

Durbin, Duckworth Join Colleagues To Call On Fcc To Bolster Lifeline Program To Keep Students Connected As The School Year Begins

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WASHINGTON – U.S. Senators Dick Durbin (D-IL) and Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) today joined Senator Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) in leading a group of 22 other Senators in calling on the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to boost its Lifeline program to keep students connected as millions return to school both virtually and in person. Since 1985, the FCC’s Lifeline program has made basic internet and telephone service more affordable for low-income Americans and has had bipartisan support.

“As millions of American families face unprecedented financial pressures and educational challenges, we urge the FCC to reverse proposed changes to the Lifeline program, take immediate steps to open its assistance to more households, and ensure

that its services meet the pressing needs of families during this crisis,” the Senators wrote in a letter to FCC Chairman Ajit Pai. “We are alarmed that as students head back to class – in person or online – there is still no national plan from the FCC to secure families’ access to their educational future. This looming disaster is one product of the vast digital divide that hinders families’ educational futures, economic opportunities, and health, which FCC should vigorously bridge through Lifeline and other USF programs.”

The Senators strongly criticized the FCC, under Pai’s leadership, for not only failing to make access to broadband easier for families, but also for actively undermining and destabilizing the Lifeline program, saying: “Regrettably, under your Chairmanship, the FCC has actively worked to undermine and destabilize the Lifeline program, which has left more families vulnerable during the pandemic by widening the learning gap and lessening household’s ability to access crucial services, such as unemployment benefits, food assistance, and health resources. Since the first weeks of your tenure, the FCC has sought to block new broadband providers’ participation in the Lifeline program, curtail benefits in tribal areas, exclude existing carriers, rollback reforms for registering new carriers, make it harder for new applicants to subscribe, prevent carriers from offering free in-person distribution of phones, reduce incentives to enroll subscribers, and add more barriers for participating carriers and subscribers.”

The Senators called for the FCC to put in place a comprehensive plan to respond to this national crisis and to immediately take steps to implement reforms that will bridge the homework gap that has already left millions of children behind with no access to internet or connected devices. These reforms include additional financial support for Lifeline providers to temporarily expand unlimited mobile data and voice minutes to consumers to keep them connected during the pandemic, pause and extend any bureaucratic obstacles for subscribers that could result in cutting off their broadband access in the midst of a pandemic, and notify Congress if additional funding is needed to support the program.

In addition to Durbin, Duckworth, and Blumenthal, the letter was signed by U.S. Senators Brian Schatz (D-HI), Edward J. Markey (D-MA), Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI), Bob Menendez (D-NJ), Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), Ron Wyden (D-OR), Mark Warner (D-VA), Ben Cardin (D-MD), Sherrod Brown (D-OH), Tina Smith (D-MN), Jeff Merkley (D-OR), Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), Mazie Hirono (D-HI), Bernie Sanders (I-VT), Chris Van Hollen (D-MD), Jack Reed (D-RI), Bob Casey (D-PA), Chris Murphy (D-CT), Tim Kaine (D-VA), Patty Murray (D-WA), and Kamala Harris (D-CA).