

Sept. 17, 2020

Pai Praises Response to Pandemic

FCC Chairman Ajit Pai, speaking in a pre-recorded message for an online conference hosted by NTCA, today praised telephone and broadband companies for stepping up to help Americans remain connected during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“At the outset of this once in a lifetime pandemic, one thing immediately was clear, connectivity would be key in this crisis,” he said. “With telework, distance learning, and the like becoming the ‘new normal,’ broadband would be a vital lifeline for pretty much everyone, everywhere. And, so, our immediate priority at the FCC was making sure Americans stayed connected.”

Mr. Pai praised the nearly 800 telephone and broadband companies that participated in the “Keep Americans Connected Pledge” he initiated in which companies agreed not to turn off service for consumers through June 30 in the wake of the economic fallout of the pandemic. Companies also agreed to make their Wi-Fi hotspots available publicly, he noted.

“We put out the call and you answered, big time,” Mr. Pai said.

A “significant amount” of the companies that agreed to the pledge were NTCA members, he said.

Many NTCA members “went above and beyond what was in the pledge,” by doing things such as increasing service speeds for customers for no additional charge and providing devices to students, Mr. Pai said.

Mr. Pai also credited work crews for maintaining phone and Internet connections throughout the pandemic.

“Crews were asked to go out and do their jobs, even as most Americans were told to stay home,” he said. “They worked non-stop to do new installs and service calls, despite the increased health risks.”

The pandemic has “ended any debate” about whether all Americans need to be able to access the Internet, Mr. Pai said.

The FCC continues to do work that should help expand broadband access, he said, pointing, among other things, to the FCC “overhauling” the Universal Service Fund so it is easier for companies to bring high-speed Internet services to areas where it is “challenging, to say the least” to reach.

“The FCC is doing our best to be an effective partner to make sure that rural customers can get the same broadband services as their urban counterparts,” Mr. Pai said.

In particular, he noted the FCC’s creation of the Alternative Connect America Cost Model (A-CAM) for rate-of-return carriers.

That model “provides more efficiency and more value for each taxpayer dollar,” Mr. Pai said, adding: “It gives carriers the predictable support they need to deliver broadband to their customers in high-cost areas.”

The FCC authorized \$4.9 billion in support for 171 rate-of-return carriers to be used over the next 10 years, he said (TR Daily, Aug. 22, 2019).

In addition, Mr. Pai stressed the importance of the FCC establishing the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund, which will provide up to \$16 billion over the next 10 years for carriers to deploy networks in unserved areas. Bidding in the auction is slated to start next month.

"The ongoing pandemic has crystalized the need to bring broadband to the unserved," he said. —Jeff Williams

Copyright © 2020 CCH Incorporated, All Rights Reserved