

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



In the Matter of)	
)	
Federal-State Joint Board on Universal Service)	CC Docket No. 96-45
)	
Lifeline and Link Up)	WC Docket No. 03-109
)	

COMMENTS OF MEDIA ACTION GRASSROOTS NETWORK

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SUMMARY

Collectively, the Media Action Grassroots Network (“MAG-Net”) member organizations submitting these comments represent communities of color, low-income communities, immigrant populations, and tribal communities, in both rural and urban areas. MAG-Net welcomes the opportunity to comment on eligibility criteria, verification rules, and outreach practices for Lifeline and Link-Up that can greatly increase subscribership in these programs and further support the aim of facilitating universal service and adoption among these least served communities. For the constituents of these organizations, affordable access to telecommunications services by low-income households plays a key role in achieving social justice goals. If not for the Commission’s Low-Income Universal Service Fund programs Lifeline and Link-Up, many low-income households would be forced to forego basic telecommunications services to meet other needs, such as food and shelter.

Eligibility criteria should be based on a reflection of meaningful but inclusive definitions of low-income and affordability. Studies show that even low-income families earning at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level would not find basic telecommunications services affordable, and such findings provide strong support for increasing Lifeline eligibility from the current 135 percent threshold. Allowing residents of homeless shelters to be automatically eligible for the low-income programs would empower these individuals to change their economic situations, maintain contact with friends and family, and improve such residents’ own sense of dignity and self-sufficiency.

Furthermore, the Joint Board should consider re-examining the one-per-household rule, which may have pernicious and unintended effects that dampen participation by eligible recipients who reside in homeless shelters and other group residences such as co-housing and

multifamily housing. The rule also may require individuals receiving low-income assistance to choose between mobile services and more robust wireline broadband offerings, thereby denying such individuals the chance to take full advantage of opportunities for economic advancement, educational enrichment, civic participation, and social engagement. The MAG-Net Commenters support the expansion of the Low-Income program to support in better fashion individuals' adoption of broadband and mobile services, while emphasizing that Lifeline and Link-Up must continue to provide support for basic telephony and connectivity in instances where more advanced offerings are not available.

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Media Access Project, on behalf of the Center for Media Justice, Center for Rural Strategies, Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, Main Street Project, Media Action Grassroots Network, Media Alliance, Media Justice League, Media Literacy Project, Media Mobilizing Project, People’s Production House, Prison Legal News/Human Rights Defense Center, Reclaim the Media, and Twin Cities Community Voicemail (collectively “MAG-Net” or the “MAG-Net Commenters”), submits these comments to the Federal-State Joint Board on Universal Service (“Joint Board”) in response to the *Referral Order* set forth for comment in the above-captioned dockets.¹ MAG-Net seeks to provide the Joint Board with information regarding the expectations of members of communities of color, low-income communities, immigrant populations, and tribal communities who participate in the Commission’s Low-Income Universal Service Fund programs, Lifeline and Link-Up.

¹ See “Federal-State Joint Board on Universal Service Seeks Comment on Lifeline and Link-Up Eligibility, Verification, and Outreach Issues Referred to Joint Board,” CC Docket No. 96-45, WC Docket No. 03-109, *Public Notice*, FCC 10J-2 (released June 15, 2010) (“*Public Notice*”). In releasing the Public Notice, the Joint Board sought comment on questions referred by the Commission to the Joint Board. See Federal-State Joint Board on Universal Service, CC Docket No. 96-45, WC Docket No. 03-109, *Order*, FCC 10-72 (rel. May 4, 2010) (“*Referral Order*”).

These comments answer some of the specific eligibility, verification, and outreach questions posed in the *Referral Order*. For example, the MAG-Net Commenters urge the Joint Board to recommend increasing the 135 percent of federal poverty level income threshold for eligibility criteria for Lifeline. MAG-Net Commenters further urge the Joint Board to recommend automatically enrolling in the Low-Income programs residents of homeless shelters as well as current participants in state and federal need-based support programs. Additionally, MAG-Net Commenters urge the Joint Board to consider the current trend towards adoption of mobile communications in conjunction with its review of the one-per-household rule and the Low-Income programs' outreach efforts.

In conjunction with calling for such forward-looking changes to the Commission's existing rules, the MAG-Net Commenters strongly support the "expansion of the low-income program to broadband, as recommended in the National Broadband Plan."² MAG-Net also strongly supports changes to the Lifeline and Link-Up programs that would make these mechanisms more readily supportive of the mobile connectivity options needed and desired by low-income individuals. These programs today provide some discounts and support for mobile services. The Joint Board should recommend changes, however, that would allow for more meaningful support of increasingly vital and broadly used mobile technologies, and that would improve the mobile service plans and options available to low-income consumers.

In sum, the MAG-Net Commenters submit that providing better adoption supports for mobile telephony, mobile broadband, and wireline broadband services would represent a crucial evolution in the Low-Income programs. Such an evolution is most necessary for the

² *Referral Order* ¶ 1 (citing FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION, CONNECTING AMERICA: THE NATIONAL BROADBAND PLAN 172-173 (rel. Mar. 16, 2010) ("National Broadband Plan").

Commission to fulfill its universal service mission in the evolving 21st Century economy. However, these changes must not come at the expense of maintaining Lifeline and Link-Up support for individuals who still may lack even basic landline telephone service.³ The Joint Board should make recommendations supporting new adopters and users of wireless telephony and mobile broadband services in typically marginalized communities, while expanding and improving upon outreach guidelines and eligibility requirements for all existing and new uses of Lifeline and Link-Up support.

INTRODUCTION

The MAG-Net Commenters represent members of various communities, regions, and demographic groups that historically have been – and remain today – unserved and underserved by providers of affordable telecommunications services. For the constituents of the MAG-Net Commenters, providing affordable access to telecommunications services for low-income households plays a key role in promoting social justice. The social, political, educational, and economic benefits of access to affordable telecommunications services provide a means for self-sufficiency, alleviate the impact of poverty for low-income households, serve as a form of empowerment in our digital economy and education system, and contribute to a sense of dignity.

Such policy considerations serve as the backbone of universal service, a policy that promotes nationwide access to telecommunications services at just, reasonable and affordable rates, firmly rooted in the Communications Act and its amendments and implemented in the Lifeline and Link-Up programs. The MAG-Net Commenters welcome the opportunity to

³ Traci L. Morris, *et al.*, Native Public Media and New America Foundation, *New Media, Technology, and Internet Use in Indian Country: Quantitative and Qualitative Analyses*, at 5 (June 2010), available at http://www.nativepublicmedia.org/images/stories/NPM-NAF_New_Media_Study_2009_small.pdf (“Analog telephone reaches only one in three families in many tribal communities.”).

comment on the potential broadening of eligibility criteria, streamlining of verification procedures, and devising of effective outreach for the Lifeline and Link-Up programs – all with an aim of providing greater access to and adoption of advanced telecommunications services by members of these least-served communities. Therefore, the MAG-Net Commenters call upon the Joint Board to make recommendations that will expand the Low-Income programs to more explicitly and readily support broadband and mobile services in addition to the traditional wireline telephony services on which the Commission has in the past focused Lifeline and Link-Up.

The availability and adoption of advanced telecommunications services, and improved access to the increasingly essential and ubiquitous Internet offerings and information services that wireline and mobile broadband users access over such broadband telecommunications platforms, greatly advance the social, political, educational and economic well-being of those with affordable access.⁴ For low-income constituents, the ability to call a loved-one, apply for a job, engage in the political process, and connect with government service programs should qualify as basic household necessities on par with shelter, health care, clothing, and energy needs. Yet, if not for the Lifeline and Link-Up programs, many low-income households would

⁴ The social benefits of affordable access to broadband are especially evident. *See, e.g.*, Comments of the National Cable & Telecommunications Association on NBP Public Notice #16, GN Docket Nos. 09-47, 09-51, 09-137, at 19-20 (filed Dec. 1, 2009) (“[I]n some low-income areas where laptops or netbook-like devices and home broadband connections have been provided to children, and the technology was thoughtfully integrated into learning and instruction, research shows positive effects on student academic performance, engagement, and attitude.”); Comments of Public Knowledge, Media Access Project, the New America Foundation, and U.S. PIRG, GN Docket No. 09-51, at 1 (filed June 8, 2009) (the “Public Interest NBP Comments”) (“[A]ccess to broadband has become an essential utility.... [B]usinesses large and small can reach new markets and make their enterprises more efficient. Students have at their fingertips educational resources not conceivable a few years ago. Some sources of news and information, once confined to the printed page, are to be found online only.”).

be forced to forego such telecommunications services to meet other basic needs, such as food.⁵ Such a deprivation of communications decreases the opportunities and depresses the dignity of low-income households, stymies their efforts at self-sufficiency, and puts added pressure on their struggle with financial difficulties. The current Lifeline and Link-Up programs, by discounting the cost of telephone service and its installation, provide support to social justice while improving communications throughout our society by expanding the reach of the network .

Concern for the public interest and societal benefits from telecommunications services and systems dates to the initial enactment of the Communications Act of 1934, which created the Commission and directed it “to make available, so far as possible, to all people of the United States a rapid, efficient... wire and radio communication service with adequate facilities at reasonable charges.”⁶ Traditionally, this concept pertained only to telephone service. The 1996 Act expanded this goal by requiring that the Commission define universal service to account for advances in telecommunications and information technologies.⁷ In implementing the 1996 Act, the Commission instituted the Lifeline and Link-Up programs that serve to make basic local telephone service more affordable for low-income consumers. The FCC’s 1997 Universal Service Report and Order interprets the 1996 Act as follows:

With respect to the Lifeline and Link-Up programs, we observe that the Act evinces a renewed concern for the needs of low-income citizens. Thus, for the first time, Congress expresses the principle that rates should be “affordable,” and that access should be

⁵ See, e.g., Comments of the Public Utility Law Project of New York on Proposed Rulemaking of Universal Service Policies, CC Docket No. 96-45, at 3 (filed April 11, 1996) (“PULP in the last year received numerous unsolicited letters from persons notified by computer generated letters of their Lifeline eligibility, and that their monthly basic service rate would be lowered to \$1, a savings of approximately \$10 per month. One customer stated: I am writing you because I have just received your letter offering my family life-line. I was really touched that someone really cares about the needs of families like mine. You have just gave my children milk for the month. Thank you very much.”).

⁶ 47 U.S.C. § 151.

⁷ See *id.* § 254 (b)-(c).

provided to “low-income consumers” in all regions of the nation. These principles strengthen and reinforce the Commission’s preexisting interest in ensuring that telecommunications service is available “to all the people of the United States.” Under these directives, all consumers, including low-income consumers, are equally entitled to universal service as defined by this Commission under section 254(c)(1).⁸

Therefore, serving the needs of low-income consumers is an integral aspect of the definition of universal service. The Lifeline and Link-Up programs serve that goal, but the Joint Board can and should make recommendations here that will improve and modernize the Low-Income programs.

While the Lifeline and Link-Up programs promote the universal service goal of making service available and affordable to low-income consumers, the success of these programs has been hindered by low participation rates. As comments in the Commission’s National Broadband Plan proceedings demonstrated, few states have succeeded in enrolling more than 50% of their Lifeline eligible consumers.⁹ Only approximately 7 million of an estimated 24.5 million eligible households (or less than 29%) participated in Lifeline in 2008.¹⁰ The National Broadband Plan cites several reasons for the low participation rates in the Lifeline program across the states, including: lack of service options; lack of information about the programs; and

⁸ In the Matter of Federal-State Joint Board on Universal Service, CC Docket No. 96-45, *Report & Order*, 12 FCC Rcd 8776, ¶ 335 (1997).

⁹ See Comments of the National Association of State Utility Consumer Advocates on NBP Public Notice #19, GN Docket Nos. 09-47, 09-51, 09-137, at 30 n.45 (filed Dec. 7, 2009) (“USAC staff prepares annually a study of the Lifeline participation rates in each state, based on United States Census Bureau data. The 2008 Lifeline Participation Rates by State map compiled by USAC shows just 5 states, Alaska, California, Colorado, Montana and Oklahoma, as having estimated Lifeline participation rates in excess of 50%.”).

¹⁰ 2009 UNIVERSAL SERVICE MONITORING REPORT at tbl. 2.1; see also USAC, 2008 Lifeline Participation Rate Data, <http://www.usac.org/li/about/participation-rate-information.aspx> (last visited July 13, 2010), as cited in the National Broadband Plan at 172.

differences in funding levels, enrollment procedures, eligibility criteria and outreach and awareness efforts.¹¹

Indeed, adding service options as suggested above should play a key role in reforming the Lifeline program. Expanding the Lifeline program to support broadband and mobile services more explicitly and more effectively is essential for improving low-income communities access to advanced telecommunications capabilities.¹² Making available new and supported mobile service options – in addition to somewhat useful but severely limited options offered under the current TracFone “SafeLink Wireless” program¹³ and by other carriers who offer prepaid wireless service with Lifeline support – may significantly increase the number of Lifeline subscribers.¹⁴ In addition to expanding the Low-Income programs, the MAG-Net Commenters suggest the following changes in response to questions in the *Referral Order* regarding overall

¹¹ National Broadband Plan at 173 .

¹² See, e.g., Comments of Access Humboldt, Appalshop, California Center for Rural Policy, Center For Media Justice, Center For Rural Strategies, Main Street Project, Media Action Grassroots Network, Mountain Area Information Network, New Mexico Literacy Project, Rural Broadband Policy Group, Texas Media Empowerment Project, Thousand Kites, and Public Knowledge on NBP Public Notice #19, GN Docket Nos. 09-137, 09-51, 09-47, at 8 (filed Dec. 7, 2009).

¹³ While service plans and minutes available to participants vary by state, the SafeLink program caps users’ minutes at levels too low to make the program as valuable as it should be for users. See, e.g., Lifeline/SafeLink Fact Sheet, <https://www.safelinkwireless.com/EnrollmentPublic/benefits.aspx> (last visited July 15, 2010); see also Comments of Free Press, GN Docket No. 09-51, at 239 (filed June 8, 2009) (“Free Press Comments”) (“[L]ow-income households are increasingly solely reliant on mobile phones for telephone service, and the limited availability of mobility Lifeline carriers is reducing overall participation in the program.”).

¹⁴ Low-income consumers trend towards using the mobile phone as their primary communication device. See, e.g., Janice A. Hague, “Whose Call Is It? Targeting Universal Service Programs to Low-Income Households’ Telecommunications Preferences, 33 *Telecomm. Pol’y* 129, 136–38 (2009), available at http://warrington.ufl.edu/purc/purcdocs/papers/0805_Hauge_Whose_Call_is.pdf; see also Aaron Smith, Pew Internet & American Life Project, *Mobile Access 2010*, at 5 (July 2010), available at <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Mobile-Access-2010.aspx> (“Continuing a trend we first identified in 2009, minority Americans lead the way when it comes to mobile access—especially mobile access using handheld devices.”); Free Press Comments at 239 (“[L]ow-income households have a strong preference for the flexibility of pre-paid mobile plans.”).

eligibility criteria, verification rules, and outreach practices for Lifeline and Link-Up. Implementing these improvements could greatly increase subscribership in these programs and further support the universal service goal of promoting adoption of advanced telecommunications capabilities among low-income communities.

DISCUSSION

I. Eligibility criteria and documentation should rely on a common sense approach to defining affordability and comport with the notion of universal service.

The Lifeline and Link-Up programs deliver a basic need to low-income households. While such supports are not able or designed to eliminate all financial stress for these families, they do alleviate some of the impact of economic hardship. The eligibility criteria for providing such relief should ultimately rely on common sense measures: the programs should serve low-income communities according to their need. Similarly, the principle that should guide the Joint Board and the Commission in their efforts to reform eligibility criteria derives from Section 254(b) of the Act: whether the services are available to low-income consumers at “just, reasonable, and affordable rates.”¹⁵ From such a perspective, eligibility criteria should not be based entirely on a narrow reading of the percentage of the federal poverty income guidelines an applicant earns, or solely on the federal and state assistance programs in which an applicant participates. Rather, the criteria should be based on a more accurate reflection of what defines low-income status and what constitutes affordability, taking into account the total percentage of income that a household spends on connectivity.

The *Referral Order* seeks comment on “whether customers qualifying for low-income support based on income should be eligible to receive support if their income is at or below a

¹⁵ 47 U.S.C. § 254(b)(1).

percentage of the federal poverty guidelines different than the current 135 percent threshold.”¹⁶ A recent report on the characteristics of low-income families observes that about one-third of all families with children have incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.¹⁷ The report states that such low-income families “are nearly twice as likely as middle-income families to report skipping meals or not being able to pay for food (‘food insecurity’), half again as likely to miss rent, mortgage, or utility payments (‘housing insecurity’), and twice as likely to lack health insurance as middle-income families.”¹⁸ Confronted with this data, the common sense approach to defining the word “affordable” of Section 254(b) compels an evaluation that even low-income families at below 200 percent of the federal poverty level would not find basic telecommunications services affordable. Independent of whether the program supports broadband service, an increase from the current 135 percent threshold would serve the interest of justice and the goal of universal service.

The *Referral Order* also seeks comment on “whether certain classes of individuals, such as residents of homeless shelters, should be automatically eligible for participation in the low-income programs.”¹⁹ Perhaps more than any other class of individuals, the homeless deserve the Commission’s commitment to universal service. Often, the homeless do not have the documentation or the required information, such as a home address, to prove eligibility for the low-income programs. Yet their inability at times to demonstrate eligibility does not diminish their need to utilize basic telecommunications services to stay connected with family, secure a job interview, search for resources, or gain access to opportunities for political and civic

¹⁶ *Referral Order* ¶ 15.

¹⁷ Gregory Arcs *et al.*, “An Assessment of the Income and Expenses of America’s Low-Income Families: Using Survey Data from the National Survey of America’s Families, The Urban Institute” (2006), *available at* http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/411382_surve.pdf.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 7.

¹⁹ *Referral Order* ¶ 15.

engagement. These obstacles likewise may affect individuals living in transitional housing, battered women’s shelters, half-way houses, and co-housing or multifamily housing settings. All individuals so situated, and those in other vulnerable populations such as refugees and immigrants, may face barriers to application that the Commission can and should remove, including those based on such individual’s concerns for privacy and physical safety.

The *Referral Order* then seeks comment on “whether a consumer should have to provide additional documentation—beyond that provided to the state—to prove eligibility for federal low-income programs.”²⁰ Requiring additional documentation diminishes the effectiveness of the Lifeline and Link-Up programs. Providing the documentation already required by most states already proves burdensome for many low-income residents and the process often comes with the stigma associated with proving need. The Joint Board should not propose any policy that places an unfair burden on an already vulnerable population. Furthermore, such a policy would likely result in the rejection and distrust of the federal Low-Income programs by low-income constituents and therefore would be counterproductive to increasing program participation.

The *Referral Order* next seeks comment on a proposal to require that states provide automatic enrollment in Lifeline/Link-up for individuals who qualify for other assistance programs.²¹ The MAG-Net Commenters support adoption of such a requirement for states that wish to participate in the federal Low-Income programs. Persons who receive need-based benefits in various federal and state categories such as Medicaid, Food Stamps, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Housing Assistance, and Home Energy Assistance, among others, should be automatically enrolled in the Lifeline and/or Link-Up programs. Sign-up opportunities for the

²⁰

Id.

²¹

See id. ¶¶ 18-19.

Low-Income programs should be available at public schools for which a majority of the school population qualifies for free and reduced meals. Agents should be available at the schools, during parent teacher conferences or open houses, to assist parents in registering for these programs. A Joint Board proposal to require such automatic enrollment opportunities would reflect the common sense awareness that those households eligible for other need-based programs likely cannot afford full-priced, advanced telecommunications services. Such an automatic enrollment process would also eliminate cumbersome administrative burdens and costs, and likely would increase participation of eligible households. The decision also comes without much risk of waste, fraud, and abuse, as the process would depend on the determinations of public agencies that already verify eligibility for these various other federal and state need-based programs.

The *Referral Order* next seeks comment on “online mechanisms that would allow carriers to automate their interactions with states and the federal government to certify a customer’s initial and ongoing eligibility for program discounts.”²² In this regard, the Joint Board should adopt the National Broadband Plan’s suggestion to create a centralized database for online certification and verification. Such a database would relieve the burden on Low-Income program participants who may switch carriers or service providers. The potential for increasing ease of access to support would improve the chance of participation by individuals eligible for Lifeline/Link-Up.

The final questions in the *Referral Order* regarding individual participants’ eligibility seek comments on methods to ensure compliance with the one-per-household rule that limits

²² *Id.* ¶ 20.

households to obtaining only one wireline *or* one wireless service with Lifeline support.²³ Instead of seeking ways to ensure compliance with this rule, the Joint Board should reconsider the one-per-household rule and recommend its revision or elimination. The *Referral Order* observes the growing use of mobile wireless services that often times complement rather than replace a residential wireline connection,²⁴ yet the *Referral Order* does not adequately justify the one-per-household rule in the presence of such trends. In the way that low-income consumers should not have to choose between other basic necessities and utilities, a low-income consumer should not have to choose between a wireline and a wireless connection when seeking access to modes of communication.

The question of expanding Lifeline and Link-Up to explicitly support broadband appears at the outset of the *Referral Order* and recurs throughout, though in each specific case the Commission simply asked the Joint Board “to consider how the potential expansion of the low-income program to broadband would affect any of its recommendations.”²⁵ As the MAG-Net Commenters have demonstrated in other proceedings, wireless broadband options still are not entirely adequate substitutes for wireline broadband.²⁶ Low-income consumers would benefit greatly from improved affordability of all vital communications services: wireline and wireless broadband services, in addition to more traditional wireline and wireless telephony services when advanced facilities and capabilities are not available to or desired by the consumer.

²³ See *id.* ¶¶ 21-22.

²⁴ See *id.* ¶ 21 (“[M]any consumers use mobile wireless service as a complement to a residential wireline connection.”).

²⁵ See, e.g., *id.* ¶ 24.

²⁶ See, e.g., Reply Comments of Center for Media Justice, Center for Rural Strategies, Main Street Project, Media Action Grassroots Network, Minnesota Digital Justice Coalition, People’s Production House, and Rural Broadband Policy Group, WT Docket No. 09-66, at 11 (filed Oct. 22, 2009).

The Lifeline program should not perpetuate the digital divide, but rather, assist members of low-income communities in bridging it. To that end, the Joint Board might consider implementing a voucher program for federal Low-Income program recipients, which could provide Lifeline and Link-Up beneficiaries with more power to shop for prepaid mobile phone minutes or broadband service, apart from and in addition to the existing Lifeline support for wireline telephony. In any event, the expansion of Lifeline to more effectively support broadband and mobile services merely reflects the increasing importance of advanced telecommunications capability for everyday economic and educational opportunities.

The MAG-Net Commenters respectfully submit that the Joint Board's eligibility and other recommendations must recognize current realities and trends, such as low-income consumers tendency to choose mobile services as their first entry into advanced capabilities and Internet access. These facts and other considerations – such as the unintended and undesirable potential application of the rule to prevent unrelated residents of homeless shelters living at same address from each obtaining supported services²⁷ – necessitates a review of the one-per-household rule. This is especially the case in light of the MAG-Net Commenters' experience

²⁷ The Commission sought comment late in 2009 on TracFone's letter request for clarification that the one-per-household rule "is not intended to limit the availability of Lifeline supported service to only one qualified low-income resident per homeless shelter" nor to prevent provision of discounted service to residents in "other group living facilities, such as nursing homes, assisted-living facilities, apartment buildings, trailer-home communities, halfway houses, and group homes." See Comment Sought on TracFone Request for Clarification of Universal Service Lifeline Program 'One-Per-Household' Rule as Applied to Group Living Facilities," WC Docket No. 03-109, *Public Notice*, 24 FCC Rcd 12788 (Wireline Competition Bur. 2009). Commenters including AT&T, the National Consumer Law Center, NASUCA, and GCI all supported such a clarification.

with the DTV transition, during which people living in group homes, nursing homes, and other such settings all too frequently were denied coupons because of their shared address.²⁸

II. Verification procedures should be encouraged to maintain the efficacy and efficiency of the Low-Income programs, but should not unduly burden eligible recipients.

The *Referral Order* seeks comment on “whether any changes should be made to the existing verification procedures in the Commission’s rules.”²⁹ The Joint Board should be encouraged in its effort to maintain the efficacy and efficiency of the low-income programs. Identifying individuals who are not eligible under the program rules frees up funds for those who are. However, adding new verification procedures that might be equally as complicated or more so than existing application requirements would likely come at some administrative cost to the Low-Income programs, and would likely result in lower participation.

As noted above, some individuals applying for service already are unable to provide responses to seemingly innocuous questions, such as a home address inquiry. Yet, these questions can be difficult or impossible to answer for individuals without a stable home address at the time of application or later verification. All of the Joint Board’s efforts in responding to the *Referral Order* should be in the nature of suggesting improvements that will increase participation by clearly eligible parties. Adding any new and unduly burdensome verification requirements to an already complicated, stigmatized, stressful, and oftentimes byzantine application process for need-based programs would diminish the programs’ effectiveness, not improve it.

²⁸ See, e.g., Letter from Rep. Eliot L. Engel to Meredith Atwell Baker, Acting Assistant Secretary, National Telecommunications and Information Association (April 1, 2008) available at <http://engel.congressnewsletter.net/common/mailings/?id=2000142>.

²⁹ *Referral Order* ¶ 27.

III. Outreach programs should incorporate current trends in consumer preferences and be responsive to the cultural and linguistic needs of Lifeline eligible communities.

Finally, the *Referral Order* seeks comment on “whether the existing [Commission] guidelines are sufficient to promote consumer awareness of the low-income programs.”³⁰ While the current outreach guidelines offer some solid methods to create more effective outreach, MAG-Net Commenters submit that the Joint Board should propose guidelines recognizing reflecting changes in technology and in the services that an expanded Low-Income program should support. Eligible households may prefer communications services that have not previously qualified or been robustly supported by Lifeline, including service from mobile wireless providers. Therefore, efforts to increase consumer awareness of the federal and state Lifeline and Link-Up programs should be adapted to promote mobile and broadband services in addition to traditional landline telephony offerings. Indeed, a Lifeline program might be able to market itself if the program took the shape of prepaid wireless phone cards or the ability to purchase a mobile phone at a discount.

Still, the Joint Board has rightly acknowledged in its guidelines that the lack of awareness and the distrust of support programs serve as prevalent barriers to enrollment. The Joint Board also correctly acknowledged that implementing outreach programs in coordination with government agencies or tribes that administer any of the relevant government assistance programs builds trust in the program and provides added convenience. In addition, optimizing marketing efforts means adjusting marketing strategies to different geographic areas and populations. In low-income areas that lack basic infrastructure such as schools, libraries, and post offices, the Joint Board should consider including places of religious worship and other trustworthy community-based organizations as additional anchor institutions for outreach.

³⁰ *Id.* ¶ 34.

Also, the Commission's outreach rules should continue to ensure that providers advertise discounted service availability in languages "that can be read or accessed by any sizeable non-English speaking populations within a carrier's service area."³¹ The Commission should enforce this policy, and any new outreach rules likewise should ensure that state agencies and community anchor institutions will be provided with culturally and linguistically relevant materials for outreach to communities that predominantly speak other languages. Adoption of such recommendations and improvements in outreach implementation would likely increase participation.³²

CONCLUSION

The current Lifeline and Link Up programs, by discounting the cost of telephone service and its installation, facilitate connectivity that benefits all of us and promotes social justice for individuals in marginalized communities. These programs should be expanded and updated to provide explicit support for new and better wireless and broadband service options, but not at the expense of cutting support for existing, basic telecommunications services. Eligibility criteria should be based on an appropriate reflection of what defines low-income and what constitutes affordability. Efforts to maintain the efficacy and efficiency of the low-income programs through verification should be encouraged, but the Joint Board should not recommend any new application or verification procedures that would unduly diminish or discourage participation by eligible individuals. Outreach programs should recognize trends in low-income household communications purchases and serve the cultural and linguistic needs of particular communities.

³¹ *Id.* ¶ 32 (citing Lifeline and Link-Up, WC Docket No. 03-109, *Report and Order and Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking*, 19 FCC Rcd 8302, ¶¶ 45, 47 (2004)).

³² *See Referral Order* ¶ 32 n.73.

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