

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Subcommittee on Communications and Technology
Ranking Member Doris Matsui

Hearing on “The Telecommunications Act of 1996: 30 Years Later”

March 26, 2026

Thank you, Chairman Hudson. And thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

Thirty years ago, Congress passed the Telecommunications Act of 1996 with a clear and ambitious vision: to promote competition and deliver lower prices and better service for consumers. At its core, this law was about making sure that as technology evolved, the benefits would reach everyone.

And in many ways, it succeeded. It opened the door to greater competition in telephone markets. It laid the groundwork for the internet revolution. And it established a universal service framework built on a simple idea: where you live should not determine whether you can connect.

That work included two programs vital to the success of the Universal Service Fund: E-Rate, which helps connect schools and libraries. And the Rural Health Care program to improve broadband access for rural clinics and hospitals, laying the foundation for expanded patient care.

These achievements were possible because Congress acted boldly. But thirty years later, we haven't finished the job. Too many Americans still lack reliable, affordable broadband. The 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law was our answer to that unfinished work. Through the BEAD program, Congress made a once-in-a-generation investment to finally close the digital divide.

But under Trump - NTIA has thrown BEAD into chaos: freezing funds, forcing states to scrap years of work, and stripping away affordability protections. Communities that were ready to build are still waiting because this Administration decided it knows better than Congress, the states, and the communities that did the hard work.

The same pattern of sabotage is showing up at the FCC under Chairman Carr. Just last week, the FCC rubber-stamped the Nexstar-Tegna merger, flying in the face of the law. The Telecommunications Act set clear media ownership caps to protect local voices and competition. Congress said no single company can reach more than 39 percent of U.S. households.

But Chairman Carr ignored that rule to clear a mega-merger that would reach 80 percent of American households. Why? Because these companies are willing to bend to pressure and silence speech Trump disagrees with. Just look at what they did to Jimmy Kimmel. And the damage is clear: weaker local news, fewer independent voices, and less competition.

These are serious setbacks. But the goals of the Telecom Act—competition, connectivity, consumer protection—remain just as urgent today. That means modernizing the Universal Service Fund so it can continue supporting our schools, hospitals, and communities. It also means getting serious about affordability. Because connectivity is not universal if it is unaffordable.

Since Republicans let the Affordable Connectivity Program expire, millions of families have struggled to stay connected. Seniors have lost access to telehealth... Students have fallen behind in school... If universal service is our goal, affordability has to be front and center. We need policies that keep pace with technology. Look at Next-Gen TV. Broadcasters are already using it to deliver better emergency alerts and on-demand local news. That's the kind of innovation the Telecom Act was meant to encourage. And it's a reminder that Congress has to keep revisiting these laws. Building on what works to support both consumers and cutting-edge technology.

One strength of the Telecom Act was that it didn't shut states out. States kept a meaningful role in regulating telecom, addressing issues on the ground, and protecting their residents. We need that same balanced approach as we navigate AI. Let me be clear - sweeping state preemption without strong guardrails is ignoring the lessons our most successful modern industry was built on.

The Telecom Act gave us a strong foundation. Our job now is to build on it, fix where it's fallen short, and hold this Administration accountable when it ignores the law.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses on how we get that done.

With that, I yield back.