



U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON
COMMERCE, SCIENCE, & TRANSPORTATION

U.S. Senator Ben Ray Luján

**Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
Subcommittee on Communications, Media, and Broadband**

Subcommittee Hearing: The State of Universal Service

May 11, 2023

Opening Statement

This hearing of the Subcommittee on Communications, Media, and Broadband will now come to order. Today, the Subcommittee is convening a hearing on the “State of Universal Service.”

I want to thank Ranking Member Thune for working with me to schedule this hearing on such an important topic. And to Chair Cantwell and Ranking Member Cruz for being partners in this work to close the digital divide.

Universal service has been a critical part of communications policy since Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone.

Last Congress, we passed the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and made a historic commitment. We made it abundantly clear that every household, every health care center, every school, every community institution, and every business in the country should have access to high-quality, affordable broadband service. And while the \$65 billion dollars of investment we made in that package was important, I recognize that one-time investments will only get us so far.

We also need programs that can meet the needs of future connectivity and continue to deliver affordability and access to households and institutions year after year.

That was the reason behind the 1996 Telecommunications Act and the creation of FCC’s Universal Service Fund.

The fund supports four programs with a proven track record. These programs are:

High Cost Support, also known as the Connect America Fund, to subsidize service to our most rural communities;

Low-Income Support, or the Lifeline program, which helps low-income families pay for their monthly telephone service;

Schools and Libraries Support, or the “E-Rate” program, to ensure our educational institutions have high quality access; and

Rural Health Care Support, which helps ensure telehealth services are available and accessible in our rural communities.

Through these programs, none of our schools, our hospitals, including those in the most rural communities across our country—should be left behind.

In the 21st Century, we understand that connectivity makes a difference whether our children are prepared to compete globally; whether our health care system is well equipped to save lives; whether we can provide equitable opportunities in historically underserved communities; and whether American workers can participate in the 21st century economy.

As we come together today and reflect on what we learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what we accomplished through our COVID relief packages and in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, we have the opportunity to build on the promise and possibility of Universal Service and how these programs should be updated, improved, and expanded to meet the needs of tomorrow.

There is a growing pressure on universal service programs to continue to deliver the connectivity that they originally promised in 1996—as a lot has changed in the last 30 years.

For example, in 2023 we know that students often learn outside the classroom. They learn during time at home, during commutes, and on the bus to school.

But today, E-Rate for schools and libraries is restricted to connecting the physical school buildings or providing equipment within the classroom, which significantly limits utilization.

Two years ago, my guest to President Biden's first State of the Union was a student from the Cuba Independent School District, Ms. Heleen Archuleta. Before the pandemic, Ms. Archuleta lacked power at her home, let alone access to broadband.

Her commute included hours on the bus across roads that disappear in heavy rains. E-Rate helped her classroom in the past, but it took a global pandemic and the Emergency Connectivity Fund to provide connectivity where she did much of her learning: at home and on the bus. Unfortunately, the Emergency Connectivity Fund is about to run out of funding.

Wi-Fi on school busses is still **not** eligible for E-Rate, which means that students like Ms. Archuleta will not be able to use their valuable time to study.

There are other simple, common-sense solutions to improve the universal service programs. For example:

Give schools the cybersecurity tools they need to make students and teachers safe online;

Review the Rural Health Care statute to prioritize connectivity for patients at home;

Work to ensure that connectivity for low income families is secure; and

Provide stable funding so that families and businesses can rely on these resources as they make long-term decisions.