

**Before the  
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION  
Washington, D.C. 20554**

In the Matter of

Report on the Future of the Universal Service Fund

WC Docket No. 21-476

**COMMENTS OF  
THE MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF  
TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND CABLE**

Commonwealth of Massachusetts  
Department of Telecommunications and Cable

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Dated: February 17, 2022

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The Massachusetts Department of Telecommunications and Cable (“MDTC”)<sup>1</sup> respectfully submits these comments in response to the Notice of Inquiry released by the Federal Communications Commission (“Commission”) on December 15, 2021, in the above-captioned proceeding.<sup>2</sup> The Notice of Inquiry seeks comment on the effect of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (“Infrastructure Act”) on Universal Service Fund (“USF”) programs, the Commission’s ability to reach its broadband universal service goals, and recommendations to further those goals.<sup>3</sup> The Notice of Inquiry seeks comment on the Lifeline Program, the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program, and the Affordable Connectivity Program, asking, *inter alia*: 1) how to best consider the differences between these programs<sup>4</sup>; 2) how to continue to ensure that these programs effectively achieve the Commission’s broadband universal service

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<sup>1</sup> The MDTC regulates telecommunications and cable services within Massachusetts and represents the Commonwealth before the Commission. MASS. GEN. LAWS ch. 25C, § 1; MASS. GEN. LAWS ch. 166A, § 16.

<sup>2</sup> *In re Report on the Future of the Universal Serv. Fund*, WC Docket No. 21-476, *Notice of Inquiry*, FCC 21-127 (Dec. 15, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* ¶ 1 (referring to Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Pub. L. No. 117-58, 135 Stat. 429 (2021)).

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* ¶ 35.

goals<sup>5</sup>; 3) whether the Lifeline Program would “benefit from express language . . . regarding the Commission’s ability to promote awareness of the program”<sup>6</sup>; and 4) “what changes, if any, should [the Commission] consider to the Lifeline program in light of the Infrastructure Act and other recent developments”.<sup>7</sup>

In this Comment, the MDTC encourages the Commission to facilitate coordination between Affordable Connectivity Program participating carriers and state agencies. The MDTC also encourages the Commission to increase consumer awareness of the Lifeline Program. Finally, the MDTC encourages the Commission to maintain a voice-only subsidy as part of the USF while continuing to advance our shared universal service goals.

First, one of the distinct differences between the Lifeline Program and the Affordable Connectivity Program is the Eligible Telecommunications Carrier (“ETC”) requirement. Lifeline providers must be ETCs designated by the state or the Commission, while Affordable Connectivity Program providers do not.<sup>8</sup> The ETC designation process is important not only for the purpose of carefully evaluating providers’ suitability for government funding, but also to develop a working relationship with providers. This is especially true for providers with which state agencies do not have a preexisting relationship. The MDTC takes many consumer complaints and inquiries daily and works with service providers to resolve these complaints. If the MDTC receives a consumer complaint regarding a provider that is unknown or new to us because it is not an ETC, we may not have a way to contact its executive consumer team directly, which unnecessarily hinders a resolution for the vulnerable population subscribing to the

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<sup>5</sup> *Id.* ¶ 36.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* ¶ 48.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* ¶ 36.

<sup>8</sup> *See* 47 CFR § 54.401(b).

Affordable Connectivity Program. A requirement for more coordination and collaboration with state agencies, or at the least, a requirement for participating providers to provide state agencies contact information for executive consumer teams rather than simply a general line, would help to alleviate this discrepancy and protect the interests of these vulnerable subscribers.

Second, the MDTC believes the Commission should be able to advertise the Lifeline Program, as it does the Affordable Connectivity Program. As the Notice of Inquiry states, the Infrastructure Act incorporates “language that allows the Commission to conduct outreach efforts to encourage households to enroll in the Affordable Connectivity Program and also permits the Commission to facilitate consumer research, conduct focus groups, engage in paid media, and provide grants to outreach partners to promote awareness of the Affordable Connectivity Program.”<sup>9</sup> The Commission has not received comparable congressional approval to do the same for the Lifeline Program.<sup>10</sup> Although the Lifeline Program benefits approximately 100,000 subscribers in Massachusetts, that number accounts for less than 14% of those currently eligible to benefit from it.<sup>11</sup> Although there may be several reasons for the underutilization of the Lifeline Program, it is likely that a lack of awareness is one of them. For our universal service goals to be realized, a lack of awareness cannot be a reason for the underutilization of the Lifeline Program. Therefore, the MDTC suggests that the Commission be able to effectively promote awareness of the Lifeline Program.

Finally, the MDTC continues to encourage the Commission to preserve a voice-only subsidy in the USF until wireless and broadband service are ubiquitous and low-income

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<sup>9</sup> *In re Report on the Future of the Universal Serv. Fund*, WC Docket No. 21-476, *Notice of Inquiry*, FCC 21-127 (Dec. 15, 2021) ¶ 48.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.usac.org/lifeline/learn/program-data/>.

consumers no longer rely on voice-only service.<sup>12</sup> In addition to the ETC requirement discussed above, another major difference between the Affordable Connectivity Program and the Lifeline Program is that the Lifeline Program provides a standalone voice option. Indeed, voice-only subscribers still account for 1 in every 5 Lifeline subscribers in Massachusetts.<sup>13</sup> Although broadband is rightfully the focus of the Infrastructure Act and the Notice of Inquiry, it bears reiterating that a focus on broadband should not completely eclipse the low-income population's continued need for voice-only service.<sup>14</sup>

The MDTC thanks the Commission for the opportunity to provide comment on its recommended actions to further advance our universal service goals.

Respectfully submitted,

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<sup>12</sup> See *In re Lifeline & Link Up Reform & Modernization*, MDTC Comments, WC Docket No. 11-42 (Apr. 14, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> FED.-STATE JOINT BD. ON UNIVERSAL SERV., UNIVERSAL SERV. MONITORING REPORT: CC DOCKET NO. 96-45 (2021), at 37 tbl. 2.9, <https://www.fundsforlearning.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/2021-USF-Monitoring-Report-Released.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> See *In re Lifeline & Link Up Reform & Modernization*, MDTC Comments, WC Docket No. 11-42 (Apr. 14, 2021).