

NRRI Alert: Telecommunications Questions to Consider as Schools and Businesses Go Online

The COVID-19 virus will have impacts on telecommunications services and systems across the country. This NRRI alert provides some thoughts regarding questions commissions may wish to consider as we move to a “virtual world.”

Growth in traffic volume may impact service availability. Internet traffic volume will grow significantly as more and more schools and businesses begin to operate online. To date, we have not experienced the sustained level of Internet traffic that may be expected over the coming weeks. Although Internet Service Providers (ISPs) have generally configured their networks to handle traffic volumes two to three times greater than normal, these levels have been tested primarily through surge events (for example, voting for *Dancing With the Stars* winners), rather than the sustained traffic volumes we should expect from large numbers of simultaneous users accessing distance learning, corporate virtual operations, and streaming services simultaneously. Home WiFi systems may be particularly susceptible to issues as multiple users access online content.

Potential for reduced data speeds. Slowing Internet traffic (throttling) is prohibited by the Restoring Internet Freedom rules; however, ISPs may still engage in “network management,” particularly in times of significant network congestion. ISPs have not yet reported surges in network traffic but this could change as more operations, including schools, move online.¹

Virtual Private Network (VPN) system capacity

challenges. It would be prudent for commissions to test their VPNs to ensure that there is enough capacity for simultaneous remote access by employees. If the system is not configured with enough capacity, a strategy of rotating access could be implemented to reduce traffic to supportable levels.

Consumer Internet access. As schools and businesses move to virtual operations, and libraries and other locations with public Internet access close, the digital divide will become more apparent. Although schools are offering remote learning for those students who can access it, the digital divide makes this access spotty at best.²

To help minimize the disruption caused by limited access to the Internet or the need to access services via mobile rather than fixed broadband, NARUC President Brandon Presley has asked the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to require wireless carriers to lift data caps and drop data overage charges on wireless plans. Many consumers in areas without broadband coverage use their cell phones as their primary method of accessing the Internet. “These customers should not be penalized for doing their jobs or furthering their education due to these unforeseen changes that are outside their control.”³ President Presley has also requested that the FCC prohibit ISPs from throttling service during this emergency.

Members of the US Senate have echoed this thought, sending a letter to the country’s largest

1 See <https://www.axios.com/broadband-providers-brace-for-coronavirus-stress-test-cf4d93bb-940d-470b-a139-2ca3307dc57f.html>.

2 Recognizing that many students do not have access to broadband or to computers, Prince Georges County, Maryland, schools have closed but will not offer remote learning. See <https://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/maryland-to-close-public-schools-gatherings-of-more-than-250-people-banned/2239127/>.

3 See <https://twitter.com/BrandonPresley/status/1238202867233755137>.

Internet providers, AT&T, Cox, Charter, CenturyLink, Comcast, Sprint, T-Mobile, and Verizon, requesting that carriers remove service caps and provide better broadband access to consumers immediately.⁴

The FCC has created the “Keep America Connected” pledge, asking carriers to

- (1) Not terminate service to any residential or small business customers because of their inability to pay their bills due to the disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic;
- (2) Waive any late fees that any residential or small business customers incur because of their economic circumstances related to the coronavirus pandemic; and
- (3) Open its Wi-Fi hotspots to any American who needs them.⁵

4 See https://www.warner.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/2/3/239084db-83bd-4641-bf59-371cb829937a/A99E41ACD1BA92FB37BDE54E14A97BFA.letter-to-isps-on-covid-19-final-v2.-signed.pdf.

5 See <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-363033A1.pdf>.

6 See <https://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2020/03/at-comcast-keeps-charging-overage-fees/>.

7 Ibid.

Carriers have responded to these requests by lifting data caps on their wireline broadband service, although wireless service caps remain for many companies.⁶

Comcast has increased speeds on its Internet Essentials program for low-income families with students that need the Internet, but has not yet removed data caps.⁷

Comcast and other carriers have also opened their wireless hotspots to those who need Internet access for telework and remote learning.

NRRI will continue to follow how the COVID-19 virus is affecting telecommunications and will provide updates on an ongoing basis.

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