

**BEFORE THE  
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION  
WASHINGTON D.C. 20554**

<b>In the Matter of</b>	)	
	)	
<i>Lifeline and Link Up Reform and Modernization</i>	)	<b>WC Docket No. 11-42</b>
	)	
<i>Bridging the Digital Divide for Low-Income Consumers</i>	)	<b>WC Docket No. 17-287</b>
	)	
<i>Telecommunications Carriers Eligible for Universal Service Support</i>	)	<b>WC Docket No. 09-197</b>
	)	
<i>Affordable Connectivity Program</i>	)	<b>WC Docket No. 21-450</b>
	)	
<i>Emergency Broadband Benefit Program</i>	)	<b>WC Docket No. 20-445</b>

**INITIAL COMMENTS OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REGULATORY UTILITY  
COMMISSIONERS**

The National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners (NARUC) respectfully submits these comments in response to the Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC) February 23, 2026, (NPRM) in the above-captioned proceedings.<sup>1</sup>

Starting in ¶ 57 of the NPRM, mimeo at 21, the FCC seeks comment on whether to maintain support for voice-only services in the Lifeline program and whether changes to the on-going phase-down of support for voice is necessary. The NPRM concedes in ¶ 58 that (A) the FCC has issued one year extensions of support

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<sup>1</sup> *In the Matter of Lifeline and Link Up Reform and Modernization; Bridging the Digital Divide for Low-Income Consumers; Telecommunications Carriers Eligible for Universal Service Support; Affordable Connectivity Program; Emergency Broadband Benefit Program*, Docket Nos. 11-42, 17-287, 09-197, 21-450, & 20-445, FCC 26-8 (adopted February 18, 2026 rel. February 23, 2026) at: <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/FCC-26-8A1.docx> and published at 91 Fed. Reg. 16871 (Apr. 3, 2026), at: <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2026/04/03/2026-06531/lifeline-and-link-up-reform-and-modernization-bridging-the-digital-divide-for-low-income-consumers>.

for voice-only Lifeline services for the past five years and (B) the reasons for granting those waivers included, among other things [1] “the minority of Lifeline subscribers that continue to subscribe to voice-only services,” [2] “the existence of alternative low-income broadband benefit programs,” for those that desire such services [3], “the potential harm from subscribers’ lack of access to emergency services hotlines,” and, finally, [4] “the fact that bundled services may not be fully utilized”.

Nothing has changed since the last waiver was granted. The extensive arguments in favor of the retention of a voice-only subsidy filed in the record of the WC Docket No. 11-42 proceeding since 2017 remain basically unopposed and unrebutted.<sup>2</sup>

The reasons the FCC chose for the last five years to justify retaining stand-alone voice Lifeline service does not simply augur in favor for keeping the current subsidy. Those reasons also support restoring the full \$9.25 subsidy for those low-income subscribers.

In support of this position, NARUC states as follows:

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Reply Comments of the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioner Supporting the National Association of State Consumer Advocates Request to Refresh the Record and Reconsider Specific Elements of the 2016 Lifeline Modernization Order (filed August 17, 2021), at: <https://ecfsapi.fcc.gov/file/1081712789302/21%200816%20NARUC%20INITIAL%20COMMENTS%20ON%20NASUCA%20RECON%20PETITION.fin.pdf>; NARUC’s May 4, 2021 Reply Comments on the State of the Lifeline Marketplace, <https://www.fcc.gov/ecfs/filing/10504022325527>; NARUC’s October 20, 2020 *Ex Parte*, at: <https://www.fcc.gov/ecfs/filing/10202650624742>; NARUC’s September 14, 2020 Comments Supporting the Request to Waive Implementation of the Scheduled December 2020 Lifeline Minimum Standards, at: <https://www.fcc.gov/ecfs/filing/10914768115490>; NARUC’s September 6, 2019 *Ex Parte* agreeing with all of the other sixteen initial commentors that the FCC should pause the scheduled reduction in the support amount for voice service, at: <https://www.fcc.gov/ecfs/filing/1090635666832>; and NARUC’s August 15, 2019 *Reply Comments* endorsing a petition to pause the decrease in support for stand-alone voice services, online at: <https://www.fcc.gov/ecfs/filing/10815208914684>.

## NARUC'S INTEREST

NARUC is a nonprofit organization founded in 1889. Its members include the government agencies in the fifty States, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands charged with regulating the activities of telecommunications,<sup>3</sup> energy, and water utilities. NARUC is recognized by Congress in several statutes<sup>4</sup> and consistently by the Courts,<sup>5</sup> as well as a host of federal agencies,<sup>6</sup> as the proper entity to represent the collective interests of State utility commissions. In the Telecommunications Act,<sup>7</sup> Congress references NARUC as “the national

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<sup>3</sup> NARUC's member commissions have oversight over intrastate telecommunications services and particularly the local service supplied by incumbent and competitive local exchange carriers (LECs). These commissions are obligated to ensure that local phone service is provided universally at just and reasonable rates. They have a further interest to encourage LECs to take the steps necessary to allow unfettered competition in the intrastate telecommunications market as part of their responsibilities in implementing: (1) State law and (2) federal statutory provisions specifying LEC obligations to interconnect and provide nondiscriminatory access to competitors. *See, e.g.*, 47 U.S.C. § 252 (1996).

<sup>4</sup> *See* 47 U.S.C. §410(c) (1971) (Congress designated NARUC to nominate members of Federal-State Joint Board to consider issues of common concern); *see also* 47 U.S.C. §254 (1996); *see also* *NARUC, et al. v. ICC*, 41 F.3d 721 (D.C. Cir 1994) (explaining that “[c]arriers, to get the cards, applied to . . . [NARUC], an interstate umbrella organization that, as envisioned by Congress, played a role in drafting the regulations that the ICC issued to create the “bingo card” system”).

<sup>5</sup> *See, e.g., U.S. v. Southern Motor Carrier Rate Conference, Inc.*, 467 F. Supp. 471 (N.D. Ga. 1979), *aff'd* 672 F.2d 469 (5th Cir. 1982), *aff'd en banc on reh'g*, 702 F.2d 532 (5th Cir. 1983), *rev'd on other grounds*, 471 U.S. 48 (1985) (noting that “[t]he District Court permitted [NARUC] to intervene as a defendant. Throughout this litigation, the NARUC has represented the interests of the Public Service Commissions of those States in which the defendant rate bureaus operate.” 471 U.S. 52, n. 10. *See also, Indianapolis Power and Light Co. v. ICC*, 587 F.2d 1098 (7th Cir. 1982); *Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission v. FCC*, 513 F.2d 1142 (9th Cir. 1976); *compare, NARUC v. FERC*, 475 F.3d 1277 (D.C. Cir. 2007); *NARUC v. DOE*, 851 F.2d 1424, 1425 (D.C. Cir. 1988); *NARUC v. FCC*, 737 F.2d 1095 (D.C. Cir. 1984), *cert. denied*, 469 U.S. 1227 (1985).

<sup>6</sup> NRC Atomic Safety and Licensing Board *Memorandum and Order* (Granting Intervention to Petitioners and Denying Withdrawal Motion), LBP-10-11, *In the Matter of U.S. Department of Energy (High Level Waste Repository)* Docket No. 63-001-HLW; ASLBP No. 09-892-HLW-CABO4, *mimeo* at 31 (June 29, 2010) (“We agree with NARUC that, because state utility commissioners are responsible for protecting ratepayers’ interests and overseeing the operations of regulated electric utilities, these economic harms constitute its members’ injury-in-fact.”)

<sup>7</sup> *Communications Act of 1934*, as amended by the *Telecommunications Act of 1996*, 47 U.S.C. §151 *et seq.*, Pub. L. No. 101-104, 110 Stat. 56 (1996) (West Supp. 1998) (“Act” or “1996 Act”).

organization of the State commissions” responsible for economic and safety regulation of the intrastate operation of carriers and utilities.<sup>8</sup> As Congress noted at the time, States have complementary universal service and low-income programs that will be affected by any FCC action in this docket. *Cf.* 47 U.S.C. §254 (f).

## DISCUSSION

Starting in December 2019, the FCC started reducing support for standalone voice lifeline service.<sup>9</sup>

That was a mistake.<sup>10</sup>

The purpose of the Lifeline program is to ensure that low-income Americans can afford an actual telephonic lifeline. For most of its existence, the Lifeline subsidy program focused on voice service based on its obvious utility. Even today, access to basic voice service is the absolute minimum necessary to permit low-income qualifying consumers to, among other things, access emergency services, get and retain a job, access medical services, and effectively communicate with the government about other assistance programs and processes.

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<sup>8</sup> See 47 U.S.C. § 410(c) (1971) (NARUC nominates members to FCC Joint Federal-State Boards, which consider universal service, separations, and related concerns and provide formal recommendations that the FCC must act upon; *Cf.* 47 U.S.C. § 254 (1996). *Cf. NARUC, et al. v. ICC*, 41 F.3d 721 (D.C. Cir 1994) (where the Court explains “[c]arriers, to get the cards, applied to . . . [NARUC], an interstate umbrella organization that, as envisioned by Congress, played a role in drafting the regulations that the ICC issued to create the "bingo card" system.).

<sup>9</sup> See *In the Matter of Lifeline and Link Up Reform and Modernization et al.*, WC Docket No. 11-42 et al., Third Report and Order, Further Report and Order, and Order on Reconsideration, 31 FCC Rcd 3962, 3989-3997, paras. 73-98 (2016) (2016 Lifeline Order or 2016 Order); 47 CFR § 54.408

<sup>10</sup> See, citations in note 3 *supra*.

The 2016 order that started the reduction in support for voice-only service, effectively argued, that, even if you are exactly the type of person that the FCC standards target as needing assistance, a low income American, the government won't provide you any subsidy or assistance for vital voice services unless you also use it to pay for broadband services - broadband services you may not want or need.

That approach is illogical on its face. Even the FCC's June 2021 FCC Report on the State of the Lifeline Marketplace,<sup>11</sup> concedes that:

A persistent minority of Lifeline subscribers opt for voice-only Lifeline plans . . . approximately 8% of Lifeline subscribers still subscribe to either a voice-only plan or a bundled plan that only qualifies for reimbursement because it has met the voice minimum service standard. This data seems to indicate that those subscribers still value the voice service to which they subscribe as those plans are only eligible for the lower voice reimbursement amount that is currently set at \$5.25.

The current NPRM, at ¶ 59, makes a similar concession:

There are still more than 160,000 subscribers to Lifeline voice-only or bundled plans that do not meet the broadband minimum service standards.<sup>12</sup>

And there is a reason to believe that there are many low-income Americans that qualify for the program that are not currently enrolled.

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<sup>11</sup> FCC Wireline Competition Bureau, *Report on the State of the Lifeline Marketplace* (June 2021), at 19, online at: <https://www.fcc.gov/document/bureau-releases-report-state-lifeline-marketplace>.

<sup>12</sup> The last Federal State Joint Board Monitoring Report, based on 2024 data, pegged that number abit higher at 181,000 current subscribers to voice-only lifeline services scattered across most U.S. States and territories. See, Table 2.9 – Lifeline Subscribers by Type of Service 2024, *Universal Service Monitoring Report 2025, prepared for the Federal State Board on Universal Service*, at page 41, online at: <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-418505A1.pdf>. Compare USAC's High Cost & Low Income Committee Briefing Book (Monday January 26, 2026) at pp. 80-81 online at: <https://www.usac.org/wp-content/uploads/about/documents/leadership/materials/hcli/2026/2026.01.26-HCLI-Briefing-Book-Public.pdf>.

A 2024 survey<sup>13</sup> emphasized that:

“Landlines aren’t a thing of the past – yet. Over a quarter of U.S. adults (68.9 million people) still rely on landline phones, with the Northeast proving most reticent to go entirely wireless; more than 4 in 10 adults (41.2%) living along the eastern seaboard are holding onto their landlines.”

And, a 2023 Washington Post article,<sup>14</sup> citing National Center for Health Statistics 2023 study, confirmed that at least:

2 percent of U.S. adults use only landlines. Another 3 percent mostly rely on landlines and 1 percent don’t have phones at all. The largest group of holdouts, of course, are folks 65 and older. That’s the only demographic for which households with landlines still outnumber wireless-only households.

Assuming that statistic is still accurate, roughly 7 million U.S. adults “use only landlines” and the bulk of that population are “65 and older.” Even if that 2023 figure has reduced 50% in the last three years, that still means the number of U.S. adults with voice only landline service is more than 3.5 million. And that does not include older Americans that get voice-centric mobile phone plans – that allow talk, text and emergency alerts.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Chamber of Commerce Team, “*Data Reveals Landline Phone Decline Statistics*” (July 24, 2024) (online at: <https://www.chamberofcommerce.org/landline-phone-statistics>) (last accessed May 1, 2026).

<sup>14</sup> Van Dam, Andrew, *Barely a quarter of Americans still have landlines. Who are they?* Washington Post (June 23, 2023) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2023/06/23/landline-telephone-holdouts/referencing-Blumberg-SJ-Luke-JV-Wireless-substitution-Early-release-of-estimates-from-the-National-Health-Interview-Survey-July-December-2024-National-Center-for-Health-Statistics-June-2025-https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhis/earlyrelease/wireless202506.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Clark, Amie, *Cell Phones for Seniors: A Complete Guide to Mobile Phones* (The Senior List November 25, 2025), emphasizing in the first paragraph services that don’t require an internet capable phone: “Even if they spend most of their time indoors, older adults need the ability to quickly and easily communicate with family, friends, and medical personnel. While landline phones were once a standard fixture of American homes, cell phones have quickly usurped them as the most efficient way to keep in touch.” Online at: <https://www.theseniorlist.com/cell-phones/#why-do-seniors-need-cell-phones>

While it is difficult to identify statistical sources affirmatively linking landline and mobile voice-only users and low-income, a recent report indicates that somewhere between 6 and 8 million adults aged sixty-five and older are living in poverty.<sup>16</sup>

Given these last two data points, it does seem more likely than not that the overlap between older American's that qualify for a Lifeline low-income subsidy and those that are voice-only users is significantly higher than the current 160,000 subscribers reflected in the NPRM.

What is clear is that as-long-as there is a significant percentage of qualified lifeline consumers that just need or can only barely afford voice service, any reduction in support for lifeline voice service, makes no sense.

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<sup>16</sup> Cubanski, Julliette, Damico, Anthony, Neuman, Tricia, "*How Many Older Adults Live in Poverty*" (KFF May 21, 2024) online at: <https://www.kff.org/medicare/how-many-older-adults-live-in-poverty/>.

## CONCLUSION

There is no question. The FCC should permit continued support for standalone voice services and consider restoring the full subsidy amount for such services. The FCC should carefully consider the record in this proceeding dating back for more than five years. That record provides no basis to eliminate the voice-only subsidy at this time.

Respectfully submitted,

/s/ James Bradford Ramsay

James Bradford Ramsay

GENERAL COUNSEL

Kim Duffley

SENIOR DIRECTOR OF ENERGY POLICY & LEGAL COUNSEL

National Association of Regulatory

Utility Commissioners

1101 Vermont Avenue, Suite 401

Washington, DC 20005

PH: 202.357.0568

Dated May 4, 2026

E-MAIL: [jramsay@naruc.org](mailto:jramsay@naruc.org)