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Some Carriers Plan Continued Keep Americans Connected Efforts

With the expiration of the Keep Americans Connected Pledge launched by FCC Chairman Ajit Pai in March, some carriers have announced plans to continue some of the pledge's policies aimed at helping Americans who have suffered economically during the COVID-19 pandemic to keep their broadband connections to the Internet.

The pledge as crafted by Chairman Pai in mid-March committed providers "for the next 60 days to: (1) not terminate service to any residential or small business customers because of their inability to pay their bills due to the disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic; (2) waive any late fees that any residential or small business customers incur because of their economic circumstances related to the coronavirus pandemic; and (3) open its Wi-Fi hotspots to any American who needs them."

Chairman Pai later announced that he was extending the pledge until June 30. More recently, he has urged Congress to find a way to assist service providers who have lost revenues as they provided service to those who cannot pay and waived late fees.

In a press release, the Wireless Internet Service Providers Association said, "WISPA members generally follow the tenets of the Keeping Americans Connected pledge as part of their normal business operations, much less during the COVID-19 pandemic. They will continue to work with their customers to continue to keep them connected as the pandemic rages on."

WISPA said that it recently polled its members on the cost of keeping Americans online during COVID-19. "Our survey shows that our average member lost approximately 8% of their monthly revenue as a result of keeping their communities connected during the pandemic," said WISPA President and Chief Executive Officer Claude Aiken, adding that they have done so "at a time when they were busy working with localities to lift students out of the homework gap. Community service is in our members' DNA, and I am proud of their commitment to serve those who need service the most."

Cedar Rapids, Iowa-based ImOn Communications announced yesterday that it "will continue to honor the elements of the pledge as long as there is a federal or state declaration of an emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic."

A Verizon Communications, Inc., spokesperson said that starting today, "customers who signed up for the Pledge will automatically be enrolled in our Stay Connected repayment program to provide options to stay connected. We'll continue to work with customers to provide the best financial options available now and moving forward."

AT&T, Inc., said, in a statement, “These temporary offers [under the pledge] assisted tens of thousands of customers who experienced economic hardship due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We urge customers impacted to contact us to make payment arrangements.” The company has an Access from AT&T Internet service for qualifying low-income customers at \$10 per month.

Comcast Corp. has announced that it will keep its wireless hot spots open until the year-end and has extended its offer of two months of free service for new eligible low-income Internet Essentials customers. —Lynn Stanton, lynn.stanton@wolterskluwer.com

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