

**Before the
Federal Communications Commission
Washington, D.C. 20554**

In the Matter of)	
)	
Bridging the Digital Divide for Low-Income Consumers)	WC Docket No. 17-287
)	
Lifeline and Link Up Reform and Modernization)	WC Docket No. 11-42
)	
Telecommunications Carriers Eligible for Universal Service Support)	WC Docket No. 09-197
)	

**COMMENTS
OF
NTCA–THE RURAL BROADBAND ASSOCIATION**

NTCA–The Rural Broadband Association (“NTCA”)¹ hereby submits these comments in response to the Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (“*Further Notice*”) issued in November 2019 in the above-captioned proceedings.² The *Further Notice* seeks comment on updating the performance metrics and goals of the Universal Service Fund (“USF”) Lifeline program. Specifically, the *Further Notice* inquires as to whether its evaluation as to the effect the Lifeline program has on adoption should treat fixed and mobile broadband services differently.³ NTCA urges the Commission to recognize the key differences between the two categories of service and set as a goal for the Lifeline program adoption of a broadband connection that meets every low-

¹ NTCA is an industry association composed of nearly 850 rural local exchange carriers (“RLECs”). While these entities were traditional rate-of-return-regulated telecommunications companies and “rural telephone companies” as defined in the Communications Act of 1934, as amended, all of NTCA’s members today provide a mix of advanced telecommunications and broadband services, and many also provide video or wireless services to the rural communities they serve.

² Bridging the Digital Divide for Low-Income Consumers, WC Docket No. 17-287, Lifeline and Link Up Reform and Modernization, WC Docket No. 11-42, Telecommunications Carriers Eligible for Universal Service Support, WC Docket No. 09-197, Fifth Report and Order, Memorandum Opinion and Order and Order on Reconsideration, and Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, FCC 19-111 (rel. Nov. 14, 2019) (“*Further Notice*”).

³ *Id.*, ¶ 141.

income consumer's individual needs. Such a goal should further carry that forward to each of the Commission's universal service programs.

NTCA's RLEC members are designated as Eligible Telecommunications Carriers ("ETCs") and have a long history of providing service to rural low-income consumers pursuant to the Lifeline program. NTCA has long been an active participant in the Lifeline proceeding,⁴ as its members share the Commission's goals of promoting the affordability of broadband service as well as the effective use of resources in this and the other USF programs. NTCA's engagement on this issue has consistently sought to strengthen the program and ensure that it works hand-in-hand with other universal service programs and efforts of private operators to drive the affordability of broadband and voice services for all rural consumers regardless of income.

NTCA supports the *Further Notice* proposal to update the Lifeline program's goals to include an evaluation of its effectiveness in driving broadband adoption.⁵ That evaluation must, however, recognize the critical differences between fixed and mobile broadband services. Mobile services, while highly valuable to consumers of all income levels, are not a substitute for fixed broadband services. As discussed further below, the critical differences between the two services are particularly relevant for low-income rural consumers.

⁴ NTCA Petition for Temporary Waiver, WC Docket No. 11-42 et al. (fil. Jul. 29, 2019) (seeking a waiver of certain program rules in order to promote and preserve adoption and consumer choice); NTCA Comments, WC Docket No. 11-42, et al. (fil. Aug. 31, 2015) (proposing amendments to the program to simplify enrollment and promote availability, affordability and broadband adoption). In addition, several NTCA members participated in the 2012 Lifeline Broadband Pilot project. See Federal Communications Commission, Low-Income Broadband Pilot Program, available at: <https://www.fcc.gov/general/low-income-broadband-pilot-program-0>.

⁵ *Further Notice*, ¶¶ 136-142.

As NTCA recently stated in the Commission’s Section 706 proceeding, there are several reasons why mobile broadband services are not a substitute for fixed broadband service.⁶ While that discussion need not be repeated in its entirety here, certain factors addressed in that proceeding are relevant to rural, low-income consumers and merit inclusion in the instant discussion. For one, in rural areas particularly, mobile broadband offers a very different experience than fixed broadband service. While mobile coverage is typically more reliable in well-populated town centers, service coverage in rural areas often remains spotty – service is often more reliable on main roads or near small town centers but far less so in outlying areas where many rural consumers reside, work, look for work, and keep in touch with their child’s school. As a result, a low-income rural consumer in search of a better job will face service reliability (or lack thereof) as another barrier they must overcome in that task.

Access to telemedicine services is relevant to low-income rural consumers as well. Many of these consumers may be unable to find reliable and affordable transportation in order to access healthcare in town or in urban areas but are able to access services via an Internet connection. Such a concern is particularly important considering the rate of rural hospital closures.⁷ A mobile connection – perhaps unreliable as noted above in a rural area – may not make access to telemedicine services possible or especially useful.

⁶ Comments of NTCA, GN Docket No. 19-285 (fil. Nov. 22, 2019) (arguing that mobile broadband services, while providing significant value of their own and essential for many uses, are not a substitute for fixed broadband services).

⁷ The decade in healthcare: 12 milestones we won't forget, Rural hospital closures, Beckers Hospital Review (Dec. 31, 2019) (“About 60 million people — nearly one in five Americans — live in rural areas and depend on their local hospitals for care. Over the past decade, 120 of those hospitals closed.”), available at: <https://www.beckershospitalreview.com/hospital-management-administration/the-decade-in-healthcare-12-milestones-we-won-t-forget.html>.

In addition, a mobile broadband connection is hardly ideal for a student attempting to complete an assignment. As Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel has noted, 7 in 10 teachers assign homework requiring a broadband connection when 1 in 3 consumers lack a connection.⁸ A low-income student may be hard pressed to complete homework assignments or perform research necessary for school with only a mobile connection in hand.

With this in mind, the Commission should set adoption of a broadband connection that meets every low-income consumer's individual needs as its goal for the Lifeline program. Mobile services may very well meet the needs of a substantial percentage of consumers, and where that is the case, Lifeline program funds have been put to good use. Where needs are not met, however, where for example a mobile broadband service is not sufficient to meet a low-income consumer's needs for accessing telemedicine, educational opportunities, or for remote work – the Commission should not settle for “good enough” and declare victory. Ultimately, the utility of a broadband connection to the end-user is the key factor here: ensuring that a low-income consumer need not settle for “good enough” is as much a part of good stewardship of ratepayers' dollars as the Commission's laudable efforts to combat waste, fraud, and abuse.

Of course, the Lifeline program itself cannot and does not provide the necessary funding or incentives to invest in high-quality fixed networks in rural areas that meet a multitude of consumer needs. It is, rather, a program tasked with placing an available broadband connection within the reach of a consumer not otherwise able to afford it – and in high-cost rural areas it does so only after the High-Cost program has made the connection available and has “normalized” the rate as between urban and rural areas for non-low-income consumers. That

⁸ 'Homework Gap' Needs Broadband Fill, Rosenworcel Says, Multichannel News (Mar. 29, 2018), available at: <https://www.multichannel.com/news/homework-gap-needs-broadband-fill-rosenworcel-says-407616>.

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said, each universal service program should be aligned in the same direction, and each should start with the baseline assumption that “good enough” is not acceptable. Rather, each program should not be considered a success until every American, rural or urban, low-income or otherwise, has access to a robust connection that does everything they need it to do.⁹ This baseline assumption should permeate every universal service program, the Lifeline mechanism included.



By: /s/ Michael R. Romano
Michael R. Romano
Senior Vice President –
Industry Affairs & Business Development
mromano@ntca.org

By: /s/ Brian Ford
Brian Ford
Director of Industry Affairs
bford@ntca.org

4121 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 1000
Arlington, VA 22203

January 27, 2020

⁹ It should be noted as well that while the Lifeline program does not support business or enterprise services, those are relevant here as well. Should the notion that “good enough” is good enough permeate universal service, low-income consumers in rural areas looking for jobs could be harmed as well. More specifically, a declaration that mobile wireless service is “good enough” is not likely to be good enough for businesses looking to expand or relocate their operations to a rural area – and such a result is highly relevant to unemployed or underemployed low-income rural consumers. Among other things, businesses look for sufficient infrastructure to meet their needs, and the quality of broadband services and its ability to meet their needs is part of that infrastructure they consider. Commission policy that does not recognize that ultimately does a disservice to the very consumers it is attempting to help by placing a broadband connection in their hands via the Lifeline program.