

LGBT Technology Partnership & Institute

May 19, 2015

Hon. Tom Wheeler Chairman
Hon. Mignon Clyburn Hon. Ajit Pai
Hon. Jessica Rosenworcel
Hon. Michael O'Rielly Commissioners
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street S.W.
Washington, DC 20554

RE: Lifeline Reform, WC Dockets 11-42 and 03-109

Dear Chairman Wheeler and Commissioners:

The LGBT Technology Partnership & Institute would like to add this addendum to the letter filed by Multicultural Media, Telecom and Internet Council (MMTC) requesting that the Federal Communications Commission take immediate action to modernize the Lifeline universal service program so that millions of Americans can realize the full potential of the digital broadband age, and obtain this benefit in an efficient and effective manner.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in the U.S. are core users of the Internet and broadband technologies. However, LGBT people face unique and ongoing challenges that make accessing the Internet essential for survival rather than mere luxuries.

Specifically, the Internet offers a key means for LGBT people to explore their identities without risking physical harm; connect to other people in and beyond their own neighborhoods and communities; and, seek out information about an array of LGBT-specific issues, ranging from safe places to live to health information.

Research shows that LGBT people are core users of the Internet and by reforming the Lifeline universal service program, the FCC would have a significant impact on the LGBT community. Our research shows that reforming Lifeline would have the following impact:

- Allow access to supportive community members, friends or loved ones – our research shows that 80% of LGBT respondents participate in a social networking site, such as Facebook or Twitter, compared to just 58% of the general public.
- Allow LGBT Lifeline users to seek health information, preventative information and competent, LGBT knowledgeable healthcare providers – our research shows that a large majority (81%) of LGBT youth have searched for health information online as compared to just 46% of non-LGBT youth.

- Additionally, the research available indicates that searching for health information online may be particularly meaningful for lesbians whose health needs are often ignored or overlooked.
- About 51% of LGBT-identifying adults have used a smartphone or tablet for three years or more, nearly twice as much as compared to those who do not identify as LGBT. Mobile devices play a particularly vital and important role in the lives of LGBT-identifying adults because of their unique need to find resources and places that will be welcoming and supportive to them.

Furthermore, the Lifeline program is especially vital for underserved and underrepresented LGBT youth. Making up about 40% of the constituency of shelters and other homeless youth services, LGBT youth are overrepresented within the homeless population. Frequently ending up in the streets after family conflicts over sexual orientation or gender identity, homeless LGBT youth are more likely than their non-LGBT peers to experience physical and sexual abuse; experience mental health problems; abuse alcohol and drugs; engage in survival sex; and contract HIV and other STDs.

Scholars are noting the potential of technology in improving these efforts, with cellphones playing a vital role in keeping homeless youth stay connected to life saving services and opportunities. For homeless LGBT youth, communication technologies are of even greater importance, helping them stay connected with supportive networks and enhancing personal safety. Studies conducted among a sample of adolescents in Los Angeles find that communication technologies are critical for the physical and mental wellbeing of homeless youth. In contrast to those primarily engaging in face-to-face communication with other homeless youth, adolescents keeping in touch with family and friends by means of technology were less likely to abuse alcohol and drugs. Similarly, street youth who use technology to connect with family and friends from home were less likely to experience depression than those primarily engaging in face-to-face relationships with other homeless adolescents. In the context of preventative health services, online information on HIV and other STDs has found to be especially effective among homeless youth.

Another common misconception about LGBT individuals is their economic status. Many in our community all over the United States face high rates of poverty, especially in rural communities or in states without legal discrimination protections for gender identity or sexual orientation. Access to affordable broadband technologies is crucial for those in the LGBT community to communicate with supportive networks, find employment, housing and health information.

For these reasons, in addition to the reasons outlined in the original MMTC letter, the LGBT Technology Partnership & Institute supports the MMTC's request that the FCC prioritize action on Lifeline reform in an effort to improve and modernize this vital program for LGBT communities.

Sincerely,

LGBT Technology Partnership & Institute