

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

Markup of H.R. 1218 and H.R. 2501

November 3, 2021

Today, the Communications and Technology Subcommittee will consider two bills.

We will begin with H.R. 1218, the Data Mapping to Save Moms Lives Act, which was introduced by Representatives Butterfield, Bilirakis, and Blunt Rochester. This bipartisan legislation would help us consider how we might target connectivity measures and telehealth services to vulnerable populations and communities at risk so that we can reduce maternal morbidity and mortality. This legislation highlights what the Covid-19 pandemic has shown—the importance of access to fast, reliable, and affordable broadband. For pregnant women, access to telehealth services like routine checkups, health monitoring, and updated prescriptions can go a long way in ensuring the health and safety of both the mother and child.

This is important bipartisan legislation, because, sadly and inexcusably, the United States has the highest rate of maternal mortality among the developed nations. Maternal mortality and morbidity are problems that affect women throughout the nation, but especially in Black and Native American communities. Maternal mortality rates for Black women are three times higher than those of White women, while the rate of death for American Indian and Alaska Native women is two times higher.

This legislation requires the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to integrate data related to maternal health, including mortality and severe morbidity into its connectivity maps. This will help us better understand the communications barriers some women face so that we can then explore connectivity policies that help keep these women safe and healthy. Improving maternal health is a priority of this Committee, and that's why we included long overdue resources and support in the Build Back Better Act. If connectivity can also help improve maternal health, we should take steps to make that happen.

The second bill we will mark up today, H.R. 2501, the Spectrum Coordination Act, was introduced by Representative Bilirakis. It requires the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) and the FCC to update a 2003 memorandum of understanding (MOU) on spectrum coordination.

Spectrum is key to unlocking next-generation wireless networks that hold so much promise to better our lives. This technology has the potential to promote enhanced telehealth services and educational opportunities, as well as new ways of engaging in entertainment and e-commerce. It can also help us make advancements in manufacturing and improve critical public safety communications that save lives.

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But it must be managed competently and correctly, and unfortunately that was not what we experienced during the Trump Administration. Instead, we watched as the FCC and NTIA — the two agencies charged by Congress to manage the public’s airways — bickered and refused to coordinate their efforts. In order for our nation to continue to lead in wireless technology, the government must speak with one voice. With the Biden administration I am confident we can move beyond interagency disagreements even as the current leadership cleans up the previous administration’s mess.

Revisiting the 2003 MOU, and updating it as necessary, is one step in this process, but it certainly won’t be enough. However, an updated MOU will reaffirm the commitment of these two agencies to provide and allocate spectrum in a way that will best serve consumers, commercial carriers, and federal agencies. I commend Chairman Doyle and Representative Bilirakis for their bipartisan work on getting this bill ready for markup.

I had hoped to consider more bills at today’s markup and am disappointed that we weren’t able to come together on other legislation that generally enjoys bipartisan support on this Committee. Legislation pertaining to issues like spectrum auctions and the universal service fund share bipartisan support, but, for whatever reason, we haven’t been able to come to an agreement on the additional bills in these areas.

I am hopeful that we can come to bipartisan agreement on other bills soon and look forward to today’s markup and advancing these proposals.