Only one-third of the households currently eligible for Lifeline and Link-Up assistance subscribe to these programs. Although we enjoy a national telephone penetration rate of just below 95 percent, some areas of this country—especially tribal lands—have penetration rates that are inexcusably lower. And we must never forget that there are households in this country without access to basic telephone service. We are bound by the statute to do more. The enhanced guidelines for outreach provided by the Order are a good first step. And I am pleased that the Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking seeks comment on the need for additional outreach requirements that would further strengthen the Lifeline and Link-Up programs. At present, the Commission’s rules require carriers to publicize the availability of these programs “in a manner reasonably designed to reach those likely to qualify for the service.” I worry that such a broad requirement is difficult to monitor, hard to enforce and puts beyond the reach of publicity those who would benefit most from these programs.

The Joint Board’s Recommendation underlies the critical changes we make today. I thank them for their hard work and valuable efforts to ensure that Lifeline and Link-Up continue to play a role in keeping America connected.