

**Before the
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
Washington, DC 20554**

In the Matter of)	
)	
Lifeline and Linkup Reform and Modernization)	WC Docket No. 11-42
)	
Telecommunications Carriers Eligible for Universal Service Support)	WC Docket No. 09-197
)	
Connect America Fund)	WC Docket No. 10-90

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

NTCA–The Rural Broadband Association (“NTCA”)¹ hereby submits these reply comments in response to the Public Notice issued by the Federal Communications Commission (“Commission”) on August 31, 2020 seeking comment on a Petition for Waiver filed by the National Lifeline Association (“NaLA”) in the above-captioned proceedings.² NTCA members are active provider participants in the Lifeline program, and NTCA has expressed concerns similar to those raised by NaLA in the past with respect to the consequences for consumers of both rigid escalation of Lifeline minimum service standards (“MSS”) and the phase-down of support for voice services. For these reasons, NTCA supports the NaLA Petition, and urges the Commission to grant it – and to grant as well the still-pending waiver petition filed by NTCA in 2019 addressing similar issues in the context of fixed broadband services.³

¹ NTCA represents approximately 850 rural local exchange carriers (“RLECs”). All of NTCA’s members are voice and broadband providers, and many of its members provide wireless, video, and other competitive services to their communities.

² Petition of the National Lifeline Association for Waiver of Lifeline Mobile Broadband Minimum Service Standard and Voice Support Phase-Down, WC Docket Nos. 11-42, *et al.* (filed August 27, 2020) (“NaLA Petition”).

³ Petition of NTCA for Waiver, WC Docket Nos. 11-42, *et al.* (filed July 29, 2019) (“NTCA Petition”).

In its petition, NaLA asks the Commission to retain the mobile broadband MSS at 3 GB rather than increasing it to 11.75 GB as planned and to retain Lifeline voice support at \$7.25 rather than decreasing it to \$5.25 as planned.⁴ NaLA observes that the presently contemplated change to the MSS would result in low-income consumers having to pay more out of pocket for communications services that they already may struggle to afford, as mandating that consumers purchase higher performance services would translate to an effective mandate that they buy more expensive services without any commensurate increase in subsidy.⁵ NaLA further explains that the voice phasedown should be paused because of the value that consumers place on voice service and the significance of such service for public safety.⁶

The observations and arguments raised by NaLA with respect to MSS echo those made by NTCA in the past on this same topic. With respect to MSS, NTCA has for several consecutive years filed petitions raising very similar concerns about the effect that escalating standards will have on the ability of low-income consumers to adopt and retain services. While positioned in the context of addressing fixed broadband standards, NTCA's filings raise nearly identical substantive concerns about the potential effects on consumers as those raised in the NaLA Petition for mobile service standards.⁷ As Free Press notes in its comments on the NaLA Petition, “[w]hile the Commission in general should look for opportunities to ensure that Lifeline users have robust service offerings available to them,” there are “unintended and unexpected consequences” that

⁴ NaLA Petition at 1.

⁵ *Id.* at 9.

⁶ *Id.* at 16-17.

⁷ *See, e.g.*, NTCA Petition at 2 (“Grant of the requested relief would enable existing low-income consumers to continue, *on a voluntary basis*, receiving the service they already subscribe to as of December 1, 2019, or move *on a voluntary basis* to the new higher speed standard of service if that choice fits within their budget. This relief is necessary because the increase in speed mandated by the Public Notice will likely come with an increase in monthly rates that may make broadband services unaffordable for some low-income consumers.”) (emphasis in original).

require further examination of the endlessly escalating MSS construct adopted in 2016.⁸ CTIA likewise highlights the concerns of enabling a further “increase in the mobile broadband MSS without a thorough analysis of the Lifeline marketplace and the impact of this change on the affordability of Lifeline services.”⁹ These are the very same points raised by NTCA in its own prior petitions for waiver with respect to fixed broadband MSS; NTCA concurs with the many parties in the record like CTIA and Free Press who raise them now in the context of mobile broadband MSS, and NTCA therefore supports grant of the NaLA Petition – and NTCA respectfully requests that the Commission acknowledge the same reasoning should prompt a grant of NTCA’s still-pending petition as well.

Similarly, NTCA has long been supportive of retaining Lifeline support for voice services, and even sought reconsideration on this very point in 2016.¹⁰ NTCA could not agree more with the many commenters who support NaLA based upon arguments about the role voice plays in enabling access to critical emergency services and concerns that “low-income consumers will be harmed financially and deprived of a choice of services” if they can no longer apply their Lifeline subsidy to either voice or broadband services.¹¹ Particularly at a time when consumers would benefit from minimal potential disruption to their existing communications services, continuing the phase-down of voice support under the Lifeline program could have a negative effect on

⁸ Comments of Free Press, WC Docket No. 11-42, *et al.* (filed Sept. 14, 2020), at 1.

⁹ Comments of CTIA, WC Docket No. 11-42, *et al.* (filed Sept. 14, 2020), at 2.

¹⁰ *See, e.g.*, Petition of NTCA, *et al.*, for Reconsideration, WC Docket No. 11-42, *et al.* (filed June 23, 2016), at 6-10.

¹¹ Comments of Oregon Public Utility Commission, WC Docket No. 11-42, *et al.* (filed Sept. 14, 2020), at 2; *see also, e.g.*, Joint Public Interest Comments, WC Docket No. 11-42, *et al.* (filed Sept. 14, 2020), at 8 (“During the COVID-19 public health and economic crisis, consumers have been increasingly reliant on voice service to stay connected with loved ones and to get things done remotely. Lifeline voice service also provides ready access to emergency services, which is even more critical during a public health crisis.”).

consumers who lack other options to remain in contact with friends and family or who may need to access emergency services.

For the foregoing reasons, NTCA supports grant of the NaLA Petition – and urges the Commission to apply the same reasoning in granting NTCA’s still-pending petition with respect to fixed broadband MSS as well.

Respectfully submitted,



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

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