YouthBuild Rural Caucus

RECOMMENDATIONS ON LIFELINE MODERNIZATION

YouthBuild Rural Caucus

YouthBuild USA is a national network of 273 education and job-training programs where low-income youth ages 16 to 24 work full-time for 6 to 24 months toward their GEDs or high school diplomas while learning job skills by building affordable housing in their communities. At exit, participants are placed in college, jobs, or both.

The YouthBuild Rural Caucus convened 21 participants from programs located in rural communities across nine states to discuss the challenges rural communities face. We talked about a vision of wellness and opportunity for our communities, and brainstormed solutions that we can put in motion.

YOUTHBUILD RURAL CAUCUS & INTERNET ACCESS

The Internet is an invaluable tool for everyone, but for young people in rural America, it can be a Lifeline to education, employment, information, improving our communities, and sharing our stories.

We use the Internet to:

- Pursue our education – complete school assignments, research, take online courses, and apply for scholarships.
- Seek employment – complete and submit job applications and communicate with potential employers.
- Engage in our economy – shop, online bank, and pay our bills.
- Apply for social services that help us get ahead – FAFSA, Food Stamps, healthcare, etc.
- Communicate with our neighbors and loved ones.
- Find entertainment and information – stream how-to-videos, watch movies, and game online.

We know the digital divide disproportionally hurts rural America. 22 million rural Americans do not have access to high-speed broadband service. We surveyed our group and found that:

- 13/21 have Internet access at home
- 20/21 have Internet access at school
- 7/21 use the Internet at the public library
- 19/21 access the Internet on their cellphone
- 19/21 access the Internet at Youthbuild

We believe the Internet can be a powerful tool to transform our communities. Some of our ideas include:

- Marketing community improvement projects to engage community members and share those projects with neighboring towns.
- Support economic development by connecting local businesses, factories, and employers to each other, to customers, and to potential employees.
- Unity: bring people together to collaborate on issues that matter to them.
- The Cabbage Patch – a community page that engages citizens in community improvement and local government.

We commend the achievements of the Lifeline program in bringing wired and wireless telephone service to rural Americans. Some of us have been recipients and experienced the benefits of Lifeline firsthand, and we strongly encourage policy makers to consider offering Internet service via the Lifeline program. We believe this would go a long way to help rural communities and rural youth.

The participants of the YouthBuild Rural Caucus discussed ideas about how Lifeline Internet can truly help rural and low-income communities. We drafted some recommendations that we respectfully ask policymakers to consider in discussions about how to offer Internet service via Lifeline.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Lifeline is a program funded **by customers for customers**. Customers must be part of the decisions about the program and the primary source of information about how it can best serve the public.

Accountability. Lifeline is a program designed to help people get back on their feet. We believe customer accountability is a core principle that can help prevent waste, fraud, and abuse of the program.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE YOUTHBUILD RURAL CAUCUS FOR LIFELINE INTERNET

1. ***The recipient must have a choice***. We think offering bundled services for a lower cost is a great idea, but a "bundle" should not be the only way a recipient can get the service. Some low-income recipients might not be able to afford a bundle, or they might only want one of the services. This decision must be made by the recipient, not policymakers or a service provider.

2. ***Prevent wired and wireless data caps.*** We believe no Internet services should have data caps, including Lifeline Internet. If a cap must be enacted, policymakers must consider the size of a recipient's family – because too little data divided among a big family would not be much help at all.

3. ***Fund Digital Literacy***. Not all of our family, friends, and community members have access to telecommunications tools and services, which limits their digital literacy skills. We recommend policymakers allocate funds to close the digital literacy gap that impacts low-income and rural communities.

4. ***No restrictions on sites to access***. The transformative power of the Internet lies in connecting us to unlimited information, ideas, and innovation. Once a Lifeline recipient gets online, he or she should not be limited on where to go. Lifeline recipients should have access to ALL of the Internet.

5. ***Maintain our right to Privacy***. Keeping personal information safe is a risk all Internet users take. Participating in a government-sponsored program should not come at the cost of waiving our right to keep digital data and information private. All privacy protections enacted in the telephone program should be transferred to the Lifeline Internet program.

6. ***Fund hardware***. Many rural and low-income Americans cannot afford the devices that allow them to use the Internet. Although computer prices have declined, they are still a significant expense that many families cannot afford. We encourage policymakers to provide free or low-cost computers, tablets, and smart phones as part of the Lifeline Internet program. Consider creating payment plans to help recipients acquire these devices.

7. ***Eligibility.*** Qualifying for the Lifeline Internet program should follow the same criteria that the Lifeline Telephone program uses.

8. ***Collaborate with state and federal agencies***. Collaborate with state and federal agencies to disseminate information to potential participants and fund the program.