RESOLUTION ENCOURAGING MODERNIZATION OF THE LIFELINE PROGRAM

WHEREAS, the National Black Caucus of State Legislators (NBCSL) recognizes access to high-speed broadband is a fundamental pathway to economic, academic, healthcare, social, and civic opportunities;

WHEREAS, Lifeline, a universal service program mandated by Congress to ensure the availability of communications to all Americans, was implemented in 1985 to provide a discount on traditional landline phone service for qualifying low-income consumers and in 2005, Lifeline discounts were expanded to include pre-paid wireless service plans;

WHEREAS, in 2012, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) adopted comprehensive reform and modernization of the Lifeline program to eliminate waste, fraud, and abuse as well as modernize the program;

WHEREAS, on May 11, 2015, NBCSL joined in with thirty-six organizations in a letter to the FCC calling for the “rapid and comprehensive reform of the Commission’s critically important Lifeline universal service program” which would make broadband more affordable and available for low income, elderly, and underserved consumers;

WHEREAS, NBCSL filed comments with the Federal Communications Commission on May 11, 2015 which implored that the government institute a twenty-first century model to “ACHIEVE NEW PROGRAM EFFICIENCIES, IMPROVE LIFELINE PARTICIPATION, AND REDUCE WASTE, FRAUD AND ABUSE” and further suggested, these goals would simplify the consumer experience, and better protect consumer privacy by allowing consumers to enroll in lifeline at the same time as they apply for other government benefits;

WHEREAS, according to the Pew Research Center’s June 2015 report, American’s Internet Access: 2000-2015, 84 percent of American adults use the internet but digital gaps still exist. For example: 96 percent of young adults use the Internet while 56 percent of older adults (65+) use the Internet; 95 percent of adults with a college or graduate degree use the Internet whereas, 66 percent of adults without a high school diploma use the Internet; adults living in households with an annual income of at least $75,000 use the Internet, whereas, 74 percent of adults in households with an annual income under $30,000 use the Internet; 78 percent of Blacks and 81 percent of Hispanics use the Internet whereas 85 percent of Whites and 97 percent of English-speaking Asian Americans use the Internet; and 85 percent of urban and suburban communities use the Internet whereas 78 percent of rural residents are Internet users;

WHEREAS, the Pew Research Center found in its report, U.S. Smartphone Use in 2015, that those with relatively low income and educational levels, younger adults, and people of color are smartphone dependent and these users are more likely to access smartphones for important health, education, and employment resources;
WHEREAS, the Pew Research Center also found that 48 percent of smart-phone dependent Americans had to cancel or shut off their cell phone service due to economic hardship and 30 percent of smartphone-dependent Americans frequently reach the data caps they are allowed on their wireless plan;

WHEREAS, even with high adoption rate of wireless, there are still certain broadband-enabled resources that are more effective when accessed in the home such as Internet-based research, multimedia projects, collaboration with peers on school assignments, and the submission of homework;

WHEREAS, relevancy and literacy are keys to broadband adoption as John Horrigan found in a 2014 survey, Digital Readiness: Nearly one-third of Americans lack the skills to use next-generation “Internet of things” applications that: 29 percent of adult Americans have low levels of digital readiness; digital readiness is a bigger problem than the digital divide; and lack of digital readiness afflicts one in five Americans who have advanced online access;

WHEREAS, programs such as Comcast’s Internet Essentials, have been effectively employed to increase broadband adoption and improve digital literacy skills; and

WHEREAS, the FCC’s recent Notice of Proposed Rulemaking recommended establishing a national verifier to encourage more provider participation, reduce waste, fraud, and abuse, reduce duplicative administrative burdens and bring greater confidentiality and dignity for consumers.

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the National Black Caucus of State Legislators (NBCSL) calls upon the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to modernize the Lifeline program to include high-speed broadband;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that eligible Lifeline subscribers should be able to choose between voice, broadband or both as part of the modernized program;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the FCC should institute coordinated enrollment with other national public benefit programs and eliminate eligibility determination by Lifeline service providers;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the FCC should supplement Lifeline efforts with digital literacy efforts;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the FCC should encourage participation from the broad spectrum of service provides to expand consumer service options; and national, regional, and local organizations should be leveraged to raise awareness about the Lifeline program and aid in program enrollment; and

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED, that the NBCSL shall send a copy of this resolution to the President of the United States, the Vice President of the United States, member of the United States Congress, and the commissioners of the Federal Communications Commission.
SPONSOR: Delegate Michael L. Vaughn (MD)
Committee of Jurisdiction: Telecommunications, Science, and Technology Policy Committee
Certified by Committee Co-Chairs: Delegate Michael Vaughn (MD) and Senator Anastasia Pittman (OK)
Ratified in Plenary Session: Ratification Date is December 4, 2015
Ratification is certified by: Senator Catherine Pugh (MD), President