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### More Than 500 Broadband Providers Sign Keep Americans Connected Pledge

More than 500 broadband providers have signed the Keep Americans Connected Pledge aimed at ensuring Americans don't lose broadband or telephone connectivity during the coronavirus pandemic, FCC Chairman Ajit Pai announced today.

"I'm pleased that over 500 broadband providers, serving hundreds of millions of Americans, have signed this pledge, and the number of providers keeps growing," Mr. Pai said in a blog posting.

"I also challenged our nation's broadband and telephone service providers to go above and beyond the commitments in the Keep Americans Connected Pledge in order to meet the connectivity needs of the American people, and I'm grateful that many have done so," Mr. Pai noted. "These offerings include free service for low-income Americans and students, lifting data caps, and increasing broadband speeds at no cost to meet the increased demand for telework and distance learning. The FCC has compiled a list of some of these offerings to help consumers see what's available. I applaud these companies for taking these steps, and taking them quickly, to ensure that our transition to telework, telehealth, and remote learning is smoother than it otherwise would be."

Meanwhile, carriers today continued to provide updates on the demands on their networks and usage changes during the pandemic as well as on efforts to address the specific needs of their customers and others.

"As people practice social distancing and adjust to working and learning from home, we've seen shifts in the way they're using the network," Neville Ray, president-technology for T-Mobile US, Inc., said in a blog posting. "While overall data traffic is higher, the overall contribution to total network loading has been relatively minor."

"People are talking and texting more. Messaging is up dramatically, with a 26% increase in SMS (texting) and a 77% increase in MMS (pictures, multi-party texts, etc.). And, the amount of time people spend on calls has increased 17% nationwide," Mr. Ray added. "People are using their smartphones to connect the household. Smartphone mobile hotspot usage is up 38% as customers share their smartphone data connections with other devices, like laptops and tablets. Gaming is helping everyone pass the time. Video game traffic has increased 45%!"

Mr. Ray also said that "people are heeding advice to #StayAtHome. In New York City, for example, we've seen an 86% increase in subscribers with limited mobility, meaning they connect to cell sites only in their primary location. In the San Francisco Bay Area, it's a 77% increase, and we're seeing similar patterns across the country!"

AT&T, Inc. said that its “network continues to perform well during the coronavirus pandemic. Our customers continue to make a lot of calls, with Wi-Fi calling continuing to lead the way up 78% versus a normal Monday as customers keep connected while staying home. We continuously monitor bandwidth usage with tools that analyze and correlate network statistics, which reveal network trends, and provide us with performance and capacity reports that help us manage our network.”

AT&T said that wireless voice minutes of use were up 39% yesterday and consumer home voice calling minutes of use were up 45% compared to an average Monday. The carrier also said that its “core network traffic – which includes our business, home broadband and wireless usage – was up 27% yesterday compared to the same day last month.”

AT&T also said that it has “deployed more than 18 portable cell sites ... during the response to COVID-19 to bolster coverage for our FirstNet customers.”

In addition, AT&T announced that through May 22, “qualified schools activating new lines on qualified data-only plans for school-issued tablets, 4G LTE-enabled laptops and hotspot devices will get the wireless data service at no cost for 60 days.” The carrier also said that it is “making AccessMyLANTM for the qualified lines available at no cost for 60 days. This service allows school administrators to manage the internet sites their students can access to help protect them from unsafe content and also to block malicious sites, malware and hacking attempts.”

“Mobile handoffs – the times when a data session moves from one cell site to another as users walk or drive around, are down 27% vs. a typical week, indicating people are increasingly staying in place,” Verizon Communications, Inc., reported today. “As people are being asked to stay physically distant, they are finding alternate ways to stay connected through a significant rise in calls, text and picture messages.”

Verizon has seen an average of nine billion texts being sent each day and an average of 800 million wireless calls, which is nearly twice the volume as Mother’s Day.

“Typically, Mother’s Day is always our highest Sunday call volume,” said Kyle Malady, chief technology officer for Verizon. “The weekday calling numbers are now significantly exceeding the national holiday honoring Mom.”

“Our networks are meeting customers’ changing habits. In small pockets where there has been a significant increase in usage, our engineers are quickly adding capacity to meet customers’ demand,” Mr. Malady added.

Also, House Energy and Commerce Committee ranking member Greg Walden (R., Ore.) urged wireless carriers to provide customers with additional data.

“During this unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, Americans are wisely staying at home as much as possible. However, more than 21 million Americans do not have access to standard broadband services, and others are facing fees and data limits as they rely more on their at-home technologies for work, learning, healthcare and entertainment,” Rep. Walden said. “I am pleased to see the adjustments wireless providers have already done on a voluntary basis, such as expanding Lifeline low-income access,

making new network investments, and sharing of spectrum. This is an unprecedented time, and wireless providers have already stepped up to the plate in a big way.”

“But more can be done. Increasing data caps for hotspots is the fastest way to connect Americans temporarily who do not have Wi-Fi at home,” the congressman added. “However, while this temporary action can fill the gap during this crisis, it could cause network congestion in the long-term if everyone were to rely on this access. We must not lose sight of the bigger problem: the need to deploy broadband in the long-term. The broadband divide has never come more clearly into focus than now where states, including Oregon, are saying online school work won’t count in part because not all students have access to broadband. Whether it’s our kids keeping up with school in the virtual classroom or workers staying on track remotely, we all know there’s more work ahead, and this action will have immediate impact. We’re in it together; let’s get this done.” —Paul Kirby, paul.kirby@wolterskluwer.com

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