

**BEFORE THE
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20554**

In the Matter of)	
)	
Federal-State Joint Board on Universal)	CC Docket No. 96-45
Service)	
)	WC Docket No. 03-109
Lifeline and Link-Up)	

**COMMENTS OF THE BENTON FOUNDATION, THE OFFICE OF
COMMUNICATION, INC. FOR THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST, ACCESS
HUMBOLDT, AND CENTER FOR RURAL STRATEGIES**

**IN RESPONSE TO THE FEDERAL-STATE JOINT BOARD REQUEST FOR
COMMENT**

The Benton Foundation along with the Office of Communication, Inc for the United Church of Christ, Access Humboldt and Center for Rural Strategies respectfully submits these comments in response to the Federal-State Joint Board’s request for comment regarding changes to the Lifeline and Link-Up programs¹.

¹ http://hraunfoss.fcc.gov/edocs_public/attachmatch/FCC-10J-2A1.pdf

The Benton Foundation² works to ensure that media and telecommunications serve the public interest and enhance our democracy. Benton pursues this mission by seeking policy solutions that support the values of access, diversity and equity, and by demonstrating the value of media and telecommunications for improving the quality of life for all. Benton is also a member of the Federal Communication Commission's (Commission) Consumer Advisory Committee (CAC) and through which Benton is a member of the broadband subcommittee. Benton has long advocated for the ubiquitous telecommunications access for all citizens.

The United Church of Christ³ is a faith community rooted in justice that recognizes the unique power of the media to shape public understanding and thus society. For this reason, UCC's Office of Communication, Inc. (OC, Inc.) works to create just and equitable media telecommunications structures that give meaningful voice to diverse peoples, cultures and ideas. Established in 1959, OC Inc. ultimately established the right of all citizens to participate at the Federal Communications Commission as part of its efforts to ensure a television broadcaster in Jackson, MS served its African-American viewers during the civil rights movement.

Access Humboldt⁴ is a non-profit, community based, public service media organization formed in April 2006 to manage local cable franchise benefits on behalf of the County of Humboldt, California and the Cities of Eureka, Arcata, Fortuna, Rio Dell, Ferndale and Blue Lake. Access Humboldt's mission is "Local voices through community media." We are an innovative, self-sustaining and trusted media resource for residents of Humboldt County. Access Humboldt seeks to connect diverse community members to local access media resources to engage in meaningful conversations that increase participation in civic life.

The Center for Rural Strategies⁵ seeks to improve economic and social conditions for communities in the countryside and around the world through the creative and innovative use of media and communications. By presenting accurate and compelling portraits of rural lives and cultures, we hope to deepen public debate and create a national environment in which positive change for rural communities can occur. Rural Strategies helps communities and nonprofit organizations incorporate media and communications into their work in support of strategic goals.

I. The Lifeline and Link-Up programs are essential and need to be modernized

² www.benton.org

³ <http://www.ucc.org/ocinc/>

⁴ <http://accesshumboldt.net>

⁵ <http://www.ruralstrategies.org>

A. Lifeline and Link-Up gives our most vulnerable populations voice access to employment, healthcare providers, emergency services and their community at large

The Lifeline and Link-Up programs have correctly focused on connecting the very hardest to connect in our country. These programs have connected low-income consumers who have limited means or are utilizing government assistance programs. These are the consumers who have the potential to benefit the most from reliable access to communications. This program helps individuals compete for jobs. For example, when an individual applies for a job, a phone number is necessary to complete the application. Lifeline and Link-Up are programs that have given our most vulnerable populations voice access to employment, healthcare providers, emergency services and their community at large. While a phone line is still a critical component, in today's world, broadband is now an essential piece of the communications puzzle.

B. The importance of broadband access for low-income populations grows with the ever-increasing reliance we all have on the Internet

Broadband-enabled communications are reducing costs for employers, government agencies, universities and healthcare providers, but the unconnected may be left behind. According to a whitepaper by Taleo Research, in 2005, 77 percent of fortune 500 companies only accepted online applications, since then that percentage has only increased⁶. To reduce administration costs most colleges and universities have electronic applications and some have fees attached to paper applications. Local, state and federal government are also reducing administration costs by moving information online, reducing hours of staff available to the public and reducing available paper copies. Also, to reduce costs, most health insurance providers only print a yearly edition of the policy and provider network information. To access updated policy or provider information consumers have to go online or call the company directly.

In February of 2010, the Commission identified that the greatest barrier to adoption of broadband was cost.⁷ The Lifeline and Link-Up programs are, at their

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<http://www.pdfdownload.org/pdf2html/pdf2html.php?url=http%3A%2F%2Fcorporate.recruitingnevada.com%2Fdownloads%2Fonline-recruiting-white-papers%2Fapplication-medium.pdf&images=yes>

⁷ http://hraunfoss.fcc.gov/edocs_public/attachmatch/DOC-296442A1.pdf

heart, attacking the barrier of cost for low-income consumers. For some, market efficiencies will never decrease costs enough to pay for the service on their own. These programs should always provide low-income consumers access to the necessary communications mediums of their day. It is for that reason that Benton strongly supports the expansion of the LifeLine and Link-Up programs to allow for the subsidies to apply for both voice and broadband service.

Considering that these programs have steadily grown over the past few years and that the expansion of the programs to include broadband will add costs, it is critical that the Commission explore potential cost-stabilizing measures, seek out program efficiencies, and consider the impacts of expanded contributions.

C. The expansion of Lifeline and Link-Up to include a broadband component requires additional pilot programs

The development of a broadband component to the Lifeline and Link-Up programs is a complex endeavor and the Commission should employ pilot projects to identify the best path forward. As the Commission develops pilot programs it should keep a four key factors in mind.

1. **Technological Neutrality:** While it would be ideal for every Lifeline or Link-Up of participant to have access to fiber broadband capacity, it is important to seek out the most efficient medium for broadband connectivity. Benton urges the Commission to remain technology neutral and consider wireline, wireless, and other technology broadband choices.
2. **Flexible Program Offerings:** Benton also urges the Commission to allow for flexibility so that the program can take into consideration the special needs of the community it is trying to serve. For older populations, accessing the Internet through a cell-phone may be too small of a medium to easily use. For consumers in locations where wireline infrastructure development maybe too expensive, a wireless option may be the most efficient method to provide access. For the members of the disability community, the opportunity to choose the device impacts the benefits of the program to participants. For those consumers who choose a smartphone to access broadband and voice service, it is important for a pilot program to flesh out the potential benefits or pitfalls of such a service.
3. **Evaluation and Publically Accessible Data:** A plan for the evaluation of every pilot program must be developed as the program itself is developed. Pilot programs developed by the Commission should clearly identify pitfalls and potential best practices. These evaluation plans must include a clear implementation timeline for the pilot program including when an evaluation will

be completed. Additionally, it is critical that all evaluations and related data be released to the public so that independent researchers (from the private, public and academic sectors) can evaluate the pilot programs as well. Timely public release of this data and effective public access will help ensure that the evaluation determinations are dependable and independently certified.

4. **Portable Lifeline and Link-Up Support:** While the transition to broadband support is yet to be realized, the Joint Board and the Commission should consider making low income support for broadband services portable and less reliant on particular providers. The Joint Board should also extend universal service support funds as to programs designed to support digital literacy, rather than creating a independent program. According to the Commission's own findings people who are not online require multiple types of assistance to get online, including, but not limited to, education, cost support, literacy skills, and relevancy of content.

Understanding that the expansion of these programs into broadband will likely increase costs, Benton still recommends that Lifeline and Link-Up programs allow consumers to acquire and maintain broadband as well as voice service.

II. Continued success of Lifeline and Link-Up requires changes to eligibility, verification and enrollment

Despite success over the past few years in maintaining and improving telephone subscribership, participation in both Lifeline and Link-Up is still shockingly low. According to the Universal Service Administrative Company (USAC), in 2009, only four states had participation rates higher than 50%⁸. This is due in large part to the programs' low-income eligibility criteria. The Federal-State Joint Board should closely study the successful methods of the four states with the greatest participation and apply those best practices to the federal programs.

A. Increase the income eligibility to 150 percent of the federal poverty level

Currently to be eligible for Lifeline and Link-Up, consumers must meet an income eligibility requirement, set at 135 percent of the federal poverty level. Benton recommends that the Joint Board increase the requirement to the threshold of other federal low-income support programs, such as the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program's 150 percent threshold. Modifying eligibility requirements to 150 percent will ease documentation certification and ultimately increase enrollment.

⁸ <http://www.usac.org/li/about/participation-rate-information.aspx>

Also, by moving to a 150 percent requirement, there would be a potential for some states to allow for automatic enrollment.

Aside from a handful of federal default states, eligibility is determined individually by each state. Instead of using the federal eligibility requirements as a baseline, or federal floor, 31 states have more stringent requirements than the federal default requirements. To ensure the fair distribution of program benefits, it is critical that the federal requirements become the required baseline. This means that if a potential participant at least meets the federal requirements, he/she can receive federal-level benefits. Benton accepts that additional state assistance is scarce and would therefore require more stringent rules; however, it is critical that citizens in all states have access to federal-level benefits.

B. Increase the range of government assistance programs that signal eligibility

Currently, enrollment in any of seven federal low-income assistance programs makes a household eligible for Lifeline and Link-Up.⁹ Increasing the number of government assistance programs that trigger eligibility would ease both verification and enrollment. Moving to eligibility to 150 percent could also ease documentation certification and ultimately increase enrollment. Also, by moving to a 150 percent requirement there would be a potential for some states to allow for automatic enrollment.

Ultimately, consumers that are eligible to participate in these programs have a limited capacity for repeat visits to government offices for social services. Access to voice or broadband means that consumers can more effectively communicate with government social services agencies. Considering that the target participants are usually without any communication access when they enter a government office, the Lifeline and Link-Up programs could help streamline administration of other social service programs offered within a given state.

C. The program should be expanded to group homes and homeless shelters

The Lifeline and Link-Up programs must adapt to best serve the low-income community. Consumers who are in domestic violence shelters, group living facilities, or in homeless shelters are among the most vulnerable members of the low-income community. For these persons, access to communications is a necessary tool to move towards self-sufficiency.

⁹ Medicaid, Food Stamps, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Federal Public Housing Assistance (Section 8), Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), and The National School Lunch Programs Free Lunch Program.

Because of the transient nature of this population, it may make take special guidelines to prevent against fraud, waste and abuse. While developing these guidelines Benton urges the Joint Board and the Commission to reach out, to non-profits and other organizations currently serving this community through roundtables or other public forums to explore a range of options and to identify best practices. With this input, the Lifeline and Link-Up programs could be best tailored to meet the needs of this population and designed to thwart fraud, waste and abuse.

Benton fully supports the expansion of the program to include group homes and homeless shelters.

D. Lifeline and Link-Up Should be a Model for Benefits Programs Transitioning to Certification and Verification Online

Many states are currently moving to providing a wide range of benefits on line, from food stamps to housing assistance. However, these programs do not currently apply best practices or benchmarks for online services to the low-income community. For example, some states require individuals to apply for unemployment benefits online, but do not have mechanisms in place to determine whether their citizens can access the Internet. Some states do not track how many individuals sign up for benefits online versus how many apply on paper. Other states do not take advantage of the many benefits that could be available to support recipients in an electronic system – for example the option to submit documents online, to track the status and timing of their benefits, or other resources. Some systems have no means to check whether the computer code implementing eligibility determinations are correctly applying the rules or laws to the particular applicants. Other electronic systems require an applicant to submit information – such as a social security number—that is voluntary under the law, thereby turning the law on its head and reducing penetration among some communities, such as immigrants. Some benefits programs, while being required to offer services in multiple languages in program literature, only offer online access in English.¹⁰

The Commission and the States should develop best practices for offering benefits online. It should address many of the problems identified above in collaboration with experts in serving poor communities.

III. Outreach for the Lifeline and Link-Up programs must be enhanced

¹⁰ Digital Safety Net – Support for Low-Income Communities, Panel Discussion, Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights (June 28, 2010).

A. Outreach methods should be broadened to utilize community, religious and state organizations.

Relying solely on eligible telecommunications carriers (ETCs) or on state agencies for Lifeline and Link-Up outreach, limits the number of citizens that the programs can reach. ETCs who benefit financially from the programs should use mass media to advertise the programs to the community. State governments should be providing paper information to low-income citizens when they interact with other government services. Community groups and services, such as homeless shelters, religious organizations and low-income advocacy groups, should be supplied with information and participate in USAC state trainings about the programs. Benton urges the Commission to utilize the collective strength of all groups focused on the low-income community within a given state or region.

B. Highlighting and implementing best practices for other state and federal programs

Benton also urges the Joint Board and the Commission to consider best practices from successful state and federal government outreach efforts. For example, the Commission's efforts in the DTV transition included a number of successful tactics that could be used as models to enhance outreach efforts for Lifeline and Link-Up.

C. The expansion of the programs to include broadband will require changes to outreach.

Broadband access is a complex problem. Consumers may need more than just information on discounts for access. Broadband consumers will also need outreach methods that explain what broadband is, how the consumer would be able to utilize the service, and what real world benefits the service can offer.

In addition to changes in the content of the information through outreach, the mechanisms for outreach should be enhanced. The Commission, through USAC, should develop and provide broadband-specific outreach toolkits to state social service agencies, schools, libraries, non-profits, community service organizations and religious institutions. This could accelerate the distribution of information on the enhanced Lifeline and Link-Up programs through trusted and familiar institutions.

D. The Commission should designate strong rules to enhance enforcement authority over outreach.

ETCs benefit directly from the programs and should be required to meet their obligations regarding outreach. We recommend that the Commission adopt strong rules on outreach requirements so that Commission can enforce penalties against bad actors.

E. Consider Offering Incentives for, or Mandating, Third Party Administrators

In many states, enrollment for Lifeline and Link-Up is handled by a state agency or a designated “third-party administrator” and approved applications are then forwarded to local telephone companies. To apply, households generally submit a paper application, sometimes along with documentation proving their eligibility for assistance. In many states, this third party administrator is integrated with the provision of other services to enable a more simplified benefit process for recipients.¹¹ In addition, once a beneficiary is in the system, they are able to switch telephone companies easily without having to go through a recertification process. Moreover, a third-party system is helpful because those systems can be set up with low-income consumers’ needs in mind, rather than the customer service staff at telecommunications companies which may have a disincentive to enroll individuals and may not have expertise in dealing with lower-income populations. Private providers do not typically need to make determinations about their customers’ income levels and they are not well suited to this task.

IV. Conclusion

The Lifeline and Link-Up programs are critical pathways to progress, for our most vulnerable citizens.

In today’s world, access to communications means at the very least, access to and links with health care, public safety, first responders, government, education and employment. As federal, state and local governments seek ways to tighten their budgets, face-to-face and paper services are likely to be replaced with more cost efficient online services. This means that for the unconnected, low-income citizens in our country, accessing government services will be more difficult if they aren’t familiar with broadband services and don’t have easy access.

To function effectively in today’s society, voice access is a given. However, now it is clear that broadband access is also essential. Careful changes to program

¹¹ See, Matt Fiedler, Center on Policy and Budget Priorities, Lessons from the Telephone Lifeline Program (July 2008).

offerings, expansion to eligibility, the creation of a national eligibility baseline, and enhanced outreach will ensure that these programs are successful in their efforts to serve our most vulnerable citizens.

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