

May 25, 2018

Ms. Marlene H. Dortch
Secretary
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20554

Re: *Bridging the Digital Divide for Low-Income Consumers*, WC Docket No. 17-287;
Lifeline and Link Up Reform and Modernization, WC Docket No. 11-42;
Telecommunications Carriers Eligible for Universal Service Support, WC Docket
No. 09-197

Dear Ms. Dortch:

On May 23, 2018, Issa Asad, Chief Executive Officer of Q Link Wireless, LLC (“Q Link”), Paul Turner, President of Q Link, Rafael Carvajal, Chief Operating Officer of Q Link, and I and Shiva Goel, counsel for Q Link, met separately with Jay Schwarz, Wireline Advisor to the Chairman, Kevin Costello of the Chairman’s office, Travis Litman, Chief of Staff to Commissioner Rosenworcel, and Trent Harkrader, Associate Bureau Chief, Wireline Competition Bureau about the above-referenced proceeding.

We discussed a flaw in USAC’s technical implementation of the National Verifier that could disconnect millions of rural Americans from the enrollment process—and a safe, secure, and simple fix to the problem.¹ If left uncorrected, this flaw will effectively deny access to mobile wireless broadband Lifeline services to millions of low-income Americans in rural areas, including in states such as Michigan, Ohio, Kentucky, Missouri, Louisiana, Texas, Pennsylvania, Georgia and West Virginia where Q Link provides a substantial number of rural households with 1 GB of data and unlimited calling through the Lifeline program. Without a change, Q Link will be unable to serve low-income consumers in these areas, as it does today. We urged the Commission to direct USAC to fix this flaw prior to “hard launch” of the National Verifier later this year.

When creating the National Verifier, the FCC and USAC recognized the critical importance of allowing consumers to enroll online. That is why USAC developed a consumer portal that would allow consumers to obtain proof of verification directly online. The FCC and USAC also recognized the consumer portal could be difficult for many consumers to navigate on their own, and thus developed a separate portal for agent-assisted eligibility verification through the National Verifier. Indeed, when USAC initially presented its concept for the National Verifier to industry, its schematics included plans for machine-to-machine interfaces (i.e. application programming interfaces, or APIs) that would have permitted carrier-assisted, online

¹ The presentation Q Link used at the meetings is attached to this letter.

verification and enrollment of Lifeline consumers.² Those schematics were consistent with the Commission’s order directing the creation of the National Verifier, which contemplated an “interface . . . geared toward providers that may allow application programming interfaces (machine-to-machine interaction).”³

However, when USAC announced its final National Verifier design last year, the APIs to permit carrier-assisted online consumer eligibility verification and enrollment had disappeared. In other words, as USAC’s plans currently stand, the National Verifier would permit consumer online eligibility verification if the consumer can navigate that process without the carrier, and it would permit carriers using agents to have the agents assist consumers with eligibility verification and enrollment, but it will not support both online eligibility verification and carrier assistance to consumers *at the same time*. This is fundamentally irrational, and cannot be based on any discernable technical or network security grounds.

The result is a system that abandons rural low-income Americans, who have far less access to in-person assistance and disproportionately depend on web-based enrollment. Without APIs, ETCs will be unable to provide remote assistance to consumers as they navigate the National Verifier’s online verification process through the consumer portal, which they must do *before* they can then enroll with a Lifeline carrier. Without APIs, a customer seeking to sign up online will have to navigate the National Verifier’s verification process on his or her own only to *repeat* the same cumbersome process with the carrier, who would still have to collect and verify the customer’s information. That kind of clunky, 90s-era redundancy is unheard of on the internet in 2018, and would erect yet another barrier to rural broadband access. Slide 7 in the attached presentation shows just how difficult this multistep process will be for consumers, especially if their eligibility cannot be confirmed simply through a database dip, but requires the submission of additional documentation. Under the current National Verifier implementation, ETCs would be able to assist customers only in-person, utilizing sales agents that cannot be economically dispatched to lightly-populated rural communities.

Q Link’s experience demonstrates the enormous stakes of this issue for rural America. Q Link has emerged as the largest wireless Lifeline provider to rural America by leveraging online enrollment. 67 percent of Q Link customers reside in rural or suburban areas, and Q Link has a *rural* customer base of at least 20,000 in ten states (Georgia, Kentucky, Indiana, Louisiana, Michigan, Missouri, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and West Virginia). 82 percent of Q Link’s customers are new to Lifeline, meaning they were previously unserved by other ETCs.

² See Attachment at p.3; *see also* Letter from John T. Nakahata to Marlene H. Dortch, Secretary, FCC, WC Docket No. 11-42 (filed Sep. 8, 2017); Letter from John T. Nakahata to Marlene H. Dortch, Secretary, FCC, WC Docket No. 11-42 (filed Aug. 10, 2017).

³ See *Lifeline & Link Up Reform & Modernization*, Third Report and Order, Further Report and Order, and Order on Reconsideration, 31 FCC Rcd. 3962, 4012 ¶ 139 n.390 (2016); *see also id.* ¶¶ 137-39; Attachment at p.2.

The reason Q Link penetrates underserved rural markets so effectively is that it reaches customers where they live and work rather than at distant retail locations. Q Link allows customers to sign up for service wherever they can access an internet connection, such as at work, a library, or at a friend's house. It performs a robust series of screens to ensure that applicants have coverage, are who they say, and are eligible. It works with customers that have questions over the phone and by email, fielding more than one million calls per month and having sent more than 150 million support emails. It allows customers to submit documentation online, mails self-addressed stamped envelopes when necessary to collect verification documents, and has established relationships with services such as UPS to allow consumers to use fax machines at UPS Stores to send documentation, with the charges billed to Q Link. Q Link does not depend on on-site personnel to perform any these functions, a model that may work in some parts of the country, but has its limits in sparsely populated or remote rural areas where sales agents just cannot make sales. Yet the entire process depends on APIs that allow Q Link to integrate verification and service enrollment.

The good news is that there are ready technical solutions that would make it relatively easy, with a minimum amount of additional development time (Q Link estimates 20 hours), to develop these APIs to permit online, carrier-assisted eligibility verification and enrollment in a single, non-mandatory carrier process. With APIs, this carrier-assisted online process would reduce opportunities for fraud and reduce costs, without any impact on network security.

For example, with carrier APIs, USAC can ensure that the applicant—and not the carrier or its agent—attests to identity and eligibility information using off-the-shelf tools like DocuSign or 3D Secure. These services enable secure, authenticated virtual signatures handled by servers operated by either USAC or USAC-selected trusted third parties, not ETCs. Because USAC would control the certification language being presented to the consumer and directly obtains the consumer's signatures, without carrier intervention, USAC can be sure that it is the consumer that is signing the form, not any carrier personnel. In contrast, under the carrier-assisted in-person enrollment process that USAC is currently implementing, the verification system relies on the agent's good faith that the applicant, and not the agent, is the party signing the certifications.

Moreover, by credentialing and authenticating carriers that are allowed to transact with USAC using an API—a step that USAC already does for NLAD—USAC can ensure that there is no impact on the National Verifier's network security. USAC will also be able to strip individual ETCs of online access if they are found to be abusing the system.

The low upfront costs of developing carrier APIs can be recovered by charging the carrier a per-transaction fee or through a similar mechanism, and would be dwarfed by the cost savings to USAC because enabling greater carrier assistance for online eligibility verifications and enrollments will reduce the load on USAC's customer service operations for the National Verifier. As discussed, the burden of handling customer inquiries and interactions are enormous, and USAC will bear those burdens alone in the current National Verifier implementation. Allowing carrier-assisted automated online enrollments will allow those carriers that wish to do

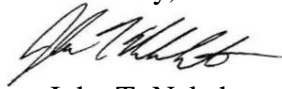
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so to continue to be the front-line interface with consumers, shifting the bulk of that customer interface burden from USAC to the ETC for customers that wish to sign up for service online. Carrier APIs also would reduce the load on the National Verifier substantially by allowing the ETC to conduct an initial filter of applicants that are ineligible. Indeed, in Q Link's experience, a very high percentage of interested customers ultimately prove ineligible; Q Link alone has filtered more than 30 million ineligible leads.

Q Link has never been able to determine why the APIs were removed from the National Verifier implementation plan last year. No one with whom we have spoken at USAC or at the Commission seems to know who decided to remove APIs or why that was done. At this juncture, we urge that APIs be restored to the National Verifier design and be implemented by "hard launch" of the National Verifier.

Please contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John T. Nakahata".

John T. Nakahata
Counsel to Q Link Wireless, LLC

cc: Jay Schwarz
Kevin Costello
Travis Litman
Trent Harkrader

Attachments

ATTACHMENT

NATIONAL VERIFIER:

**CARRIER-ASSISTED ONLINE
ENROLLMENT VIA API NEEDED TO
SUPPORT RURAL CONSUMERS.**



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

These are Q Link Wireless and Industry recommendations on how to (reasonably) quickly explain the fundamental concern regarding the removal of the National Verifier APIs. It has been clear in our conversations with TAPD, WCB and FCC staff that they haven't yet grasped the gravity of the API concern.

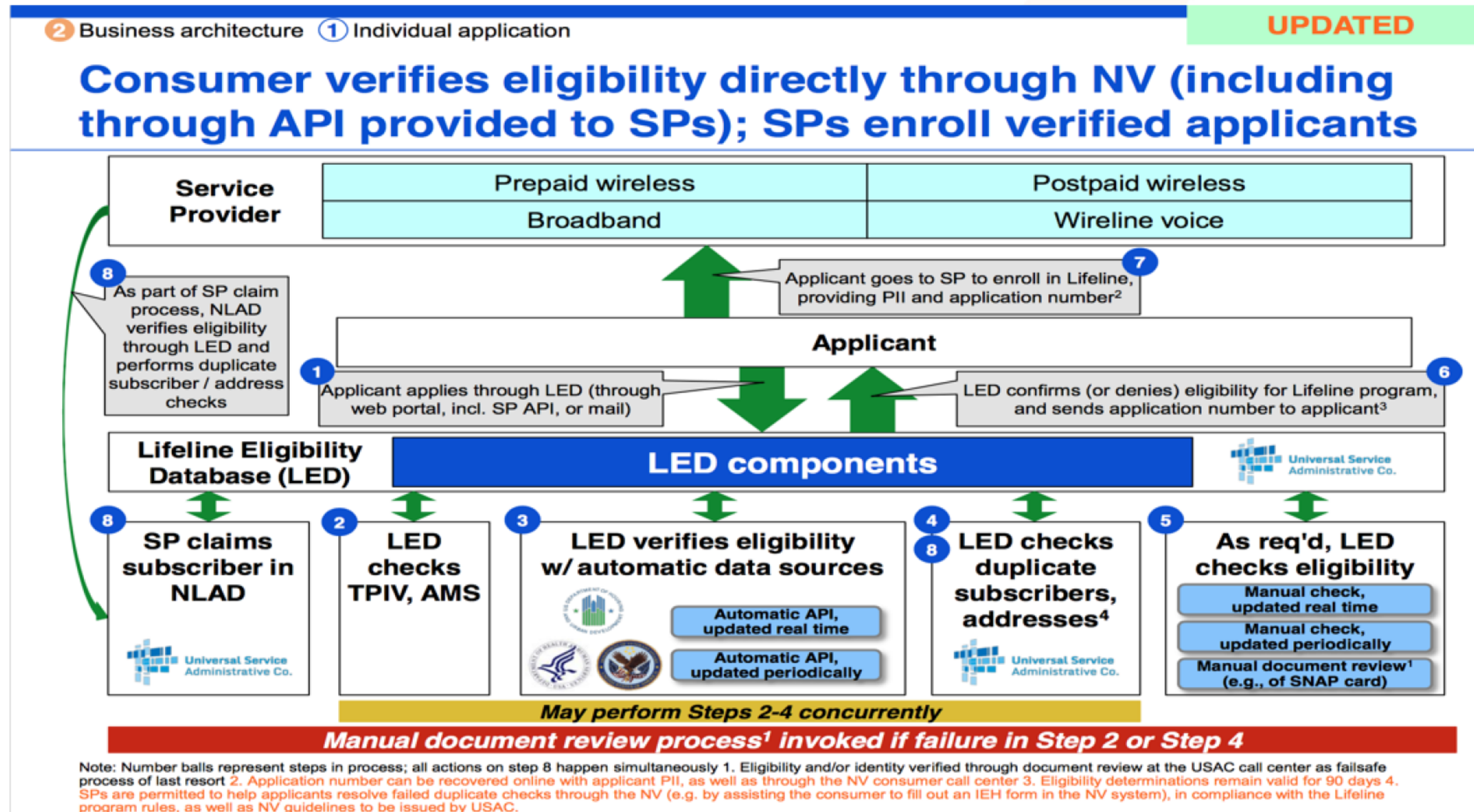
NPRM Paragraph 137 and 138 and n. 390 are particularly relevant to the use of an API for verification:

137. "Our objective is to provide multiple pathways to populate the LED with records associated with Lifeline eligible subscribers in order to simplify the enrollment process for subscribers and Lifeline providers. We therefore direct USAC to work with the Bureau to develop other efficient and reliable methods of listing eligible subscribers in the LED. Additionally, USAC must develop processes regardless of the pathway used, to obtain subscriber consent to the collection, retention, use, and sharing of a subscriber's personally identifiable information, including information about their use of Lifeline services with USAC, the National Verifier and other appropriate users. As described further below, the LEC will also maintain information about the supported services of the Lifeline providers.

138. Access by different users. The National Verifier will also function as an interface for authorized users for many different activities. We agree with commenters and anticipate that eligible subscribers, Lifeline providers, states, and Tribal Nations will require access to establish or verify eligibility. We also expect the National Verifiers to have varying interface methods to accommodate these different groups of users. [n. 390] We direct USAC to work with the Bureau to develop interfaces that promote the objectives of the National Verifier and service the needs of users in a cost-effective and efficient manner.

n. 390 For example, the National Verifier may have an interface that is consumer-friendly and geared towards subscribers. It may have another interface that is geared toward providers that may allow application programming interfaces (machine-to-machine interaction)."

OCTOBER 2016 ORIGINAL NV PLAN SUPPORTED APPLICATION VIA SP WHICH FOLLOWS FCC INTENTIONS



FACTS

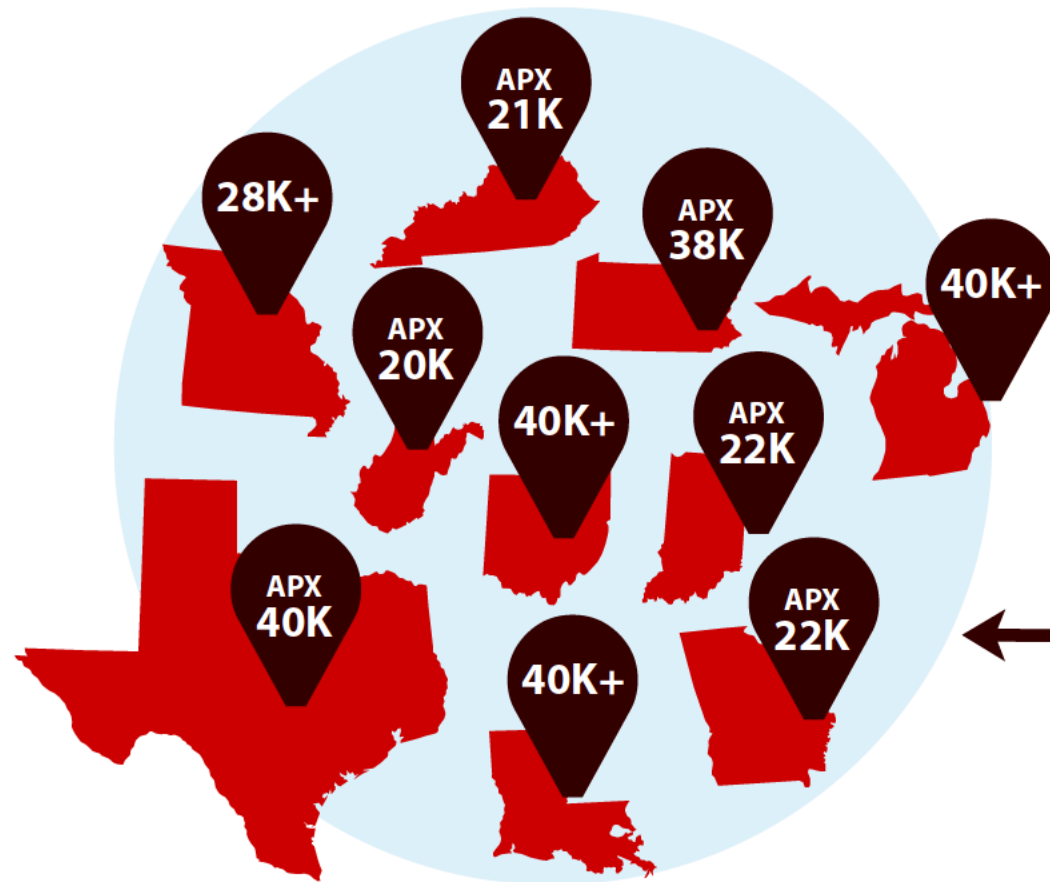
- 1.. FCC and USAC have determined that both in-person and web-based enrollments are important to the future of the Lifeline Program. Hence, they've created an Agent portal for carrier-assisted, in-person enrollments (addresses 80% of current enrollments) and a consumer-direct portal for web-based enrollments (addresses <1% of current enrollments). They derailed the future of the carrier-assisted, web-based enrollment model (currently 30% of all enrollments) when they removed API connection to the NV for carriers; connections that have successfully existed between carriers and NLAD for over 4 years.
2. APIs have been the backbone of the web-based transaction economy for the past 15-20 years. They drive considerable efficiencies in customer experience and enhance cyber security by reducing the number of websites a prospect must visit to complete a transaction. They also allow a carrier to maintain connection with a prospect while information to complete the prospect's desired transaction is gathered from other websites/databases.
3. Lack of APIs will drive carriers away from serving the rural markets without the web engagement model at a time when they have dramatically increased broadband service offerings to underserved, low income urban and rural markets, at the request of the FCC.
4. Online marketing companies such as Amazon and eBay and Telecom providers like Sprint, AT&T, T-Mobile and Verizon will NOT send prospective customers to another website to make a payment. This would cause an overall loss in transactions, as prospects may not return to a company's secure website to complete the enrollment process or shipping details. Instead, these companies open an API connection to the payment processing company's platform and send the prospect's payment information to be validated, all while maintaining their session with the prospect. APIs provide this efficiency.
5. The new NV model proposes to break the above process by requiring the ETC, once they've spent the capital to engage a prospective LL applicant, to transfer that applicant to the NV's consumer-direct web enrollment portal and terminate their session with the applicant. From there, an applicant might not even return to the ETC's website to enter the credentials received from the NV. The failure-to-return rate for the ETC will raise the cost of this model considerably, but, more importantly, will create confusion for applicants who will now have to endure two separate, independent approval processes. Some will pass the NV screening but will not pass the ETC's screening. Consumer confusion will increase the cost of administrating the NV.
6. Restoring the APIs as originally planned by the FCC and USAC will provide a level playing field for all enrollment models (no wrong door) and support the expansion of broadband to lower income and rural America. It will also provide the National Verifier with the same complete visibility and control over the applicant's eligibility determination as does the Agent portal enrollment process under the NV.
7. To have a viable web-based transaction business, a company that invests capital in advertising and engagement must maintain connection with the prospect through completion of the transaction, or in this case, enrollment. It does not make financial sense for a company to invest in a fickle internet user just to hope he returns to their website after leaving it. This convoluted process will also cause a barrier to entry for rural consumers.

KEY MESSAGES

- 1 Online enrollment is important to serving rural areas, veterans, the disabled, the elderly and multi-language support.
- 2 The eligibility verification process is important, but shouldn't be a barrier to prevent enrollment from otherwise eligible users. A complicated process will be difficult for many consumers to navigate, especially if they are not validated through automated database checks.
- 3 The FCC/USAC has recognized that an online eligibility process is important to have.
- 4 Service Provider assistance is very important to successful consumer navigation of the eligibility process.
- 5 Including an API will support Service Provider assistance for online enrollment, without introducing fraud risks.
- 6 Existing solutions support consumer certifications directly on USAC's site or on a USAC-selected trusted third party.

ONLINE ENROLLMENT IS CRITICAL TO SERVING RURAL AREAS, VETERANS AND OTHER UNDER-SERVED COMMUNITIES

Q LINK WIRELESS IS THE LARGEST LIFELINE PROVIDER TO RURAL AMERICA



67%

OF Q LINK CUSTOMERS
LIVE IN RURAL/
SUBURBAN AREAS

STATES WITH AT LEAST
20,000 RURAL Q LINK
LIFELINE HOUSEHOLDS

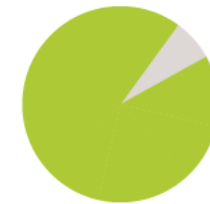
Ohio, Michigan, Louisiana, Texas, Pennsylvania,
Missouri, Indiana, Georgia, Kentucky, West Virginia

2,000,000

NUMBER OF LIFELINE HOUSEHOLDS
Q LINK CURRENTLY SERVES

100%

OF THESE SIGNED UP ONLINE



82% OF Q LINK CUSTOMERS ARE
NEW TO THE LIFELINE PROGRAM



12% OF US POPULATION HAS
SOME FORM OF DISABILITY
(INCLUDES VETERANS)



21% OF APPLICANTS ARE
OVER 55 YEARS OLD



55 MILLION

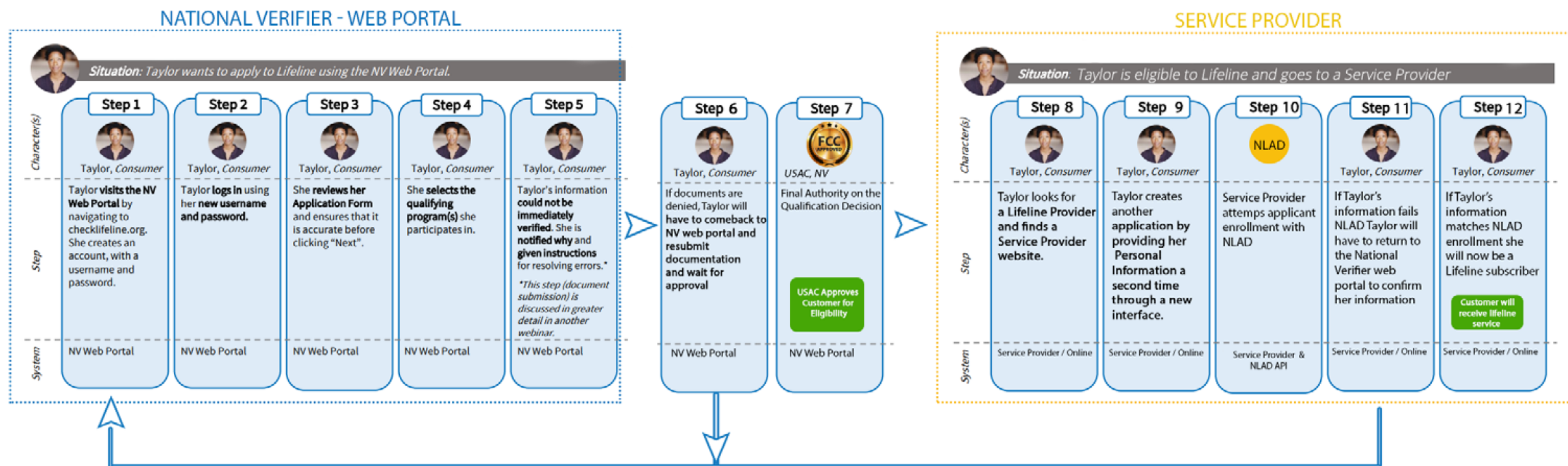
HISPANIC AMERICANS

(This population requires multi-language support)

COMPLEXITY OF SIGNUP WITH NO API

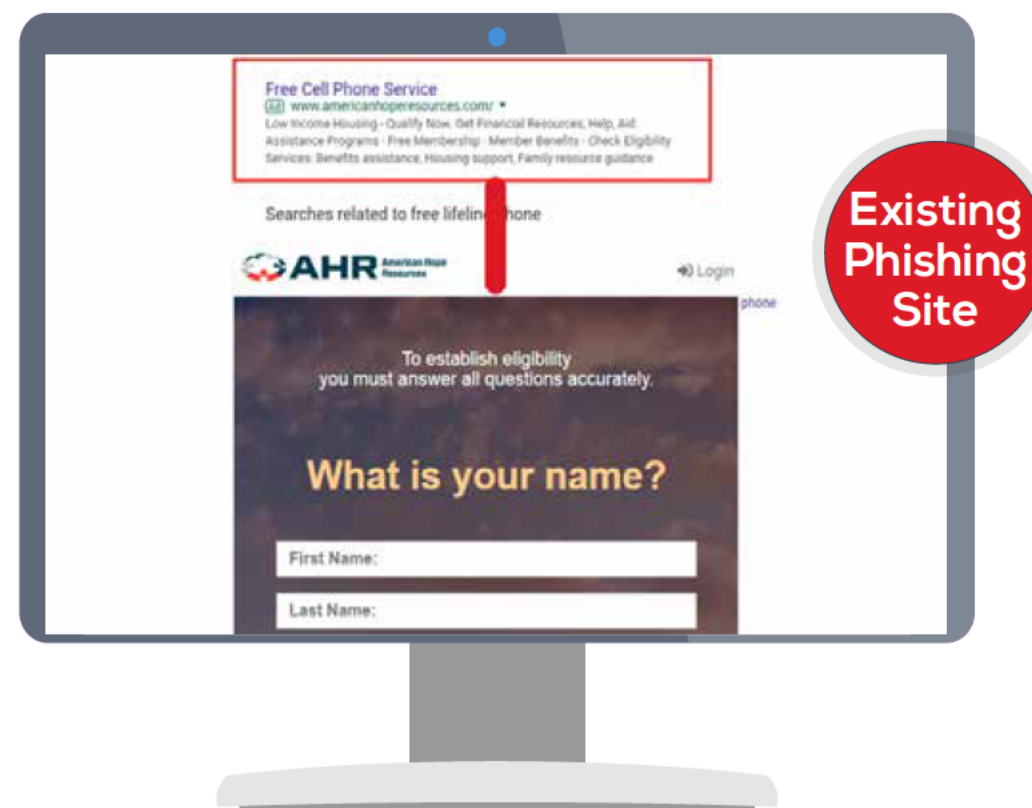
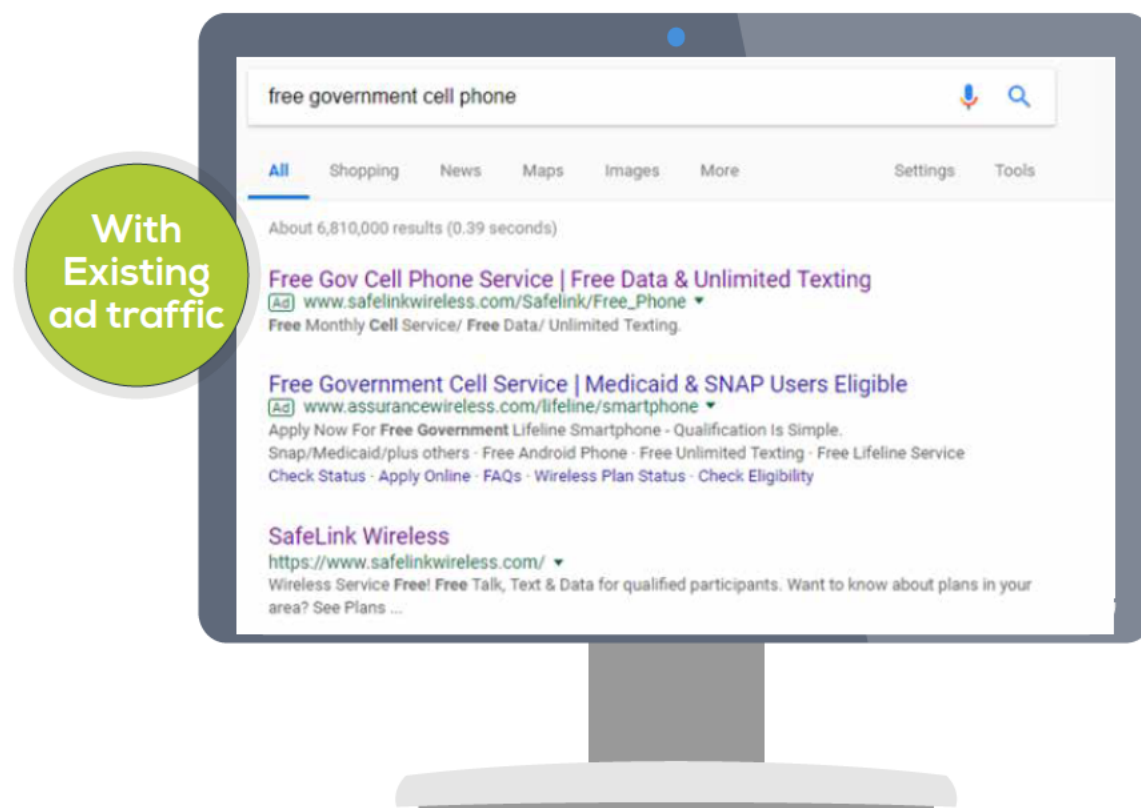
NV CONSUMER PORTAL + SERVICE PROVIDER ONLINE

- ❗ 2 sign up processes for the applicant, through the NV and Lifeline Service Provider, increases the user's workload. This is in defiance of <https://webstandards.hhs.gov/guidelines/15>
- ❗ Every application flows to the National Verifier where the user provides personally identifiable information and document proofs. If there are any questions that arise during the registration process, USAC will have to support these inquiries. Q Link sees ~1.7 million calls, ~12 million emails, and ~15,000 social media interactions per month, all to resolve customer inquiries.
- ❗ This process requires duplication of work for USAC and the Service Provider. USAC is inheriting approximately 38 times more work that the service provider will normally do by filtering applications through LexisNexis, CGM, Internal Compliance, Coverage, and Address Checks.



To preserve the integrity of the program and to prevent fraud, waste, and abuse, the consumer will be required to submit PII twice for the purposes of service providers submitting information to NLAD, consumer communication, marketing and advertising purposes.

NO API OPENS THE DOOR FOR PHISHING SITES



Without existing competitive ad traffic, these sites can and will rise to the top of Google

FAKE LIFELINE SITES EXIST AND WILL RISE IN SEARCH RESULTS PAGES

Providers will be unable to advertise if the main intent is to send users to a different website (this violates Google's Bridge Page Policy). This system opens the door for phishing websites to impersonate Lifeline providers and maliciously collect data.

NV COULD CREATE CARRIER-ASSISTED LIFELINE SIGNUP FOR ONLINE ENROLLMENT PARALLEL TO AGENT PROCESS

NV SERVICE PROVIDER LIFELINE SIGNUP WITH AGENT

- Consumer meets Agent
- Agent signs into NV Agent Portal
- Consumer provides full name, address, DOB, last 4 SSN to Agent to complete USAC online form.
- Consumer reviews and clicks consent when handed tablet by Agent.
- Consumer lists for agent all qualifying programs that she participates in. Agent checks boxes on USAC form.
- Consumer initials certifications and signs USAC online form when handed tablet by Agent.
- If Consumer needs to provide additional information to verify identity and eligibility, Agent helps consumer understand what is needed and can collect documentation from the consumer to upload to USAC.
- Once Consumer is verified, Agent can complete carrier's enrollment process.

NV SERVICE PROVIDER LIFELINE SIGNUP ONLINE

- Consumer reaches Service Provider online.
- Consumer provides full name, address, DOB, last 4 SSN to Service Provider – same info as on USAC online form.
- Consumer reviews and clicks consent to provide info to USAC. Service Provider provides identity info to USAC via API.
- Consumer checks all qualifying programs on Service Provider website – same as on USAC online form. Service Provider provides info to USAC via API.
- Consumer initials certifications and signs USAC online form linked by Service Provider.
- If Consumer needs to provide additional information to verify identity and eligibility, Service Provider helps consumer understand what is needed, and can collect documentation from the consumer to upload to USAC.
- Once Consumer is verified, Service Provider can complete the enrollment process.

THE NV WILL MAINTAIN CONTROL OF THE SIGNATORY PROCESS THROUGH API

TOOLS EXIST TO RETAIN THE INTEGRITY AND SECURITY OF VIRTUAL SIGNATURES
ON USAC CERTIFICATIONS THROUGH SERVICE PROVIDER'S WEBSITE.



ADOBE document cloud
(pdf Service & Adobe Sign)
Authorized: 05/14/2018



DocuSign - DocuSign Federal
Authorized: 08/10/2017
Agencies using this service
Federal Communications Commission



VASCO - eSignLive
E-Signature and Digital Signature
Service by Project Hosts
Authorized: 08/30/2016

DocuSign has been authorized by FCC as a secure means for compliance with the Federal E Sign act of 2000. DocuSign provides locking in documents for signatures to present to the person that needs to sign the document. NV in real time can edit and render the document that NV wants the consumer to execute at any time allowing full control of the content document used for attestations that is accessed by the providers through the API presenting to customers. Currently use by: Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Department of Agriculture, Department of Commerce, General Services Administration, United States Census Bureau, Federal Communications Commission, Broadcasting Board of Governors.

<http://www.businessinsider.com/docusign-electronic-signature-certified-federal-technology-provider-2017-8>

The Electronic Signatures in Global and National Commerce Act (ESIGN, Pub.L. 106-229, 114 Stat. 464, enacted June 30, 2000, 15 U.S.C. Although every state has at least one law pertaining to electronic signatures, it is the federal law that lays out the guidelines for electronic signatures



The user will complete the Lifeline application on the Service Provider website, then be redirected to the NV for attestation, a model similar merchant payments 3D secure which is commonly used by PayPal payments and also Verified by Visa And MasterCard SecureCode. Once complete, user will be redirected back to Service Provider website for results of accepted attestations or not.

NV WITH API WORKS BETTER FOR USAC & CONSUMER



1,705,000

MONTHLY NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO
CALL Q LINK CUSTOMER SERVICE

THAT'S 55,000 EVERYDAY



167,705,397

NUMBER OF SUPPORT EMAILS Q LINK HAS SENT

These are calls and issues that USAC would
have to address without an API



58% of the 24M

DOCUMENTS CUSTOMERS SUBMIT
are improper and unusable

34,117,332

TOTAL LEADS

894,820

APPLICATIONS COMPLETED

855,096

SENT TO NLAD

Q Link Wireless filtered
33,262,236 Ineligible leads

API-FACILITATED CARRIER-ASSISTED ENROLLMENT PROCESS REDUCES OPPORTUNITIES FOR FRAUD



FEWER HUMAN TOUCHPOINTS TO ALLOW FOR FRAUD

USAC conducts all eligibility and identity verifications, including consumer initials and signatures, directly from the consumer because the consumer is the only one who can input them.

This is unlike the agent process which relies on the agent's good faith to have the consumer sign and not sign in lieu of the consumer.