ASIAN AMERICAN JUSTICE CENTER | MEMBER OF ASIAN AMERICAN CENTER FOR ADVANCING JUSTICE

April 24, 2013

Chairman Greg Walden
Subcommittee on Communications and Technology
Committee on Energy and Commerce
2125 Rayburn HOB
Washington, DC 20515

Ranking Member Anna Eshoo
Subcommittee on Communications and Technology
Committee on Energy and Commerce
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Washington, DC 20515

Re.: Importance and Value of the Lifeline Program

Dear Chairman Walden and Ranking Member Eshoo:

On behalf Asian American Justice Center (AAJC), member of Asian American Center for Advancing Justice, and Self-Help for the Elderly, we write to express our strong support for the Lifeline program.

AAJC is dedicated to promoting a fair and equitable society for all by working for civil and human rights and empowering Asian Americans and other underserved communities. We provide the growing Asian American communities with multilingual support and culturally appropriate legal services, community education, and public policy and civil rights advocacy. In the communications field, AAJC works to promote universal access and reduce barriers to critical technology, services, and the media.

Established in 1966 to serve seniors in San Francisco's Chinatown community, Self-Help for the Elderly's mission is to promote the independence, dignity and self-worth of seniors by empowering seniors to help themselves and by providing a comprehensive range of multicultural and multilingual services. Self-Help for the Elderly serves over 35,000 seniors each year in San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara and Alameda counties. AAJC and Self-Help for the Elderly recently partnered to administer Broadband Technology Opportunity Programs (BTOP) to increase broadband adoption in the Asian American community.

The Lifeline program helps approximately 16 million low-income households gain access to critical phone services that provide them an invaluable connection to employment opportunities, emergency services, medical and social care, friends, and family. As the subcommittee considers major modifications to the Lifeline program, we urge the subcommittee to carefully weigh the benefits of the program and potential disruption of phone service to vulnerable populations.

Significant Subgroups of Asian Americans Benefit from Lifeline

Created by President Reagan in 1984, the Lifeline program currently supports low-income households gain access to wireline or wireless telephone service. Households at or below 135% of the federal poverty line or who participate in certain government assistance programs qualify for the program.

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While some members of the Asian American community are faring well, others—particularly those in the Southeast Asian community—continue to face socioeconomic challenges specific to their subgroup that likely make eligible for the Lifeline program. For example, Laotian, Cambodian and Hmong Americans are more likely than any racial group to access cash public assistance.[1] Bangladeshi, Laotian, and Hmong Americans all have average per capita incomes of under $20,000 and Korean, Hmong, Laotian, Cambodian, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Bangladeshi seniors have above average poverty rates.[2]

Communication services are literally a "lifeline" for many Asian Americans because approximately one-third of Asian Americans are limited-English proficient (LEP).[3] All of the ethnic groups listed above also have LEP rates above 40% and many live in linguistically isolated households.[4] For example, Self-Help for the Elderly serves over 25,000 low-income monolingual (non-English) Asian Americans in San Francisco's Chinatown who are enrolled or are eligible for Lifeline benefits. Having telephone service is critical for these individuals to stay in contact and communicate in their native language with medical professionals, social workers, family, friends, and emergency services. Without the Lifeline program LEP communities we serve would be further isolated by from critical social services and their communities by having their sole means of communications cut off.

The FCC has made great efforts prevent waste, fraud, and abuse in the Lifeline program. Applicants must provide proof of eligibility and phone companies must certify they are providing services to eligible consumers. These major reforms have strengthened the Lifeline program and the FCC should have the opportunity to monitor the efficacy of these reforms before further changes are made to the programs.

Thank you for your consideration on this very important topic. Please do not hesitate to contact Jason T. Lagria, AAJC Senior Staff Attorney, at 202-296-2300 ext. 122 if you have any questions or comments.

Sincerely,

Jason T. Lagria
Senior Staff Attorney
Media and Telecommunications
Asian American Justice Center

Anni Chung
President and CEO
Self-Help for the Elderly

[1] Asian Pacific American Legal Center & Asian American Justice Center, *A Community of Contrasts: Asian Americans in the United States 2011* 38 (2011). In 2007-2009 approximately 13% of Hmong, 7% of Cambodian, and 6% of Laotian American households accessed cash public assistance, compared to 5% of African American and 4% of Latino households.
[2] *Id.* at 36-37.
[3] *Id.* at 27.
[4] *Id.* at 28-29.