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Office of the Secretary
Federal Communications Commission
45 L Street NE
Washington, DC 20554

RE: WC Docket No. 20-445, Emergency Broadband Connectivity Fund Assistance

To Whom It May Concern:

On behalf of the National Affordable Housing Management Association (NAHMA), thank you for the opportunity to provide comments to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) on the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program (EBBP) as established by the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021. NAHMA strongly supports this newly created program, which would be funded through the Emergency Broadband Connectivity Fund and which would serve to ensure that families and households have internet access and a connected device during the COVID-19 pandemic. NAHMA members manage multifamily affordable rental housing, and they have observed that many of their residents lack high-speed internet connections compared to the general population. Unfortunately, the digital divide has only widened during the pandemic. NAHMA strongly supports the comments submitted by our industry colleague, Stewards of Affordable Housing for the Future (SAHF). Please find our comments below.

About NAHMA

NAHMA is the leading voice for affordable housing management, advocating on behalf of multifamily property managers and owners whose mission is to provide quality affordable housing. NAHMA supports legislative and regulatory policy that promotes the development and preservation of decent and safe affordable housing, is a vital resource for technical education and information and fosters strategic relations between government and industry. NAHMA's membership represents 75 percent of the affordable housing management industry, and includes its most distinguished multifamily owners and management companies.

Comments

NAHMA urges FCC to lower barriers to entry for eligible households to ensure that EBBP can be used by those most in need. We greatly appreciate that the statute makes clear that households with any past or present debt with an Internet Service Provider (ISP) can qualify for the program. This is an important aspect of the law, since past debt has been a barrier for far too many households in participating in past and current low-cost programs. FCC should consider the following additional ways to lower barriers to participation:

1. **Blanket Eligibility for Multifamily Assisted Housing:** According to the statute, qualifying households include any household with at least one member that 1) meets the requirements for participation in the Lifeline program, 2) has been approved for free or reduced-price lunch or school breakfast programs, 3) has experienced a substantial loss of income since February 29, 2020, 4) has received a Pell Grant in the current award year, or 5) meets the criteria for the broadband provider's existing low-income or COVID-19 subsidy program, as approved by the FCC. The Lifeline program already provides automatic eligibility for residents of Federal Public Housing, but that eligibility has not clearly extended to residents of other HUD affordable housing programs that have comparable income limitations, income targeting and tenant populations. This results in inequitable access among residents of affordable housing. The FCC should further streamline eligibility by providing blanket eligibility for participants in other federally-assisted multifamily housing properties, such as those assisted under Project-based Section 8, Section 202, Housing Choice Voucher, Low Income Housing Tax Credit, or Section 521, where residents can be presumed income eligible based on eligibility requirements for the housing program. This could be verified through connections to federal tenant characteristic databases (USDA, HUD) or databases located at state housing finance agencies.
2. **Inter-Agency Collaboration:** Further FCC should work with HUD, USDA, and state housing finance agencies to publish a list of all assisted multifamily properties where all or substantially all units are assisted, where residents can be presumed income eligible based on eligibility requirements for the housing program. FCC should further clarify that owners of listed properties should be eligible to connect all units at EBBP pricing and levels of service while residents would retain the option to enhance service if they desired. This would facilitate rapid connection of residents with fewer barriers. This type of blanket eligibility has precedent with the expansion of the Weatherization Assistance Program to multifamily housing through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), and offers a helpful way to quickly facilitate the connection of more residents of affordable housing. Moreover, the ability to batch eligibility this way could help affordable housing providers leverage the EBBP to gain stronger service provisions for residents, such as higher speeds and additional equipment.
3. **Blanket Eligibility for USDA Community Eligibility Provision Schools:** The USDA Community Eligibility Provision allows the nation's highest poverty schools and districts to provide no-cost breakfast and lunch without providing household data. In order for the FCC to facilitate timely approval of households with students in these schools, who can be presumed income eligible based on living in these high poverty areas, the FCC should automatically approve participation in EBBP and not require any additional steps. NAHMA also encourages FCC to consider incentives for ISPs that provide an additional device to be used by students from Community Eligibility Provision Schools to facilitate the ability of schools to connect with students for the purpose of remote learning.
4. **Establish Strategic Partnerships to Encourage Participation:** Uptake of this program, especially among target populations, will require strategic partnerships and robust communication. To support residents of affordable housing, NAHMA recommends that the FCC develop a comprehensive public outreach campaign that includes partnerships with public housing authorities, state housing finance agencies, affordable housing providers, and affordable housing associations. FCC should also partner with managed care

organizations to help reach Medicaid-enrolled households and other eligible households. Because the FCC proposes to require eligible households to directly interact with the National Verifier to apply for the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program, it is imperative that robust communication measures are in place to ensure current Lifeline users and especially first-time users can navigate the National Verifier platform.

5. **Clarifications:** FCC should clarify the definition of “address” to include unit/apartment so that in the case of multifamily housing properties, there is not a limit on the number of beneficiaries at one address. The FCC should also expand the data fields used for identification under Lifeline’s National Verifier system to allow for sources beyond a social security number. The current limitation creates unnecessary barriers for participation, and may disproportionately impact seniors living in some affordable housing programs that may not have social security numbers or have difficulty accessing this data.

6. **Outreach and Communications to Ensure Goals of Program:** The Emergency Broadband Benefit Program is the first of its kind, and its success or failure depends largely on outreach and communications. At a minimum, FCC should take the following actions:
 - Launch a public outreach campaign to encourage ISP participation;
 - Require participating ISPs to inform current customers of EBBP;
 - Establish strategic Partnerships with local governments, affordable housing providers and others to encourage household participation;
 - Update and publically share a list of participating ISPs for individuals and partners to use in connecting eligible households;
 - Require ISPs to communicate terms of EBBP to participating household at start and on monthly basis;
 - Track EBBP spend-down to ensure advanced notice can be provided before end of the program (the earlier of six months after the public health emergency or when funds are exhausted);
 - Require ISPs to provide a 60-90 day notice of the program’s termination to participating households; this notice should include information on billing after the conclusion of the program, when the first bill at a higher rate will be due, an explanation of any partial month charges and information on any additional resources; and
 - Use the same distribution channels during the start of the program, to communicate about the end of the program: This robust communication is needed to ensure that beneficiaries fully understand that costs will increase at the end of the program, have the opportunity to consider terminating their account before those emergency funds are depleted, and are not saddled with unnecessary debt and fees.

NAHMA and our members appreciate FCC’s efforts to implement the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program. Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments. Please contact Larry Keys, NAHMA Manager of Government Affairs, at lkeys@nahma.org, with any questions.

Sincerely,



Kris Cook, CAE
Executive Director