



Senators Urge USDA, HUD, FCC Leaders to Support Communities in Need Of High-Speed Internet

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WASHINGTON – U.S. Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin (D-IL) and U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) today joined U.S. Senator Brian Schatz (D-HI) in leading a group of 17 additional Senators in calling on the leaders of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and

the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to share data to identify communities without high-speed internet access and work together to improve broadband connectivity.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has made it even more apparent that affordable and reliable broadband is critical to accessing education, health care, and other essential services. Yet millions of households remain unconnected either because broadband infrastructure has not been built to their homes or the price of broadband services is out of reach for them. We need a collaborative, cross-government approach to addressing this gap. Accordingly, we write to request that your agencies share data on existing Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Department of Agriculture (USDA) programs with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to improve broadband connectivity, and that you collaborate with each other to better promote the Lifeline universal service program,” the Senators wrote in a letter to USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack, HUD Secretary Marcia Fudge, and FCC Acting Chairwoman Jessica Rosenworcel.

In a letter to the agency leaders, the Senators also called on them to collaborate and find ways to ensure families in need also have information on accessing Lifeline, an existing federal phone and internet service program.

“We urge HUD and USDA to use their resources to help promote the Lifeline program through existing outreach to public housing agencies and schools. HUD, USDA and the FCC should also collaborate on what additional information they could share with each other to make enrollment in the Lifeline program easier,” the Senators continued.

In addition to Durbin, Duckworth, and Schatz, the letter was signed by U.S. Senators Ron Wyden (D-OR), Patty Murray (D-WA), Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Raphael Warnock (D-GA), Ed Markey (D-MA), Bob Casey (D-PA), Tina Smith (D-MN), Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), Alex Padilla (D-CA), Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), Gary Peters (D-MI), Ben Ray Lujan (D-NM), Chris Van Hollen (D-MD), Jeff Merkley (D-OR), Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), Martin Heinrich (D-NM), and Jacky Rosen (D-NV).

Earlier this year, Durbin and U.S. Representative Sean Patrick Maloney (D-NY-18) introduced the Promoting Access to Broadband Act, a bicameral bill that would help states inform Medicaid enrollees, SNAP participants, and low-income individuals of their potential eligibility for the FCC’s Lifeline Program.

The full text of the letter follows and is available here:

June 2, 2021

Dear Secretary Fudge, Secretary Vilsack, and Acting Chairwoman Rosenworcel:

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it even more apparent that affordable and reliable broadband is critical to accessing education, health care, and other essential services. Yet millions of households remain unconnected either because broadband infrastructure has not been built to their homes or the price of broadband services is out of reach for them. We need a collaborative, cross-government approach to addressing this gap. Accordingly, we write to request that your agencies share data on existing Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Department of Agriculture (USDA) programs with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to improve broadband connectivity, and that you collaborate with each other to better promote the Lifeline universal service program.

HUD and USDA currently collect data that may be valuable in identifying neighborhoods where broadband is and is not available, or affordable for, low-income Americans. For example, HUD has important data on the locations of federally-assisted housing communities, and USDA has location information for communities that are receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and Rural Rental Housing programs. As we focus on closing the connectivity gap, your agencies should work together to determine how USDA and HUD data could help target resources to increase broadband connectivity to low-income families residing in federally-assisted housing communities that don't already have it, including whether this data could be incorporated in the FCC's broadband maps required by the Broadband DATA Act of 2020 (Public Law 116-130). Accordingly, please identify data that your agencies collect that could guide resource allocation for expanding broadband connectivity in low-income communities. Please also indicate whether and how such data can be shared with the FCC to complement its broadband mapping tool.

HUD and USDA could also help inform low-income families about the FCC's Lifeline program. As you may know, the Lifeline program offers a monthly benefit of \$9.25 towards phone or internet services for eligible subscribers, and this amount goes up to \$34.25 for those living on Tribal or Native lands. The Lifeline enrollment process uses participation in HUD and USDA programs to determine eligibility, and so many of the same people who receive HUD and USDA support are eligible for Lifeline.

Unfortunately, the Lifeline program is always undersubscribed, due in part, to lack of awareness about the benefits. Accordingly, we urge HUD and USDA to use their resources to help promote the Lifeline program through existing outreach to public housing agencies and schools. HUD, USDA, and the FCC should also collaborate on what additional information they could share with each other to make enrollment in the Lifeline program easier.

As you work on these coordination efforts, please identify any obstacles that you may face in sharing HUD and USDA data to increase broadband connectivity to the millions of unconnected low-income families residing in federally-assisted housing and participation in the Lifeline program. Thank you for your continued efforts to close the digital divide and we look forward to working with you to make broadband service accessible to all Americans.