



April 27, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi, Speaker
United States House of Representatives
1236 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell, Leader
United States Senate
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy, Leader
United States House of Representatives
2468 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Charles Schumer, Leader
United States Senate
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi and Leaders McConnell, McCarthy, and Schumer:

NTCA–The Rural Broadband Association represents nearly 850 providers of voice and broadband services offered atop some of the most robust and advanced networks to be found in rural America. As “hometown providers” based largely in the areas they serve, their community commitment in the face of the coronavirus pandemic has been heartening and a great source of pride for our association. It is critical, however, that our legislators and policymakers understand the unique position that our members find themselves in during the current national emergency. They are both relatively smaller businesses that face the same challenges many other small businesses do and also crucial providers of critical infrastructure to millions of Americans in many of our nation’s most rural and remote areas.

We estimate that perhaps more than half of the signers of FCC Chairman Pai’s pledge to “Keep Americans Connected” are NTCA members – and, in numerous cases, our members have gone “above and beyond” the terms of the pledge, taking steps such as the offering of free broadband to families with students, extending school fiber networks, and providing free speed upgrades for current customers. Moreover, despite having an average of fewer than 30 employees, NTCA member companies are doing all that they can to extend broadband and “keep the Internet lights on” during this challenging crisis, continuing installation and repair activities by any and all means possible while also managing employee health and safety, including innovations such as “broadband in a box” and other self-installation techniques.

As businesses serving sparsely populated rural markets, however, the ability to sustain these efforts beyond the 60-day time frame of the FCC Chairman’s pledge presents its own challenges. In the past five weeks, 26 million Americans have filed for unemployment. We are hearing reports from members now of customers increasingly raising concerns about an inability to pay for services; a recent survey of our members found that 54% of members have seen “uncollectibles” increase by up to 20% since a national emergency was declared just over a month ago, with another 20% reporting that it was simply too soon to tell what sorts of payment shortfalls might arise given billing cycles.

Failure of any of these rural critical infrastructure providers would be devastating to the communities they serve. Even beyond the global nature of this connectivity, within the rural communities themselves, these networks connect workers to employers, students to teachers, and citizens to local government. Our members desire nothing more than to “keep the Internet lights on” for their neighbors, families, and friends in the rural communities they serve wherever possible. To do so, however, they must be able to keep their own lights on. To continue delivering critical connectivity in

more than a third of the nation's landmass, they must be able to pay suppliers for all of the routers and fiber needed to install new service and for the connections between the very rural markets they serve and Internet points of presence around the country – costs that are only increasing in the face of increased network demands even as revenues decline. Most importantly and immediately, they must pay their own employees – the front-line essential workers who go out despite the risks to make sure that those without voice and broadband services or in need of upgraded services get such access. But if customers cannot afford to pay for service, these providers can do only so much to keep doing what they do so well and so badly want to keep doing.

NTCA therefore asks Congress to join us in helping to keep Americans connected. To be sure, longer-term infrastructure initiatives are necessary to ensure that we are never back here again, wringing hands over a lack of robust and affordable connectivity for far too many Americans, rural and urban alike. We very much look forward to a discussion and the development of such longer-term initiatives. In the near term, however, there are two specific steps that Congress can and should take to help service providers achieve the shared goal of keeping Americans connected.

First, Congress should establish an emergency broadband program that provides financial support for consumers facing economic hardship and unable to pay their voice and broadband bills due to the coronavirus pandemic. This program should provide a specified amount of funding per month for each consumer during the pandemic, and for a period thereafter reflecting the likelihood of a lingering economic crisis, that will make quality services more affordable for that consumer.

Second, because such a benefit will unfortunately not help all broadband customers who need it during this crisis, Congress should provide complementary funding to help ensure that all customers can remain connected. For example, some customers who just recently lost jobs or suffer from reduced wages may not qualify for the emergency benefit articulated above; similarly, health care providers, students, and small business customers also covered by the FCC Chairman's pledge would not be eligible for such a program despite desperately needing connectivity too. Moreover, even those broadband customers that *do* qualify for the emergency benefit program above may find that the amount of support received does not cover the full amount of their broadband bill, leaving those customers still very much at risk for a loss or downgrade of service. Creating a program that provides dedicated funding to "help cover" bills that go unpaid by such broadband users therefore represents a logical and necessary complement to the emergency benefit program described above, and is ultimately essential to help ensure that broadband providers can "keep the Internet lights on" throughout this crisis.

NTCA's members have long looked to be "part of the solution" when it comes to critical connectivity in rural America. They led the charge as early investors in rural broadband, and their community commitment as locally owned or cooperatively organized providers is unparalleled. They want to keep answering the call even during this difficult time for their families, friends, and neighbors in these rural communities. We ask you to help these providers keep delivering on this mission despite mounting financial pressures, and to help Americans in rural and urban areas alike stay connected through the two simple measures described above.

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Thank you for your attention to this letter. We have greatly appreciated your interest in rural broadband issues, and we know you share our interest in attempting to make sure every consumer remains connected during this critical time. We look forward to working with you to make this a reality.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Shirley Bloomfield". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Shirley Bloomfield
Chief Executive Officer

cc: The Honorable Ajit Pai
The Honorable Michael O'Rielly
The Honorable Brendan Carr
The Honorable Jessica Rosenworcel
The Honorable Geoffrey Starks