

The Honorable Brett Guthrie

- 1. When it comes to describing the Commission’s work within global for a such as the ITU or others, what role do you believe the Commission should play as an influential voice on spectrum policy and connectivity? This could be in relation to other US agencies and foreign policy makers or relative to domestic and foreign stakeholders.**

Historically, the United States government—led by the Department of State and supported by the policy and technical expertise of the Department of Commerce and the Federal Communications Commission—has played an important role shaping international frameworks for spectrum and connectivity policies. We have led the world with our support of innovation and competition while highlighting that these policies are compatible with a commitment to human rights and consumer protection.

I believe that continued US advocacy on the global stage is important. To this end, I believe the FCC should continue to play a role in spectrum and connectivity policies at the International Telecommunication Union and other comparable international fora. Note that while the Department of Commerce—through the National Telecommunications and Information Administration—is the primary coordinator for federal spectrum, spectrum matters involving commercial use, as well as use by local and state authorities, is uniquely subject to the oversight of the FCC.

Accordingly, I believe the FCC should coordinate with other federal authorities and interagency committees on international telecommunications matters. At a practical level, this means participating in US delegations and leading US participation in international conferences, assisting with preparatory efforts, advising on the status of FCC actions, helping with the negotiation and implementation of telecommunications trade agreements, and conducting economic, statistical, legal, and technical studies to support the development of positions and policies, among other things.

In addition, I believe the FCC should engage with industry interests and other non-governmental stakeholders. This can be accomplished in a variety of different ways. The agency can establish external advisory committees pursuant to the Federal Advisory Committee Act. It also can seek input through solicitations published in the Federal Register. It also can develop more informal vehicles for public participation, provided they offer all stakeholders an equal opportunity to give input and share their perspectives. Consistent with this approach, on June 9, 2016, the FCC rechartered its World Radiocommunication Conference Advisory Committee to provide advice, technical support, and recommend proposals for the ITU’s upcoming 2019 World Radiocommunication Conference. This committee—which is composed of public and private sector members—is focused on the set of spectrum issues identified in the WRC-19 agenda with the goal of identifying US priorities and objectives. I fully expect that the work of this committee will help the FCC formulate meaningful recommendations.

In sum, I believe the upcoming ITU Plenipotentiary and World Radiocommunication Conferences are important opportunities for the US—supported by the FCC—to forcefully

advocate for ITU efforts to bridge the digital divide, allocate global spectrum resources, and support telecommunications development around the world. I believe it is also possible for the US to accomplish these goals while ensuring that ITU policymaking stays within the scope of its mandate.

The Honorable Yvette Clarke

- 1. The FCC’s efforts to expand broadband access in rural areas are appropriate, but the Communications Act also mandates that the Commission help low-income communities get access to broadband. A recent Pew Research Center survey on internet use found that more than 19 percent of Americans who do not use the internet cite the expense for internet service or a computer as the reason.**

Given the clear instructions Congress gave to the Commission in the law, and the facts on the ground, it’s vexing to me that the FCC would push struggling families to the back of the line when it comes to broadband access. Specifically, Mr. Chairman, your proposal to strip phone or internet service from 8.3 million Americans is draconian.

- a. Can you explain the problems faced by low-income Americans struggling to afford internet access and why cutting 70% of providers, capping the program, or cutting out fully subsidized service would be devastating to Americans using the Lifeline program to get back on their feet?**

I do not support the proposal by the Federal Communications Commission that would cut 70% of existing users from the Lifeline program.

The Lifeline program got its start in 1985, when President Reagan was in the White House and nearly all communications involved a cord and a jack in the wall. When it began, it supported the cost of basic telephony in low-income households. The idea was simple—without the ability to call others, it would be difficult to secure jobs, seek out healthcare, pursue education, or seek assistance in a disaster. Over time, the FCC updated this program to reflect the current state of technology. To this end, more than a decade ago it added wireless service. Later, the FCC sought to add broadband, recognizing that internet access is the dial tone of the digital age.

Unfortunately, the agency’s most recent proposal does not continue this course. Instead of modernizing the program, it proposes to slash it from front to back. This will harm millions who presently rely on the program. That includes nearly 2.2 million elderly who depend on Lifeline for their healthcare and security as they age on limited incomes. It includes 1.3 million veterans who rely on Lifeline to reacclimate to civilian life. It includes 500,000 people on Puerto Rico who are still recovering from last year’s devastating hurricane season. It also includes those who seek assistance from domestic violence programs and homeless youth—and many other similar groups that rely on low-cost communications services for safety.

It does not have to be this way. It is possible to address concerns about the Lifeline program through more thoughtful reform. All carriers participating in the program should be subject to regular audits. In addition, the FCC should consider increased penalties for those carriers that fail to follow program rules—including debarment prohibiting future participation. It is also important to note that key reforms are already underway, including the introduction of a national verifier system in six states. This should be expanded nationwide as soon as feasible.

I believe that it is worth the effort to modernize and improve the Lifeline program. But I am concerned that the proposal before the agency is not only cruel, it is at odds with the FCC’s statutory duty to support service to “all regions of the Nation, including low-income consumers.”

b. I share your concern about the Homework gap. How does the FCC’s assault on Lifeline affect the homework gap, and how can better help our students compete?

Today, seven in ten teachers assign homework that requires broadband access. But data from the FCC show that as many as one in three households do not subscribe to internet service. Where those numbers overlap is the Homework Gap. According to the Senate Joint Economic Committee, the Homework Gap is real. By their estimate, it affects 12 million children across the country.

The Homework Gap harms students in rural areas and urban areas—wherever they lack access to the reliable internet service that is now necessary for so much nightly schoolwork. That means students are sitting in fast food restaurants and writing their papers with fries, just to get a free Wi-Fi signal. It means there are parents who have to make elaborate plans to head to the homes of friends and relatives just to ensure their children have a place to get online for homework. It means too many students sitting in the school parking lot well after the final bell has rung because it is the only place they can get a reliable connection.

We can applaud the grit of those who find a way to cobble together a connection for schoolwork. But we should also do better—and the Lifeline program could help. If it was properly reformed and refocused on broadband, it could assist millions of students in low-income households get the internet access they need for basic homework.

In 2016, the FCC sought to make this happen when it updated the Lifeline program. Pursuant to that effort, wireless services eligible under the program would feature devices with Wi-Fi chips for internet access and permit tethering for use by other devices, such as a computer. Unfortunately—over my objection—the FCC rolled back these changes in 2017. This is regrettable. I believe the FCC needs to reconsider this course. Were we to do so, it would help bridge the Homework Gap. It also would help ensure that in the digital age no student will lack the skills necessary for full participation in modern civic, social, and economic life.