

February 8, 2024

Ms. Marlene H. Dortch  
Secretary  
Federal Communications Commission  
45 L Street NE  
Washington, DC 20554

**Re: Notice of Proposed Rulemaking proposing E-Rate support for Wi-Fi hotspots for remote learning, Addressing the Homework Gap Through the E-Rate Program, WC Docket No. 21-31**

Dear Madam Secretary:

The undersigned organizations are submitting this letter in support of the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) proposal to allow E-Rate to fund Wi-Fi hotspots and wireless internet services to address the remote learning needs of students and library patrons.<sup>1</sup> While the COVID-19 pandemic propelled a nationwide surge of off-campus connectivity, online learning and remote schoolwork have become common practice for many students and library patrons throughout their daily journeys - even after the end of the pandemic. In today's environment, learning simply does not stop after school or library operating hours or the moment a student or patron steps off the premises.

While many schools and libraries distributed hotspots with funding from the Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF) program, some schools and libraries found that the mobile carrier hotspot signal was not strong enough to support remote learning, especially inside the home, in many low-income and less populated areas.<sup>2</sup> While we support the FCC moving forward to continue the progress made by the ECF, we caution against incorporating certain ECF-inspired limitations in a permanent hotspot program under E-rate. Whereas ECF adopted measures to respond to an emergency situation, a long-term hotspot program should give schools and libraries more flexibility to address larger, systemic broadband issues for students and patrons that contribute to the Homework Gap and with a potentially more cost-effective solution.

Specifically, we encourage the FCC to ensure that E-rate funding supports *any cost-effective* wireless technology and service that provides Internet access to students and library patrons off-

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<sup>1</sup> See *Addressing the Homework Gap Through the E-Rate Program*, WC Docket No. 21-31, Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, FCC 23-91 (rel. Nov. 8, 2023)

<sup>2</sup> See Comments of the Schools, Health & Libraries Coalition and The Open Technology Institute at New America, WC Docket No. 21-31, at 11-13 (filed Jan. 17, 2024).

premises as recommended by the comments submitted by the Schools, Health & Libraries Broadband Coalition (SHLB), the Open Technology Institute (OTI) and the American Library Association (ALA). Applicants must have the flexibility to distribute equipment and services that solve not only the basic connectivity needs of their students and patrons, but that also support today's remote learning tools indoors (such as video streaming, which requires considerable bandwidth).

Rather than limiting E-rate support to commercially available mobile carrier services that might not 1) be available at all in a particular community or 2) meet these remote learning needs, the FCC should allow support for other innovative wireless offerings, including hotspot equipment and service the school or library itself or their partners provide to their students, staff, and patrons using their own equipment. We further agree that incorporating current E-Rate regulations such as the competitive bidding process and requiring applicants to pay their non-discounted share of the cost of service can ensure that applicants make the most cost-effective decision and safeguard the program against wasteful spending. In fact, allowing technology-neutral solutions will, in many cases, be the most cost-effective solution, as it will allow libraries and schools to build upon and sustain existing off-premises solutions developed during ECF or with other program funding.

We additionally urge the FCC to be mindful against setting overly burdensome program requirements that could ultimately deter participation in this advantageous initiative. To meet goals of bridging the digital divide, the Commission must design the program rules with maximum flexibility and recognition of the community-level knowledge that libraries and schools have. For example, strict requirements that force applicants or service providers to track monthly usage and/or turn equipment on and off can create administrative challenges for even the most tech-savvy school or library, and can be the reason that small and rural entities – those that most need the support – will not participate.

Further, recordkeeping is a significant hurdle for many applicants, especially for libraries as they must safeguard personally identifiable information. Circulation and data usage statistics should be sufficient to demonstrate the reach and demand for a library's hotspot lending program. This data should not be associated with an individual user's library record once items have been returned, and certainly not for a burdensome 10-year period. Additionally, circulating hotspots outside of traditional library procedures adds steps and administrative burden for library staff to comply with past ECF and proposed Wi-Fi hotspot document requirements.

We applaud the FCC for taking this exemplary step to ensure that the E-rate program is keeping up with the connectivity needs of our students and library patrons.

Respectfully,

American Library Association (ALA)  
Arkansas River Valley Regional Library System  
Association for Rural and Small Libraries  
Bristow Public Library  
COSLA - Chief Officers of State Library Agencies  
Common Sense  
E-Rate & Educational Services, LLC  
Fresno Coalition for Digital Inclusion  
Kajeet  
LA County Library  
Link Oregon  
#OaklandUndivided  
Open Technology Institute at New America  
Pacific Northwest Gigapop  
Public Knowledge  
San Joaquin Valley Library System  
School Project for Utility Rate Reduction (SPURR)  
Schools, Health & Libraries Broadband Coalition (SHLB)  
Strategic Consulting of Rachelle Chong  
UNITE-LA  
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