

# Congress of the United States

## Washington, DC 20510

April 28, 2020

The Honorable Ajit Pai  
Chairman  
Federal Communications Commission  
445 12th Street SW  
Washington, DC 20554

Dear Chairman Pai:

We write to urge the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to work directly with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to help ensure the millions of people in the U.S. who are newly eligible for the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) or Medicaid, due to job loss or reductions in income, are informed of their eligibility for the FCC's Lifeline program.<sup>1</sup> The Lifeline program is the primary federal program charged with providing financial assistance to help low-income families obtain broadband and telephone services.

The ongoing pandemic has led to financial hardships for millions of Americans. At least 26 million Americans filed for unemployment benefits in the past month alone,<sup>2</sup> and states are seeing a surge in applications for SNAP benefits.<sup>3</sup> Medicaid enrollment is also expected to increase significantly as a result of these unprecedented job losses and health coverage.<sup>4</sup> Non-essential businesses and schools have closed across the country to limit the spread of the coronavirus, leaving families to rely on the internet now more than ever to access public benefits, search for employment, learn from home, or access telehealth services. The need is greatest among low-income households forced to stretch limited resources to try to keep up with monthly expenses and put food on the table during the public health crisis. For these vulnerable populations, the FCC's Lifeline program can help struggling families afford basic internet and telephone connectivity at a time when they need it most – but only if they know about it.

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<sup>1</sup> Do I Qualify? (Accessed April 21, 2020). Universal Service Administrative Company. Retrieved from <https://www.lifelinesupport.org/do-i-qualify/>.

<sup>2</sup> Chaney, Sarah and Guilford, Gwynn. (2020, April 23). *Another 4.4 Million Americans Sought Unemployment Benefits Last Week*. The Wall Street Journal. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/millions-of-u-s-workers-continue-to-seek-unemployment-help-amid-coronavirus-11587634201>

<sup>3</sup> See Kulish, Nicholas. (2020, April 8). 'Never Seen Anything Like It': Cars Line Up for Miles at Food Banks. The New York Times. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/business/economy/coronavirus-food-banks.html>; See e.g., McGreevy, Patrick. (2020, March 31). *Demand for food stamps surges in California as virus takes economic toll*. LA Times. Retrieved from <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-03-31/california-demand-food-stamps-calfresh-coronavirus>; Chang, Julie. (2020, April 15). *Coronavirus crisis leads to surge in Texas food stamp applications*. Statesman. Retrieved from <https://www.statesman.com/news/20200415/coronavirus-crisis-leads-to-surge-in-texas-food-stamp-applications>; Lisinki, Chris. (2020, April 8) *Mass. Residents Turning to Public Assistance Programs*. WGBH News. Retrieved from <https://www.wgbh.org/news/local-news/2020/04/08/mass-residents-turning-to-public-assistance-programs>.

<sup>4</sup> Raman, Sandhya. (2020, April 2). *Medicaid enrollment will likely increase because of COVID-19, experts say*. Roll Call. Retrieved from <https://www.rollcall.com/2020/04/02/medicaid-enrollment-will-likely-increase-because-of-covid-19-experts-say/>

Congress recently passed legislation to provide states additional funding and flexibility to streamline access to SNAP for people adversely effected by the economic impact of the coronavirus. Many of the at least 26 million Americans who have lost their jobs through no fault of their own in the last five weeks may also soon turn to the food assistance programs to feed their families and enroll in Medicaid to access necessary health care. This will likely lead to a significant increase in the number of individuals eligible for the Lifeline program.

Even before the pandemic, only 7 million out of the 38 million people who were eligible for the Lifeline program were enrolled.<sup>5</sup> While we understand that the FCC has traditionally issued guidelines for states and telecommunications providers to advertise the Lifeline program, given the critical role of internet connectivity during the coronavirus pandemic, we urge the FCC to coordinate directly with USDA and HHS as well as states and stakeholders to help ensure people in need are informed about their eligibility for the Lifeline program. We also respectfully request responses to the following questions:

1. What is the FCC currently doing to work with the USDA and HHS to help ensure that people in the U.S. who are newly eligible for the Lifeline program are aware that they can receive subsidized communications services?
2. What data has the FCC collected on the number of people in the U.S. who are newly eligible for the Lifeline program since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic and how many of those newly eligible have enrolled in the program?
3. Please detail the additional resources and authorities the FCC needs to ensure qualifying people in the U.S. know that they are eligible for the Lifeline program.

Thank you for prompt attention to this matter. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



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Amy Klobuchar  
United States Senator



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Marcia L. Fudge  
Member of Congress



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Richard J. Durbin  
United States Senator



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Anna G. Eshoo  
Member of Congress

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<sup>5</sup> Remarks of Commissioner Geoffrey Starks at NTCA—the Rural Broadband Association Legislative and Policy Conference. (2020, April 21). Federal Communications Commission. Retrieved from <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-363893A1.pdf>. (highlighting the need for the FCC to coordinate with other federal agencies to inform eligible Americans about the Lifeline program).

*Charles Schumer*

Charles E. Schumer  
United States Senator

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Doug Jones  
United States Senator

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Kirsten Gillibrand  
United States Senator

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Mazie Hirono  
United States Senator

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Bernard Sanders  
United States Senator

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Tammy Duckworth  
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Edward J. Markey  
United States Senator

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Ron Wyden  
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Robert Menendez  
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Margaret Wood Hassan  
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Benjamin L. Cardin  
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Brian Schatz  
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Michael F. Bennet  
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Richard Blumenthal  
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Kamala D. Harris  
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Sherrod Brown  
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Patrick Leahy  
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Tim Kaine  
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Jack Reed  
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Catherine Cortez Masto  
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Elizabeth Warren  
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Diana DeGette  
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Ted Deutch  
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Marcy Kaptur  
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Ann McLane Kuster  
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Barbara Lee  
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Eleanor Holmes Norton  
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Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez  
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Ilhan Omar  
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Peter Welch  
Member of Congress

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Frederica S. Wilson  
Member of Congress

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John Yarmuth  
Member of Congress

CC: The Honorable Sonny Perdue, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture  
The Honorable Alex Azar, U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services