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Community Use of E-Rate Wi-Fi OK During Closures, FCC Says

Government entities and broadband service providers continued their efforts to address broadband availability and network capacity issues in the face of changing usage patterns as workers, students, and people in general increasingly spend their time at home, relying on the Internet for remote learning, remote working, information about the global coronavirus pandemic, and entertainment to distract them.

The FCC's Wireline Competition Bureau today issued a public notice confirming that school and library Wi-Fi networks supported by E-rate funding may be opened for community use during building closures related to the coronavirus pandemic. That is, members of the community can be outside the closed building using the Wi-Fi network.

"Specifically, libraries may offer access to E-Rate funded services on their premises as well as services that are 'integral, immediate and proximate to the provision of library services to library patrons' —and because the mission to serve the public is ongoing, libraries are permitted to allow the public to access E-Rate funded services even when they are closed to the public due to the coronavirus pandemic. Similarly, closed schools may allow access to E-Rate funded services 'to community members who access the Internet while on a school's campus' so long as they do not charge for the use of the service," the bureau said in a public notice in WC dockets 02-6 and 13-184.

"We hope that this reminder will promote connectivity to Americans impacted by the disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic," the bureau continued. "We leave it to individual schools and libraries to establish their own policies regarding use of their Wi-Fi networks during closures, including hours of use. And we remind all parties that health and well-being are paramount, and to follow any applicable health and safety guidelines, including those on social distancing, as may be set out by relevant federal, state, local, and Tribal authorities."

In a statement on the bureau's action, John Windhausen Jr., executive director of the Schools, Health & Libraries Broadband (SHLB) Coalition, said, "Many schools and libraries have been uncertain about whether to switch off their Wi-Fi networks when the institution is closed, out of concern that they would lose part of their E-rate funding. Shutting down these Wi-Fi networks could have been disastrous for the millions of people who depend on schools or libraries as their only point of internet access. We are pleased that the FCC, in response to our request, has clarified that schools and libraries may leave their Wi-Fi networks on for community use without jeopardizing their E-rate funding. The SHLB Coalition now encourages the FCC to take the next step and grant the Petition of the Boulder Valley School District to permit schools and libraries to extend their broadband services to surrounding residential consumers."

The American Library Association today “recommended the nation’s libraries leave their Wi-Fi open 24/7. ALA hopes our statement will encourage more libraries to do the same and without penalty. Nearly every library in the country offers free Wi-Fi for patrons. In some communities, the library offers the fastest internet speed in town; in a few, the library offers the only internet.”

Meanwhile, International Telecommunication Union Secretary General Houlin Zhao announced that he has directed the ITU staff “to leverage without any delay ITU’s existing regulatory and policy-maker platform to help countries and industry cope with the increasing stress being put on global networks.”

He added, “The platform ITU is launching today aims to assist national policy-makers, regulators and industry stakeholders to ensure that networks are kept resilient and telecommunication services are available to all to the maximum extent possible by sharing best practices and initiatives put in place during the COVID-19 crisis. It will collect relevant and trustworthy information and expertise on actions that telecommunication policy-makers, regulators and others in the regulatory community can use to ensure that their telecommunication networks and services serve the needs of their country.”

Information will be shared through the portal in areas such as emergency preparedness; broadband availability, affordability, and accessibility; quality of service and quality of experience; consumer protection; and universal service strategies, the ITU said.

The private sector also announced new and ongoing efforts to address consumer affordability issues and network capacity, among other issues.

Verizon Communications, Inc., today announced that “for those residential and small business wireless customers whose economic circumstances have been impacted due to the coronavirus, Verizon will waive overage charges in addition to our Keep Americans Connected pledge to not terminate service and waive late fees. We’re also offering new internet options for low-income households and adding 15GB [gigabytes] of 4G LTE data to consumer and small business plans automatically.”

It also announced “plans for a discount program on Fios broadband plans for qualified new low-income customers and two months waived service charges for current Verizon customers that are part of the Lifeline discount program.” And it said that as of April 3, it will offer “a new broadband discount program ... to new Fios Internet customers who qualify through the Lifeline program. Customers may select any Verizon Fios speed in our Mix & Match plans and receive a \$20 discount per month.”

AT&T, Inc., said today that its network “continues to perform well as we closely monitor bandwidth and capacity. Our customers are definitely making more voice calls as we all try to stay connected to loved ones from home. In fact, Wi-Fi calling was up a staggering 88% yesterday versus a normal Sunday.”

On Sunday, data traffic between AT&T’s network and peers tied its record set on Friday, the company said.

CenturyLink, Inc., Chief Technology Officer Andrew Dugan said in a blog post that the company is currently “seeing no impacts to our network, making the risk to our customers’ service continuity minimal. However, we know how quickly things can change. Our Network Operations Center is constantly monitoring usage across our network. Through a combination of smart technologies and human expertise, our teams can quickly add capability, modify paths, and shape traffic to meet the changing needs of our customers.”

FCC Commissioner Brendan Carr issued a statement today praising broadband providers for their efforts in rolling out or expanding “access plans tailored to keeping students and others in low-income households online and connected.”

“This is the private sector stepping up and extending the reach of the FCC’s own low-income initiatives. Over the past week, we have been in close communication with America’s Internet providers because we are all in this together. I want to commend them for how quickly they have moved to ensure that Americans — and low-income consumers in particular — stay connected. Internet providers understand that low-income households now more than ever need access to fast Internet to keep working and learning. Creating and enhancing plans for those most in need is caring for our communities and deserves our praise. I’m grateful to our partners in the private sector who have worked with us on so many of these plans. Their leadership and continued quality service will keep kids connected and help all of us beat this virus,” Commissioner Carr said. —Lynn Stanton, lynn.stanton@wolterskluwer.com

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