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Internet for all now

By Sunne Wright McPeak

Rarely is there a moment in time when just five people hold in their hands the destiny of millions, but such is the case for the Federal Communications Commission. In the next few weeks, the five commissioners will decide on a Broadband Lifeline Program and the corporate consolidation application by Charter Communications to acquire Time Warner Cable and Bright House Networks. Hanging in the balance is whether or not **more than one fifth** of America's poorest and most disadvantaged populations will be able to get online and participate in the digital economy. Will the FCC take bold steps to make the Internet affordable for low-income Americans?

Today, about one in five households are stuck on the wrong side of the digital divide, left behind at an accelerating pace without 21st-century tools to become self-sufficient taxpayers fully contributing to the nation's overall economic productivity. They are almost disenfranchised from the democracy itself, given how much government information and how many public services are available only online. Students can't do their homework or apply for college; adults can't apply for a job or take online courses to improve their workforce skills; and people with disabilities are further isolated. The lack of affordable high-speed Internet access is part of interrelated factors that constitute a "wall of poverty" for millions of Americans.

The FCC has been a trailblazer during the Obama administration, including adopting rules on net neutrality, beginning to modernize E-rate for schools and libraries and approving affordable broadband programs offered by Comcast and AT&T. Under Chairman Tom Wheeler, building upon the foundation established by Commissioner Mignon Clyburn and embracing the imperative to close the "homework gap" highlighted by Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel—the FCC is moving to approve an affordable Internet subscription offer for low-income households, which will transform a Reagan administration discounted telephone service program called Lifeline. This is to be commended. A recent **Rutgers University/Joan Ganz Cooney Center study** found that more than 20 percent of families rely on mobile-only access with data limits, and don't have home Internet service because they can't afford it.

But the FCC must push the envelope in the design of Broadband Lifeline, if the goal is actually to get low-income households online. Participants in Lifeline should pay something—it need not be free for most low-income households—it just needs to be affordable. Charging most customers a modest amount will help greatly with the sustainability of the program in the long run. Further, there must be performance goals and accountability, as Commissioners Ajit Pai and Michael O'Rielly have underscored.

However, there is a bigger issue. If the administration wants to get everyone online, the FCC must encourage broadband companies to partner with community organizations, schools and libraries to accelerate broadband adoption through outreach, digital literacy training, acquisition of affordable computing devices and assistance with signing up for service. While federal law may restrict subsidies to the Internet service companies themselves and not allow direct payment for outreach and digital literacy, the program can be designed to foster and reward sincere company-community partnerships, which will be even more financially feasible if most customers pay something for Lifeline.

Until a new Broadband Lifeline Program is operational in three to four years, companies should be offering affordable high-speed Internet service for all low-income households. The FCC has accepted affordable broadband programs from Comcast and AT&T in approving previous acquisitions. Frontier made a similar commitment in California to secure approval to acquire the Verizon wireline network. While Charter has announced an affordable program at a good price if its deal is approved, that offer excludes the majority of low-income households, most vulnerable being people with disabilities. And Charter has yet to commit to investing in community partnerships.

The \$67 million Charter-TWC-BHN corporate consolidation is the last opportunity in this administration for a company to step up with tangible public benefits in a mega merger. New Charter will be the second-largest Internet provider in the nation with 19 million subscribers in 40 states. The FCC needs to send a clear message and strong signal that only the five commissioners can do: *Internet for all now.*

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