



FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
WASHINGTON

OFFICE OF THE
ACTING CHAIRWOMAN

February 26, 2021

The Honorable John Thune
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Communications, Media, and Broadband
Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
United States Senate
511 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Ranking Member Thune:

Thank you for your letter regarding the Commission's efforts to assist Americans in staying connected during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. As you highlighted in your correspondence, the pandemic has impacted every aspect of daily life for people all across the country. Moreover, it has revealed hard truths about the extent of the digital divide, and the way those without adequate broadband access are now denied access to education, jobs, healthcare, and other opportunities. That is why I agree with you that during this public health emergency access to a broadband connection is critical.

The impact of the pandemic is particularly challenging for students and presents a special hardship for those who lack the internet connection they need to participate in remote learning. There are news reports from across the country describing how school-aged children are sitting outside of school buildings, libraries, fast food restaurants, and anywhere else they can get the connection they need to participate in remote learning. Other students are navigating schoolwork during this time using mobile phones with data caps that may limit their ability to complete their assignments and attend class online. According to recent data, as many as 16.9 million children across the country lack adequate broadband access at home and fall into the homework gap. The homework gap is especially pronounced among students of color and those living in rural areas. But no parent—in rural or urban America—wants their child to be denied access to an education because they lack sufficient broadband connectivity at home.

In response to petitions filed by a broad array of stakeholders, including the Mississippi Department of Education, the State of Nevada, the State of Colorado, the Florida Department of Management Services, among others, the Commission's Wireline Competition Bureau (Bureau) issued a Public Notice seeking comment on how the E-Rate program could be used to support remote learning during the pandemic.

The Public Notice specifically sought comment on what measures should be used to safeguard E-Rate funds, and protect against waste, fraud, and abuse. In addition, commenters

were encouraged to explain how E-Rate program funding used to address student connectivity would not be duplicative of funding available through the CARES Act and the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program, including what guardrails or other measures should be implemented to avoid duplication of limited funds. Furthermore, the Bureau sought comment on the cost of the services and equipment needed to support remote learning, and encouraged schools, libraries, and other stakeholders that have purchased these services and equipment to provide specific information about the services they purchased, the costs they paid, and steps they took to ensure the services were sufficient and the costs were reasonable.

Comments on the Bureau's Public Notice were received on February 16 and reply comments were received just three days ago, on February 23. Notably, a broad range of stakeholders including more than two dozen State Attorneys General, the National Football League, the National School Boards Association, and others filed in support, urging the agency to address the emergency petitions.

As we assess this record, we will be mindful of the issues identified in your letter including how this effort could complement other sources of funding, the need to engage in reasoned analysis by experts at the agency including the Office of Economics and Analytics, how to account for school needs in light of remote learning and re-opening plans, and how to develop smart programmatic controls. In the meantime, you asked about whether schools are using broadband services during the pandemic. The heightened reliance on remote learning, as well as social distancing in schools providing in-person instruction, has increased demand on school networks, creating a need for additional on-campus bandwidth this school year. As a result, the Bureau opened a second E-Rate application filing window in October 2020 to allow schools to purchase additional broadband bandwidth to address needs resulting from the increasing shift to 1:1 student-to-device ratios in classrooms; live streaming of classroom instruction to students at home; and expanding use of cloud-based educational tools and platforms—all of which can significantly increase on-campus bandwidth requirements. The agency received almost \$100 million in additional funding requests during this second application filing window.

Finally, I appreciate your concern about our system of universal service contributions, which is based on assessments to the interstate portion of carriers' end-user telecommunications revenues. This system was born out of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. I look forward to working with you and others in Congress to explore how to improve this system and, in the meantime, recognize the Commission's important responsibilities as a steward of the Universal Service Fund.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jessica Rosenworcel", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jessica Rosenworcel



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OFFICE OF THE
ACTING CHAIRWOMAN

February 26, 2021

The Honorable Roger Wicker
Ranking Member
Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
United States Senate
512 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Ranking Member Wicker:

Thank you for your letter regarding the Commission's efforts to assist Americans in staying connected during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. As you highlighted in your correspondence, the pandemic has impacted every aspect of daily life for people all across the country. Moreover, it has revealed hard truths about the extent of the digital divide, and the way those without adequate broadband access are now denied access to education, jobs, healthcare, and other opportunities. That is why I agree with you that during this public health emergency access to a broadband connection is critical.

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