

March 19, 2020

Lawmakers Urge Additional Lifeline Changes During Pandemic

Four Democratic senators today called on the FCC to prevent Lifeline eligibility terminations during the coronavirus pandemic, while a House Democrat urged the Commission to make it easier for newly eligible households to enroll and to consider easing the path for new providers to become eligible to deliver Lifeline service if necessary to meet growing demand.

The FCC earlier this week temporarily waived the Lifeline eligibility reverification and recertification requirements in an effort to ease burdens on low-income households during the pandemic (TR Daily, March 17) because it said it does “not believe that the public interest would be served by de-enrolling Lifeline subscribers who are unable to complete the recertification process or reverification process over the next 60 days” (TR Daily, March 17).

At the urging of Chairman Pai, nearly 400 broadband providers have taken his Keep Americans Connected Pledge, committing to waive late fees and for residential and small business customers financially impacted by the pandemic and not to terminate service for nonpayment by residential and small business customers financially impacted by the pandemic (TR Daily, March 13 and separate story today).

However, in a letter to Chairman Pai dated today, Sens. Richard Blumenthal (D., Conn.), Ed Markey (D., Mass.), Michael Bennet (D., Colo.), and Brian Schatz (D., Hawaii) said, “We commend the FCC for its Keep Americans Connected Pledge and for taking steps to waive reverification requirements that could hinder Lifeline. However, the FCC should go further to address the pressing economic, social, and safety needs of the public. Despite its laudable work during this crisis, the Commission has previously imposed limits and registration requirements on Lifeline and eligible telecommunications carriers that could inhibit enrollment, disconnect subscribers, or curtail use of the program. Too many eligible individuals face delays, denials, and disconnections because of paperwork issues and arcane rules. Moreover, with sudden business closures, reduced hours, and new financial pressures, more Americans will qualify for assistance and need this help. Lifeline should be able to keep up with an expected increase of demand.

“We strongly urge the FCC to commit that no one loses access to Lifeline at this time of crisis. Congress has invested the FCC with emergency powers to waive, suspend, or revise its policies and regulations for challenging times. The FCC should use these authorities to take every action necessary to ensure that Lifeline is available and fits the needs of subscribers. The Commission should also take swift steps to provide information about Lifeline to the public and ensure carriers more aggressively advertise their Lifeline services to all eligible individuals. Americans must know that help is available,” the senators added.

Also today, Rep. Doris Matsui (D., Calif.) asked Chairman Pai to ease the process for new Lifeline enrollees as the economic effects of social distancing lead to job losses and income reductions.

"I urge you to take immediate steps to provide any Americans that become eligible for Lifeline due to effects of COVID-19 access to the support they need as quickly as possible," she wrote.

She added, "I was pleased to see that recertification and reverification activity will be put on hold for the immediate future to prevent unnecessary service interruptions for current Lifeline subscribers. However, these steps will not do anything to assist Americans that become eligible for Lifeline or other qualifying assistance programs due to a loss in work or drop in income. The needs of these families cannot be ignored. As containment measures force businesses to suspend operations and schools to close, low income families deserve a reliable broadband connection through which they may participate in a remote classroom, work from home, or apply for new jobs. I urge you to take immediate steps to ease barriers to entry for families that have recently become eligible for the Lifeline program due to the effects of COVID-19.

"Specifically, I encourage you to explore measures to grant provisional approvals for Lifeline subscribers as they become eligible directly or via qualifying support programs. Navigating the Lifeline application process for the first time can be confusing and timely. Moreover, waiting for benefits to initiate is a luxury many students and workers cannot afford. To ensure there is service capacity to meet the increase in demand, temporary waivers or modifications to the FCC's current approach to determining Eligible Telecommunications Carrier status may need to be revisited, as has been done in previous emergencies, and the FCC should explore this option immediately. Additionally, I request that the FCC take additional steps to promote awareness of the Lifeline program in coordination with other federal assistance programs so that newly eligible Americans are able to take advantage of this program throughout this public health crisis," Rep. Matsui continued. —Lynn Stanton,
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