

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr.

Hearing on “Strengthening Our Communications Networks: Legislation to Connect and Protect”

May 24, 2022

Today we are continuing this Committee’s longtime work of ensuring that our nation’s communications networks are stable, secure, and reliable. Communications networks are essential infrastructure. They help connect friends and families, relay emergency communications to the public, allow business operations to run more efficiently and effectively, and deliver education and health services. At today’s legislative hearing we will discuss five bills, most of which are bipartisan, on a broad range of proposals aimed at ensuring that these invaluable networks continue to deliver this critical service to consumers.

First, I am pleased we are considering H.R. 7783, the Extending America’s Spectrum Auction Leadership Act, introduced by Representatives Davids, Joyce, Welch, and Johnson. This Committee has a long tradition of working together in a bipartisan fashion to lay the groundwork for technological innovation in this country, and this legislation is no exception.

It will extend spectrum auction authority for the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) by 18 months from its expiration date later this fall. As a result, the FCC will be able to hold its planned auction of the 2.5 gigahertz band in July without disruption and also fully close out auctions that have already occurred. Congress has never let the FCC’s spectrum authority lapse since authorizing it in the early 1990s, so I am pleased we are taking this important step forward today.

I also want to thank FCC Chairwoman Rosenworcel for her leadership on this issue and emphasizing its importance. I agree with the Chairwoman, and I am hopeful that Congress can come together to use the funding from upcoming auctions to fund important priorities like next generation 9-1-1 and the replacement of suspect communications equipment, among other good ideas.

Next, we are considering, H.R. 7132, the Safe Connections Act, introduced by Representatives Kuster and Eshoo, and co-sponsored by Representatives Welch and Walberg. While there is no question that wireless phone service can be an important lifeline for survivors of domestic violence, human trafficking, and other related crimes, it is also the case that shared mobile service plans can subject these individuals to hidden risks, such as digital abuse.

This legislation addresses this abuse by requiring mobile service providers to separate the survivor’s phone line from an account shared with their abuser, without financial penalties or

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other potential challenges after they receive a request from a survivor. The FCC would also be required to establish emergency communications support for these survivors. This is lifesaving legislation that has already passed the Senate, and I welcome the opportunity to discuss it here today.

We are also considering H.R. 4275, the Ensuring Phone and Internet Access for SNAP Recipients Act, introduced by Representatives Luria and Katko. Since 1985, the FCC's Lifeline Program has provided a discount on phone service to qualifying Americans. But the data demonstrates that only a fraction of Lifeline-eligible individuals enroll in the program.

This bill would require the FCC to annually submit a report to Congress on the Lifeline Program's enrollment of individuals participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). It would also require the FCC to report to Congress on the enrollment of new broadband consumers in the Lifeline Program and the effectiveness of advertising on these numbers.

Finally, we will consider two bills directed at the work of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA). Specifically, H.R. 4990, the ITS Codification Act, introduced by Representative Carter, and co-sponsored by Representative O'Halleran; and H.R. 5486, the SMART Act, introduced by Representative Guthrie. Collectively, these bills provide NTIA with access to innovative spectrum management solutions, lead in part by NTIA's Institute for Telecommunication Sciences (ITS). As the engineering laboratory for NTIA, ITS helps drive innovation, enables the robust development of telecommunications infrastructure, and helps protect an open global internet.

Finally, I would like to recognize a departing member of the Energy and Commerce Committee team. Parul Desai is a native New Jerseyian and has done terrific work for the Committee over the past few years since she joined us on detail from the FCC. She's now headed to a new role at the NTIA. We all know the incredible amount of work that agency has before it, and I wish her nothing but the best in her future pursuits.