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FCC Moves to Include Broadband in the Lifeline Program

The Federal Communications (**FCC will vote on March 31 on steps to update the Lifeline program**) to add broadband to voice in the Lifeline program, according to Computerworld.

FCC Commissioner Mignon Clyburn joined Chairman Tom Wheeler in proposing the updates. Lifeline now helps 13 million people with voice communications. The steps would expand the service by 5.5 million people and include broadband assistance. The initial budget proposal for the change is \$2.25 billion.

At FCC.gov, Wheeler and Clyburn provide rationales for the plan and **set forth the program's new goals**: to revitalize it for the broadband era, set minimum voice and broadband standards, improve its management and design, and put safeguards in place against waste fraud and abuse.

The effort, as Wheeler and Clyburn point out, is ultimately about helping people in need. The New York Times' Cecilia Kang recently took a look at **the real world of people without access to broadband**, beginning with a vignette about kids who have to stand outside an elementary school to sneak onto its Wi-Fi because the family can't afford their own service. This is not a rare instance:

The challenge is felt across the nation. Some students in Coachella, Calif., and Huntsville, Ala., depend on school buses that have free Wi-Fi to complete their homework. The buses are sometimes parked in residential neighborhoods overnight so that children can connect and continue studying. In cities like Detroit, Miami and New Orleans, where as many as one-third of homes do not have broadband, children crowd libraries and fast-food restaurants to use free hot spots.

In a commentary written before the FCC's announcement, California Emerging Technology Fund President and CEO Sunne Wright McPeak **called on the FCC to act**. She wrote that 20 percent of households don't have access and that this is a singular moment in time to meet the challenge. The program should be updated, she said, and more:

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,



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which will be even more financially feasible if most customers pay something for Lifeline.

McPeak noted that the FCC is in the process of considering whether to allow Charter Communications to acquire Time Warner Cable and Bright House Networks. She is clearly suggesting a link between approvals of those deals and helping more low-income Americans get broadband in general -- and the updating of the Lifeline program in particular.

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