

Keeping Connected Amid Crisis

Summary of Policies to Keep People Online During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Immediate Demand-Side Stimulus Policies that Will Help Get and Keep Everyone Connected

- Emergency Federal funding for the FCC’s “Lifeline” Low-Income Program
 - Congress should appropriate \$1 billion for an immediate emergency Lifeline fund to accommodate an influx of new sign-ups and ensure robust, unlimited service for all.
 - Congress is poised to spend \$1 trillion in ongoing stimulus packages, supposedly aimed at helping those most-impacted by COVID-19-related job losses and the economic slowdown.
 - Appropriating new funding will ensure Lifeline as currently administered can handle a large influx of new customers using more data and voice minutes without harming other ratepayers.
- Emergency Eligible Telecommunications Carrier Waivers for Existing Form 477 Filers
 - The FCC should immediately waive its ETC rules and allow Lifeline subscribers to apply their \$9.25 discount to any broadband service.
 - If major residential ISPs like Comcast and Charter (with infrastructure that passes more than 100 million homes, and which already offer reduced-cost services for low-income households) could accept Lifeline, they would be top choices for most Lifeline households.
 - The FCC could limit the waiver to those ISPs who have filed FCC Form 477 data consistently during the prior two-year period, to limit participation to providers that are well-established.
- Public Awareness Campaign Promoting Lifeline
 - The FCC should work with state utility regulators, Lifeline providers, local TV and radio broadcasters, and providers of direct social services to create and distribute Lifeline Public Service Announcements (“PSAs”) in multiple languages.
 - PSAs should be funded by local broadcasters, in fulfillment of their public interest obligations.
 - Congress could appropriate up to \$25 million to pay for consumer outreach.
 - The FCC should run online or print ads targeted at potential subscribers or those who might know them, though platforms like Facebook and Google should donate ad space as well.
- Promoting Easier Lifeline Sign-Ups Online, At Home, and Through Other Social Services
 - Congress should fund education and training in the use of the Lifeline National Verifier Portal for staff administering other social service programs.
 - The FCC should grant provisional approvals for new Lifeline subscribers for at least 90-days.

- Congress should mandate that the FCC (in conjunction with the relevant oversight agencies) develop a unified application for social services that includes Lifeline.
- The FCC should waive or permanently eliminate overly-burdensome National Verifier requirements on proof of enrollment in qualifying programs and proof of address.
- While online and mail-in application options will allow many subscribers to apply for Lifeline without leaving home, Congress should fund an expansion of existing USAC call centers to create at-home jobs and allow applications to be taken over the phone.
- The FCC must ensure that any administrative delays in Lifeline processing do not impede the ability of an eligible subscriber to secure a device and service as soon as possible.

Medium-Term Supply- and Demand-Side Stimulus to Help Get and Keep People Connected

- Lifeline Broadband Vouchers
 - Allocate up to \$25 billion over a two-year period for Lifeline qualifying households, to provide \$50 monthly vouchers (\$600 per year, per household) that could be used for broadband from any current or temporarily-designated ETC (*i.e.*, cable ISPs).
- Congress Should Create and Fund a standalone “e-Rate@Home” Program
 - Congress should create a stimulus-focused 3-year, \$3 billion fund using e-Rate’s needs-based formula to subsidize the purchase of laptop computers and fund construction of Wi-Fi networks that extend a school or library’s broadband connection to surrounding neighborhoods.
 - This Wi-Fi service should be offered for free to households with students, with funding also set aside for schools that operate particularly long bus routes to support equipping school buses with hotspots for mobile Internet access.
- Helping HotSpots
 - Congress should temporarily expand e-Rate to appropriate an emergency \$2 billion for schools to purchase hotspots and hotspot plans (typically sold in gigabyte buckets) to loan out to students that do not have a home internet connection.
 - This temporary fix would be a bridge to when school Wi-Fi networks are extended, or other programs described below are stood up to ensure that all students can get online at home.
- Every Child Online Tax Deduction
 - Congress should establish the “Every Child Online Tax Deduction Program” for the approximately 20 million households or families with qualifying children (under 18 years of age) earning less than \$60,000 in taxable income during 2019.

- Participating families or households would be allowed to deduct the cost of home internet access up to \$240 for the year, and deduct up to \$300 in qualifying internet access device expenditures made in 2020.
- Learning@Home Child Care Tax Credit
 - Enact a “Learning@Home” tax credit, to offset a portion of the costs of home learning services.
 - Participating families or households would be allowed to claim funds spent on distance tutorial services under the existing Child Care Tax Credit.
 - Because prolonged quarantines will reduce families’ typical childcare costs, this change to the existing program should have minimal fiscal cost.
- Matching Grants for States to Expand Existing Low-income Programs
 - Congress should create a \$2 billion Emergency Lifeline Matching Grant fund, which would offer states a 1:1 match on their existing low-income funds, and a 2:1 match on new low-income funds.
 - The U.S. states collectively allocate approximately \$1.7 billion for all state Universal Service Funds, with Lifeline accounting for a fraction of this total.
 - A matching grant fund of \$2 billion over 2-years would bring additional relief to the residents of those states with existing programs in place, while inducing other states to restore or implement their own low-income funds.
- Broadband Deployment Fund
 - Congress should create a 5-year, \$50 billion broadband deployment fund with a mix of interest-free loans and grants for high-capacity networks in unserved areas.
 - Congress should utilize the expertise of NTIA, the Department of Agriculture, and the FCC, and create a joint coordinating committee that administers the 5-year fund.
 - These monies can augment the FCC’s existing Connect America Fund and Rural Digital Opportunity Fund efforts, accelerating many projects that would not be completed for another 10 years.
- “Cash for e-Clunkers”
 - Congress should create a \$3 billion program offering \$150 rebates on computer purchases for ~20 million households with less than \$60,000 in taxable income.
- Congress Should Immediately Pre-empt all State Anti-Municipal Broadband Prohibitions
 - Congress should prohibit anti-competitive bans on municipal broadband to ensure local communities can offer affordable high-speed internet access.

Immediate Private Actions that Will Help Get and Keep Everyone Connected

- All ISPs should follow Charter's lead, and offer free home Internet on a temporary basis to those in need, but with no strings attached with regard to long-term contracts.
- All mobile carriers should follow T-Mobile's lead to offer unlimited data on all wireless plans and increase Lifeline broadband data allotments. All Lifeline carriers should also drop their 1,000 monthly voice minute cap and offer unlimited calls.
- All ISPs should follow Charter's, AT&T's, Comcast's and other ISPs' lead, and suspend all data caps and overage fees.