

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS
APPROVING IN PART, CONCURRING IN PART**

In the Matter of Federal-State Joint Board on Universal Service, CC Docket No. 96-45; Lifeline and Link Up, WC Docket No. 03-109

In today's Decision, the Joint Board takes some important steps to move us closer to our national goal of affordable access for all to the nation's communications networks by strengthening the Lifeline and Link-Up programs. On the heels of the wide-ranging and inclusive process that the FCC conducted to formulate the National Broadband Plan, I am proud to have had the opportunity to work again with this dedicated group of state and federal colleagues on the Joint Board whose hard work has produced this Decision. I particularly want to commend the leadership of the Joint Board, Joint Board Chair Mignon Clyburn and State Joint Board Chair Ray Baum, for all the effort they put into forging this document and managing the process, and all of the federal and state Commissioners whose input has been invaluable. Of course, our work would have been impossible without the long hours and excellent insight of all the federal and state staff. Collaboration and dialogue between federal and state partners in reform can and must continue as we move ahead to bring our Universal Service Fund and the intercarrier compensation system into the 21st century broadband world.

The principle of universal service – that all Americans, no matter who they are or where they live, should have access to reasonably comparable service at reasonably comparable rates – is a cornerstone of federal communications policy. The Lifeline and Link-Up programs help us meet that goal by getting and keeping low-income consumers connected. Since the FCC established the Lifeline program, telephone penetration rates for low-income households have increased from 80.1% to 89.7%. But what those statistics tell us is that millions of Americans remain without access to basic telephone service today.

I support the recommendations we make today that have the potential to increase participation in the Lifeline and Link-Up programs, in particular adopting mandatory outreach requirements for carriers participating in the programs. As I have said before, the potential of the low-income support programs is in large part linked with the success of our outreach efforts. We can build on the success that individual states have had with automatic enrollment when families sign up for other assistance programs by recommending it here as a best practice to other states. I believe that the information we could obtain by requiring all eligible carriers to submit their verification data to the Commission, USAC, and states would help us strengthen the impact of the low-income programs as well. At a time when the economic climate has left many American families in dire straits, I hope we will seriously consider raising the income eligibility criteria for consumers to 150% of the federal poverty guidelines. This could be a powerful tool as we renew our focus on the stubborn and persistent percentage of unconnected low-income Americans. I realize this raises important questions that must be addressed but the fact is our current economic distress has left many more of our citizens in need and they could benefit from this action.

We should also consider with some precision the extent to which prepaid wireless Lifeline service has helped the program achieve its mission, but I concur in part out of concern for isolating a particular technology and service plan in this Decision. I believe that those concerns raised here, especially in connection with the size of the Universal Service Fund writ large are appropriately examined in the context of comprehensive reform.

Finally, the Joint Board is once again expressing its support for broadband to be eligible

for Universal Service. Since the last time the Joint Board took up this issue in 2007, the support – and need – for that change has only grown stronger. I would simply note here that the need for Universal Service support for broadband is one of many reasons I continue to urge Title II reclassification and our Decision today does nothing to temper my support for that course of action. That said, I wholeheartedly support this renewed recommendation to add support for broadband as a Universal Service principle. As technology evolves, so too must the policies designed to help us achieve our constant goal: ensuring that all Americans, including low-income consumers, have access to services at just, reasonable, and affordable rates.