

June 27, 2013

The Honorable Claire McCaskill
508 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator McCaskill:

We represent a diverse coalition of public interest, civil rights and community-based organizations working on issues related to the media, telecommunications, technology and social justice. We are writing to underscore the significance of the Lifeline Program to the communities we represent. We share your vision of bringing next-generation connectivity to our schools and libraries via the ConnectED initiative, but not at the expense of defunding Lifeline. These two programs are complementary pathways to bringing connectivity to our country, and we believe that both are necessary if we are to eradicate the digital divide and reduce economic disparities.

Though recent media attention has focused on the instances in which certain companies have abused the Lifeline Program, we write to draw your attention to the actual subscribers and communities who rely on this vital resource. Lifeline's core beneficiaries encompass our most vulnerable and needy populations: seniors, people with disabilities, veterans, Native Americans and struggling families.

For these subscribers, the Lifeline Program lives up to its name and serves as a literal lifeline to the outside world for access to medical care, job opportunities and emergency services. Many subscribers use Lifeline to escape the circumstances that made them eligible for the program in the first place. While the modest subsidy Lifeline subscribers receive may not seem like much, it means the difference between having a connection to the outside world and not.

We share your desire to eliminate any abuses of the Lifeline Program. We urge you to continue to monitor the impact of the FCC reforms issued in 2012 instead of calling to defund Lifeline entirely. The reforms, which include the establishment of a centralized database to confirm eligibility and check for duplication, will address many of your very legitimate concerns. At this juncture, it would be premature to consider eliminating Lifeline without first allowing for full implementation of the reforms and study of their consequent effects.

Our coalition similarly supports many of the points raised in your letter sent on June 11, 2013 to Acting Federal Communications Commission Chairwoman Clyburn concerning the significance and necessity of the ConnectED initiative. We too recognize the need to bring next-generation connectivity to our schools and libraries, but believe that this aim can be achieved while maintaining and reforming the Lifeline Program.

Rather than viewing this as a zero-sum game between Lifeline and expansion of E-Rate to fund ConnectED, we should instead view these programs as complementary means of bridging our nation's digital divide. If we focus our resources on E-Rate while neglecting the Lifeline Program, we risk further solidifying that divide – because, what good is providing a fast Internet connection to a low-income student in school if that same student returns to a home that lacks basic telephone and Internet service? While putting high-speed Internet in our nation's schools

should be a top priority, it should not be accomplished by depriving our most vulnerable communities of basic phone service.

As public interest, civil rights and community advocates, we too have an interest in seeing that the money collected from consumers for the Universal Service Fund is used efficiently and effectively. We believe the solution is to build on the FCC reforms to eliminate fraud and penalize those who abuse the program. We must continue to serve the individuals who need the Lifeline Program most.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

AARP
Access Humboldt
AdvoCare, Inc.
Appalshop
Asian Americans Advancing Justice – AAJC
Benton Foundation¹
Center for Media Justice (CMJ)
Center for Rural Strategies
Chicago Media Action
Common Cause
Common Frequency
Consumer Action
Consumers Union
Free Press Action Fund
GRO – Grass Roots Organizing, Missouri
Main Street Project
Maryland Office of People’s Counsel
Media Alliance
Media Literacy Project
Metro Organization for Racial and Economic Equity (MORE²)
Missouri Association for Social Welfare (MASW)
Missouri Jobs with Justice
Missouri Progressive Vote Coalition
Missourians Organizing for Reform and Empowerment
National Association of State Utility Consumer Advocates (NASUCA)
National Consumer Law Center, on behalf of its low-income clients
National Hispanic Media Coalition (NHMC)
Native Public Media
Open Access Connections
Open Technology Institute
Public Knowledge

¹ The Benton Foundation is a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting communication in the public interest. These comments reflect the institutional view of the Foundation and, unless obvious from the text, are not intended to reflect the views of individual Foundation officers, directors, or advisors.

SEIU Missouri State Council
The Greenlining Institute
The Utility Reform Network (TURN)
United Church of Christ, OC Inc.
Urbana-Champaign Independent Media Center