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New Heroes Act Includes $15B in Lifeline, Home E-Rate Funds

House Democrats yesterday evening released an updated version of the Heroes Act that passed the House in May (TR Daily, May 18), with an overall price tag of $2.2 trillion, down from the $3 trillion package passed earlier that the Senate has not acted on.

The new bill includes $12 billion in Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF) support for off-site Wi-Fi hotspots, equipment, connected devices, and connection service for students, school staff, and library patrons, up from $1.5 billion in the earlier version of the Heroes Act.

Like the earlier bill, it would prohibit service terminations for nonpayment or imposition of late fees due to COVID-19 financial hardships; prohibit imposition of data caps or overage fees; and require service providers “to open Wi-Fi hotspots to the public at no cost during the COVID-19 public health emergency,” according to a title-by-title summary released by House Democrats.

It also includes $3 billion in Emergency Broadband Connectivity Fund (EBCF) support for deeper Lifeline discounts of $50 per month per household, or $75 per month for households on tribal lands, if a household member has been laid off or furloughed. The EBCF could also support up to $100 for a connected device, provided the eligible household is charged between $10 and $50 for the device. EBCF support could also be used to offset increased costs in connection with a mandate to provide unlimited minutes and data to Lifeline customers during the pandemic emergency.

The version of the Heroes Act that passed the House in May included $4 billion in EBCF funding.

As under the bill passed previously, the FCC would have seven days after enactment of the bill to adopt rules for both the ECF and EBCF.

The new Heroes Act would authorize the FCC to set rates for both interstate and intrastate inmate calling service (ICS), and the bill would set interim rate caps of 4 cents per minute on debit calls and 5 cents per minute on collect calls.

The new proposal also includes $200 million to fund broadband used for telemedicine services, to be administered by the FCC, and $24 million for broadband mapping, according to the title-by-title summary.

The new Heroes Act also includes many provisions aimed at easing access to, support for, and reimbursement for medical services provided using broadband connections.
Like the earlier bill, it would repeal the statutory requirement that the FCC auction public safety T-band spectrum and relocate incumbents.

The new Heroes Act would provide $2.6 billion for grants to electric and telecom Rural Utilities Service borrowers that are “dealing with impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their operations, including covering the cost of forgiving ratepayer debt, to ensure they may continue to provide critical services to rural communities,” according to the title-by-title summary.

It includes $3.6 billion for grants to states for contingency planning, preparation, and resilience of elections for federal office, according to the title-by-title summary. —Lynn Stanton, lynn.stanton@wolterskluwer.com

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