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MMTC Urges FCC to Expand Lifeline Enrollment Waivers and Strengthen the Lifeline Program for Communities in Need all Lifeline

WASHINGTON, D.C. (June 17, 2020): The Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC) Wireline Competition Bureau has released an Order streamlining the Lifeline program application and enrollment process for rural Tribal consumers until August 31, 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The FCC defines “rural” as less than 25,000 residents. While the Multicultural Media, Telecom and Internet Council (MMTC) appreciates this effort, much more needs to be done to ensure that all struggling households are connected to vital communications services during these difficult times.

The Order grants a 45-day grace period to rural Tribal consumers to provide Lifeline eligibility documentation. During this period, the carrier, at its discretion, may choose to provide service until the eligibility documentation is received. Once the documents have been submitted, providers can seek reimbursement from the FCC for up to 45 days of Lifeline service provided to the applicant. If documentation is not received within the 45-day grace period, reimbursement is not allowed. While this is a good step for providing a modicum of relief to rural Tribal communities that are being hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic and who often lack easy access to roads, post offices and other critical infrastructure, the Order, while well intended, is flawed in several ways:

- **Lack of Incentives for Providers:** In the event that applicants cannot obtain the necessary documentation within 45 days, providers will have to absorb the cost of the Lifeline service provided to the applicant – this inherent risk may limit the number of rural tribal consumers who are offered this option. It is incumbent upon the provider to make the selection rather than automatically including all rural tribal consumers. Hence, some providers may decide not to provide applicants with this optional grace period.
- **Order Duration Is Too Short:** The Order gives providers the option of granting this waiver through August 31, 2020. In recognition of the fact that the pandemic will most likely extend beyond August, the Commission is reportedly weighing whether to extend the Keep Americans Connected pledge through the end of September. We believe the Lifeline Order similarly should extend for the duration of the pandemic, and during this time, the FCC should focus on overhauling Lifeline in a manner that truly makes it easier for eligible low-income consumers to receive its benefits.
- **Non-Rural Tribal Populations and Other Lifeline Eligible Consumers Left Out:** Because “rural” is defined as an area with a population of less than 25,000 residents, many households otherwise eligible for the lifeline program will be left out. There are Tribal populations that do not live in rural areas, but are facing hardships that exacerbate their already near-subsistence living. The FCC’s own data has demonstrated that Tribal lands experience lower rates of both fixed and mobile broadband, and data from the American Community Survey indicates that Native people are the “least connected” people in the country. When disparities are impacting an entire population, it does not make sense to limit the Lifeline extension waiver to rural areas, while excluding other areas that need support.
- **Broader Inclusion Is Necessary and Important:** Equally important, MMTC believes that all Lifeline-eligible individuals across the nation should be granted this extension. Additionally, the FCC should take steps to ensure that all Lifeline qualifying individuals are made aware of the program. It has been widely reported that the Lifeline program is severely underutilized – just 10.7 million of the 38 million eligible households use the program. We urge the Commission to establish a consumer awareness campaign to address these gaps.
- **Bold Action is immediately required.** The COVID-19 pandemic has had major disproportionate impacts on many communities. For example in New Mexico, Native Americans account for 60% of cases, but only 9% of the population. Further, statistics released in May indicate that American Indians/Alaska Natives are dying from the virus at eight times the rate of Whites. In numerous other states, African Americans and Latinos make up double, triple, and even quadruple the number of COVID-19 cases in relation to their populations. Clearly, families that were already struggling

before this pandemic are now devastated.

Now more than ever, connectivity for all Americans is critical, and we encourage the FCC to take bold action now.

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About MMTC:

The Multicultural Media, Telecom and Internet Council (MMTC) is a non-partisan, national nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting and preserving equal opportunity in the mass media, telecom and broadband industries, and closing the digital divide. MMTC is generally recognized as the nation's leading advocate for multicultural advancement in communications.