

**Before the
Federal Communications Commission
Washington, D.C. 20554**

In the Matter of)	
)	
Emergency Connectivity Fund for Educational)	WC Docket No. 21-93
Connections and Device to Address the Homework)	
Gap During the Pandemic)	
)	

COMMENTS OF CENTRAL TEXAS TELEPHONE COOPERATIVE, INC., PEOPLES TELEPHONE COOPERATIVE, INC., AND TOTELCOM COMMUNICATIONS, LLC

Central Texas Telephone Cooperative, Inc., Peoples Telephone Cooperative, Inc., and Totelcom Communications, LLC (collectively, the “Texas Carriers” or the “Companies”), by counsel, hereby submit these comments in response to the *Public Notice* (“PN”) in the above captioned proceeding.¹ In the *PN*, the Wireline Competition Bureau (“Bureau”) seeks comment on the provision of support from the Emergency Connectivity Fund (“ECF”) to address the homework gap during the pandemic.² Specifically, the Bureau seeks comments on, among other things, the precise services and equipment that ECF should support to fund off-campus access to broadband and whether the funding should be used to reimburse schools and libraries for purchases of eligible equipment and services made since January 27, 2020. For the reasons stated herein, the Texas Carriers support the use of ECF funds for purchasing education-only devices and emergency non-permanent Internet access over existing facilities or mobile wireless hotspots (“WiFi hotspots”). The Federal Communications Commission (“FCC” or the “Commission”) should prioritize leveraging existing facilities and should exclude funding the

¹Emergency Connectivity Fund for Educational Connections and Devices to Address the Homework Gap During the Pandemic, *Public Notice*, WC Docket No. 21-93 (rel. Mar. 16, 2021) (“PN”).

² *PN* at 2.

construction of new networks, including the construction of self-provisioned networks. The ECF funding should be used to reimburse schools and libraries for purchases made during the COVID-19 emergency period which began on January 27, 2020.

I. Background

The Texas Carriers and their subsidiaries provide rural voice, broadband and other communications services throughout rural portions of central and northeast Texas. Each has successfully built broadband infrastructure, including fiber connections, to schools in their areas with the assistance of the E-Rate and High Cost Programs. Due to the expansive landscape and low population density of their communities, the tremendous expense in deploying services has traditionally outweighed any return on investment. The Texas Carriers, like most rural telephone companies, have worked hard to keep their communities connected during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to participating in the Keep Americans Connected Pledge,³ the Companies offer free WiFi hotspots in school and church parking lots and Totalcom Communications, LLC offers free installations and connections for students. The Companies have previously expressed concerns that using E-Rate special construction costs to overbuild existing federally supported fiber networks in Texas would result in tremendous waste in the finite E-Rate fund.⁴

³ Keep America Connected, <https://www.fcc.gov/keep-americans-connected> (last visited Apr. 5, 2021).

⁴ *See, e.g.*, Petition for Rulemaking of Central Texas Telephone Cooperative, Inc. et al., RM-11841; CC Docket No. 02-6; WC Docket No. 13-184 (filed May 22, 2019).

II. Discussion

In the *PN*, the Bureau seeks comment on what equipment and services that should be eligible for ECF support.⁵ The Texas Carriers support using ECF funding for connected devices, including tablets and laptop computers and other similar end-user devices capable of supporting video conferencing platforms so long as such devices are dedicated for educational purposes. These devices can be connected to the students' existing Internet connection or WiFi hotspots.

The eligible equipment should be limited to educational use only, blocking entertainment streaming applications and video games.⁶ Limiting the use of eligible equipment and services for educational use (and not for extracurricular activities) is consistent with the educational purposes requirement of Section 254(h)(1)(B) of the Act.⁷ In addition, blocking entertainment will ensure safe Internet usage by students and assist schools in complying with the Children's Internet Protection Act requirements.⁸

The Texas Carriers support the Commission's proposal to exclude funding the construction of new networks and self-provisioned networks⁹ and further urge the Commission to be mindful of overbuilding networks previously constructed with federally subsidized money. The Commission should not use ECF funds for the permanent construction of facilities off-campus and should leverage the existing fiber connections to the extent possible. By leveraging existing facilities, the Commission can better ensure that the limited funds are used to make cost-effective purchases.

⁵ *PN* at 5.

⁶ *See id.* at 9.

⁷ 47 U.S.C. § 254(h)(1)(B).

⁸ *See PN* at 14-15.

⁹ *Id.* at 7.

ECF funding should be applied retroactively to reimburse schools, libraries and broadband providers for purchases made for eligible equipment and services during the “COVID-19 emergency period.” As noted in the PN, the COVID-19 emergency period “is defined in section 7402 of the American Rescue Plan as beginning on January 27, 2020 and ending on the June 30th that first occurs after the date that is one year after the Secretary of Health and Human Services determines that a public health emergency no longer exists.”¹⁰ Accordingly, the Texas Carriers believe that it is appropriate for ECF funding to be used for previously purchased eligible equipment and services beginning in January 27, 2020, when the COVID-19 emergency period began, to reimburse schools and carriers for significant purchases they have made in during the emergency period in order to support remote learning and close the homework gap.¹¹

¹⁰ *PN* at 2.

¹¹ *See id.* at 2 and note 6.

III. Conclusion

In order to provide the most efficient and cost-effective relief to students during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Commission should use ECF funds for equipment and services dedicated for educational use. Such equipment and services have and will be crucial and effective during the national emergency and, as such, funding should be applied retroactively. The Texas Carriers are committed to ensuring that unserved students that comprise the homework gap receive critical ECF funds, bringing the power of the Internet and broadband services to the most rural and underserved portions of the United States.

Respectfully submitted,

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April 5, 2021