

**STATEMENT OF  
COMMISSIONER JESSICA ROSENWORCEL**

Re: *Lifeline and Link Up Reform and Modernization*, WC Docket No. 11-42, *Telecommunications Carriers Eligible for Universal Service Support*, WC Docket No. 09-197, *Connect America Fund*, WC Docket No. 10-90.

For over three decades, the Lifeline program has helped the neediest among us connect—connect to family, jobs, healthcare, and help when emergency strikes. These connections make us stronger. That is why, over time, the Commission updated the Lifeline program to include both wireline and wireless voice services. Today, we continue this course—by updating the Lifeline program to include broadband.

This change is overdue, because connectivity today is so much more than it was when this program got its start and most communications involved a phone cord. Today, getting connected means getting online. It is time for the Lifeline program to reflect this reality.

So I support today's decision to modernize this program and update it to include broadband. I also support this effort because it brings new accountability and internal controls to the program. We put in place minimum standards and we adopt fiscal controls. We also create a National Verifier to improve administration and take the customer eligibility process out of the hands of providers who would abuse it. In addition, we bring new transparency to the program by making information about subscriber counts publicly available to all. These are good things. This is progress.

But above all, I support today's decision because it helps narrow the cruelest part of our new digital divide—the Homework Gap.

Let me explain—and let me start by taking us for a moment to McAllen, Texas. McAllen is one of the southernmost cities in the United States. It lies in the storied Rio Grande Valley, right on the river itself. In the last century, McAllen was a community devoted to agriculture. Its fields produced cotton, alfalfa, grapes, and figs. In later years, the economy grew with oil exploration. Still later, it became a foreign trade zone, with cross-border commercial traffic making it one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the country.

But like so many other places, this transition to a new economy has been uneven. Jobs are harder to come by. Healthcare is a challenge and diabetes has hit the community hard. So not every household or every neighborhood has found opportunity in what is new—nor advantage in what comes next. This is painfully clear when you look at the students in this community.

Take Isabella and Tony Ruiz. Isabella is 11 and her brother Tony is 12. Every weeknight they stand on a crumbling patch of sidewalk across from the elementary school near their home. They take up residence here as night falls in order to pick up the wireless signal they need to do their homework. Over the cracked screen of their family smartphone they download math materials and review research for class.

Credit to Isabella and Tony for their tenacity. Their mother is out of work and their father brings in what income he can from washing dishes. Their family has cut back on everything. So these students, like so many others in their community, cobble together whatever connectivity they can for schoolwork. They may not know it, but standing on that cracked sidewalk in the South Texas heat, they are on the front lines of a new digital divide.

This divide did not exist when I was growing up. All I needed for homework was pencil, paper, and my brother leaving me alone.

But gone are the days. Today, as many as seven in ten teachers assign homework that requires access to broadband. But data here at the Commission show that as many as one in three households do not subscribe to broadband service, citing lack of affordability and lack of interest.

Think about those numbers. Where they overlap is what I call the Homework Gap—and according to the Pew Research Center the Homework Gap is real. Five million households out of the 29 million with school-aged children nationwide are falling into this gap.

These households falling into the Homework Gap are everywhere—all across the country.

The Homework Gap exists in McAllen, Texas, where Isabella and Tony and so many other students have to stake out space on the sidewalk just to do their schoolwork.

The Homework Gap exists in Detroit, Michigan, where seven in ten students have no way to get online at home—and where students forgo eating lunch in order to borrow laptops and rush through their nightly homework at school—the one place they have Internet access.

The Homework Gap exists in Charlotte, North Carolina, where one in five students have no broadband access at home and where teachers are wrestling with a curriculum that effectively punishes students without online resources.

The Homework Gap exists in Fairfax, Virginia—right over the river from where we sit in Washington, DC—where even in an relatively affluent suburb, nearly one in ten students do not have Internet access at home.

Across the country the math might be different, but the Homework Gap stories are the same. There was a time when broadband access was a luxury. No more. And nothing demonstrates this as clearly as with education.

The good news is that we have identified this problem—the Homework Gap—and have given it a name. And because of this—the Homework Gap is finally getting the attention it deserves. Last month, Isabella and Tony from McAllen, Texas were the subject of a front page story on the Homework Gap in *The New York Times*. It's a story that President Obama shared with millions of his followers on his Facebook and Twitter accounts.

The other good news is that today's decision includes steps designed to help close the Homework Gap. By incorporating broadband into the Lifeline program, we open the doors of digital opportunity. This simple change can help bring more broadband to low-income households with school-aged children. But significantly, we do not stop here. Our decision also modernizes Lifeline by making sure that the devices used for Lifeline broadband services are able to access Wi-Fi signals and that these devices can be turned into Wi-Fi hotspots. For a student with a computer but no way to connect at home, a hotspot can be the difference between keeping up in class and falling behind. It can be the difference between being a digital consumer and becoming a digital creator. It can help put more students on the pathway to science, technology, engineering, and math—a road that suffers today from an unacceptable lack of diversity. So it may seem small—but giving more students the tools to do digital age homework—can yield big results.

Finally, today's decision encourages providers to help make eligible families with school-aged children aware of the Lifeline program. This is good and important.

To be clear, addressing the Homework Gap will require more than the Lifeline program. It will require public and private partnerships to get high-speed services in low-income homes. It will require smarter policies with unlicensed spectrum—because Wi-Fi democratizes Internet access and putting more Wi-Fi in more places can provide more students with more opportunity to get their homework done. And if you want to see how true that is, visit Coachella Valley, California, where two weeks ago I saw an innovative Wi-Fi system on school buses that turns ride time into connected time for homework.

In closing, we have made progress today by modernizing the Lifeline program. But we still have work to do to ensure that every student, no matter who they are, or where they live has access to the digital tools they need to have a fair shot at 21<sup>st</sup> century success. Because the Homework Gap is the cruelest part of our new digital divide—but it is within our power to bridge it.