OMAHA, NE///April 21, 2021///Nebraska Public Service Commission (PSC) Commissioner Crystal Rhoades commented today on the Promoting Access to Broadband Act introduced last week by U.S. Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin (D-IL) and U.S. Representative Sean Patrick Maloney (D-NY-18) to increase wireless and broadband access to the federal Lifeline program for low-income urban and rural Americans. The bicameral bill is cosponsored by Senators Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Bernie Sanders (I-VT), Robert Menendez (D-NJ), Ed Markey (D-MA), Patty Murray (D-WA), and Amy Klobuchar (D-MN).

In a statement on the bicameral legislation, Commissioner Crystal Rhoades said:

“Nationwide, only 18 percent of those eligible for Lifeline broadband and wireless assistance are getting the help Congress intended that they receive. In Nebraska, the estimated rate of service is appallingly low at 3 percent. In this era of Covid, where the ability to communicate with medical professionals, emergency responders, educators, and loved ones is so critical, it is an outrage that Lifeline has been allowed to fall into such a state of disrepair.”

“Sen. Durbin and Rep. Maloney are to be complimented for working to breathe urgently needed new life and resources into the Lifeline program. It is vital infrastructure in terms of moving our nation forward out of the Covid economic quagmire. For the elderly and sick in low-income homes, this is literally a life and death matter. For children in low-income homes who must access school entirely or in part on a remote basis, this is literally about the future they will have, and whether they will be left behind.”

“Important before the coronavirus epidemic and even more so now in Nebraska and nationwide, Lifeline phones are a vital link for qualifying low-income households needing medical/emergency service, as a means of finding and keeping jobs, obtaining government services, and staying in touch with family members.”

“Even before COVID struck, the Lifeline program was struggling to survive. Since 2016, Lifeline enrollment has plummeted from 13 million to 6.9 million subscribers, with the biggest single drop of 2.1 million coming with recent FCC minimum standards rule changes. Millions more could fall out of the ranks of the Lifeline program unless Congress acts now to stop this slide that does real harm to low-income families.”

“As a result of COVID, thousands of families in Nebraska have experienced death, medical bills, job loss, foreclosure, bankruptcy, the failure of businesses, farms in jeopardy, and other calamities. A robust Lifeline program is part of what these families in need in my state require to rebuild and move ahead. I urge the Congress to act now bring Lifeline service levels up to the same levels of participation as SNAP (62 percent) and Medicare (more than 90 percent). America’s struggling families need a Lifeline program that works for them.”

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