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September 12, 2013

Honorable John D. Rockefeller IV

Chairman

Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation

United States Senate

Washington, D.C. 20510

Honorable John Thune

Ranking Member

Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation

United States Senate

Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Rockefeller and Ranking Member Thune:

On behalf of The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, a coalition charged by its diverse membership of more than 200 national organizations to promote and protect the rights of all persons in the United States, we write to urge you to support and defend the Lifeline program against threats to eliminate it. The Lifeline program allows our nation's most vulnerable and chronically underserved to maintain telephone service that would otherwise be unaffordable. While critics have focused on alleged fraud and abuse as a reason to eliminate or limit the program, we believe the solution is to give the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC's) reforms, which are strict and go to the heart of identified abuses, the necessary time to be fully implemented, while at the same time finding ways to modernize the program so that it can continue to serve the communities who need it the most.

Created in 1984 under President Reagan, the Lifeline program supports low-income people's access to telephone service, whether they use either wireless or traditional technology. In 2012, about \$2.2 billion, or one-quarter of the total \$9 billion spent on universal service, was spent on this program targeting low-income people. Of the total 440 million lines supported by universal service, 16 million are in the Lifeline program.

Today, more than ever before, access to telephone service is essential for all people who seek to reach emergency services, earn a living, improve their education, receive health care, or engage in civic society. Contacting the fire department, getting a job, making a doctor's appointment, or managing any aspect of daily life would be virtually impossible if one had to be physically present to communicate with others.

We strongly support efforts to ensure that telephone companies are not using Lifeline funds for ineligible people or for substandard services. We believe that even more reforms are possible to improve the program but not harm the population it intends to serve. In our filings before the Commission, we asked it to consider a number of additional changes:

- Expand the program to support broadband services;



- Create a portable electronic benefit for Lifeline participants;
- Develop financial incentives for states that adopt pro-efficiency reforms;
- Adopt financial penalties for carriers that miss appropriate targets;
- Utilize existing databases housed at the state level to verify eligibility, rather than develop new and costly databases which will likely undermine privacy protections; and
- Adopt minimum quality controls for Lifeline-eligible services, such as a minimum monthly minute allotment.

We look forward to working with you and the Commission to ensure that the nation's most vulnerable populations have affordable access to the tools essential for daily living in the information age. Thank you for considering our views. Please contact Leadership Conference Media/Telecommunications Co-Chair Cheryl Leanza, UCC O.C., Inc., at 202-841-6033 or Corrine Yu, Leadership Conference Managing Policy Director, at 202-466-5670, if you would like to discuss the above issues or any other issues of importance to The Leadership Conference.

Sincerely,



Wade Henderson
President & CEO



Nancy Zirkin
Executive Vice President