

Statement of Representative Anna G. Eshoo
House Committee on Energy and Commerce
Subcommittee on Communications and Technology
Rural Call Quality and Reliability
2322 Rayburn House Office Building
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Our nation's telecommunications system is grounded in the principle of universal service. Every American, regardless of zip code, should have access to quality and reliable communications services. These services are too critical to our economy and public safety to tolerate degraded service for certain populations or regions of the country. For far too long, Americans living in rural areas have experienced problems with their telephone service simply because of where they live. This is unacceptable and must be corrected.

Most Americans rightly take for granted the fact that when they make a call, it connects at the other end. We may not always reach the person being called, but we assume and expect that their phone will ring after we dial. Rural Americans have been living in a world where this assumption has been tested. They've experienced poor call quality, false Caller ID information, false ringing or busy signals, or just plain dead air. My colleagues who represent rural areas can speak to these frustrations, which their constituents have experienced for years.

But when calls don't go through, it's more than just frustrating. For a business, a lost call could mean a lost sale or a lost customer. That harms our economy. For a doctor or hospital in a rural area, call failure can be a matter of life or death. This places the public in jeopardy and we need to address the reasons for these failures.

The FCC has been engaged on this issue and has taken a number of steps to try to correct it. It appears one underlying cause of the problem – the higher rates incurred by completing calls to rural areas – will eventually be solved by the transition to “bill and keep” that the FCC adopted in 2011. But for many rural customers, this transition won't take full effect for a few more years. In the meantime, the FCC has adopted data collection rules and brought enforcement actions against providers, but these problems still persist.

Today, the Subcommittee will be examining legislation to help further crack down on these problems. The bill before us would require intermediate providers to register with the FCC and would require the FCC to develop service quality standards that providers would be required to adhere to. We're also looking at a substitute amendment that would bring it in line with changes that have been made in the Senate.

Congressman Welch and Congressman Loebsack have been important leaders on our side on this bipartisan issue and I thank them for their work to ensure that every American has access to reliable telephone service. I look forward to today's discussion on this important issue.

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