

Statement of Jennifer Case Nevarez  
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and member of the Broadband and Digital Equity Support Team  
for New Mexico and the Office of Broadband Access and Expansion (OBAE)  
Hearing Titled "The Future of Broadband Affordability"  
before the Subcommittee on Communications, Media, and Broadband  
Of the United States Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation  
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My name is Jennifer Case Nevarez. I live in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and serve as Director and Lead Educator for an educational nonprofit called the Community Learning Network (CLN), which is dedicated to "building stronger communities through real-life learning" and grounded in the words of our Dine' (Navajo) co-founder who noted that "well-being is nourished by being accountable to a people and a place." Over the years, CLN has supported powerful real-life learning experiences for thousands of community members of all ages and worked to build resiliency with communities and tribes throughout the state and nation. As a member of the Broadband and Digital Equity Support Team for New Mexico and the Office of Broadband Access and Expansion (OBAE), I have traversed the state, met with hundreds of constituents, and been deeply involved in stakeholder engagement. I am here today to speak to broadband affordability, to share community concerns about the end of the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), and to highlight the need for Congress to take action now to extend ACP before it lapses completely and permanently.

First, I would like to start with the reminder that many think the Internet is all about technology, but it is actually about connecting people. A Dine' (Navajo) elder I worked with lives on fixed income on a farm in rural New Mexico. With the end of ACP and broadband access and affordability out of reach for many rural residents, she, and many others like her, will go without Internet connectivity at home, and in her case, will do what she has done before to get online... drive 52 miles to check her email at the public library (but only once in a while, since gas is expensive, too).

As of April 30, 2024, just two days ago, more than 23 million households are now at risk of losing their Internet connectivity with the end of ACP. Nearly half are military families and 10 million are over the age of 50 (with Seniors reporting that they rely

heavily on the Internet to coordinate and track medical services and overcome isolation). 320,000 are households on Tribal lands, where high-speed internet is generally more expensive.

In New Mexico, more than 184,000 households enrolled in ACP face losing their Internet connectivity and their ability to pay bills, purchase goods, check health portals, access essential services, run small businesses, and do work or schoolwork online. In Congressional District 2, 28% of all households are enrolled in ACP, which means 1 out of every 4 households in the District are now at risk of losing connectivity. This is a terrible blow to the local economy and a terrible setback for local families and the counties where they live, already burdened by economic, community development, and infrastructure challenges and serving large numbers of residents struggling with higher household, transportation, utility, and healthcare expenses on fixed or lower incomes. With families facing hard decisions about what to cut, finding an affordable alternative is not easy, especially in rural areas where there may only be one provider, where costs can be much higher, and where low-cost options may be unreliable or inadequate for families working or learning from home.

As the 5th largest state (with 121, 298 square miles) and the 6th lowest in population density (with an average density of 17 people per square mile) (The District of Columbia has the highest population density with 11,131 people per square mile), deploying fiber in New Mexico is extra costly, subscriber pools are smaller and more scattered, and networks are difficult to maintain and sustain due to lower density, higher cost of deployment and maintenance, and the financial vulnerability of subscribers.

For us in New Mexico,... for our economy, for our health, and for the well-being of our families, our communities, and our Internet Service Providers,...every subscriber counts.

Subscribers are especially critical for our small tribal and rural communities who have leveraged investments and built networks and companies to provide valuable Internet services in hard to reach areas where they are often the only option. (There are 23 Tribal Nations in New Mexico and many have started and run their own networks). These local providers often run on tight margins with higher expenses to serve low-density areas with lower-income customers. They are at a higher risk of

bankruptcy without a reliable and consistent pool of active subscribers. Thanks to collaborative federal, state, local, and non-profit investment in ACP outreach, local networks and providers have been building relationships and trust while growing their customer base. Amidst the massive investment in broadband infrastructure currently underway, the end of ACP now, after just over two years of getting it going, and the loss of ACP subscribers puts the BEAD initiatives in jeopardy and some local networks at risk of failure, especially in areas that are most in need and serving some of the hardest to reach and traditionally underserved, disconnected community members.

We cannot overlook the massive investment and administrative burden of standing up the ACP program and coordinating more than 1500 Internet Service Providers and 23 million subscribers through the application, documentation, approval, authorization, and enrollment process. To let ACP, and the systems in place to manage it, die now, in the wake of that investment and effort, feels wasteful and irresponsible. To let it lapse and have to build another system later feels short-sighted and irreverent of both its current success (23 million subscribers in just over 2 years) and the massive investment of time, energy, and money in ACP by everyone...including federal, state, and local agencies, as well as trusted community organizations.

Right now, confusion abounds, and Congress is losing credibility. Local service providers are losing customers and public trust. Providers and partners are now also burdened by the additional expense and effort of alerting ACP subscribers to the changes, navigating public confusion, and managing service down-grades and terminations.

So what now?

When connectivity is critical for progress and a matter of national security and economic vitality, are we really going to let ACP end? Are we really going to let 23 million households potentially drop out of the Internet economy and disappear from the digital world?

I urge Congress to act now and extend ACP. I urge congress to consider the creative funding possibilities currently proposed. Governors from across the country, both Republicans and Democrats, have publicly prioritized the Affordable Connectivity Program, and made it a part of their plans to close the digital divide. Affordable,

reliable internet is more than just a bi-partisan issue. It is a people issue with real world impacts on health and wealth for Americans. Moreover, it is rare but inspiring when you have government, community, and industry aligned. Numerous community and industry partners have stepped up to voice their concerns, and in January 2024, an initial 174 Mayors from around the U.S. signed a bipartisan letter calling for legislators to extend ACP.

Why?

As aptly noted by one of our local community leaders: Broadband is everybody's business. Broadband is an essential service for everyone and opens a world of possibilities.

The ACP was established to address the critical need to connect everyone. 23 million enrollment was a monumental feat and success we should not waste. Proving eligibility and enrolling was complicated and time-consuming. Terminating now would be wasteful, the robust eligibility verification and enrollment work would be lost, and starting over would demand so much more time, energy, and money.

Meanwhile, ACP use is widespread and directly impacts constituents. Community members in more than 23 million households across the nation, including urban, suburban, and rural communities rely on ACP to pay for the high-speed internet service they need for school, work, health care, essential services, and more. As a matter of fact, four of the seven states with the highest ACP enrollment are represented by members of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, to which this subcommittee reports (Source: USAC, Feb. 2024).

Most importantly, we all lose when ACP ends. Households and families lose. Students lose. Covered populations including seniors, veterans, low-income, and rural community members lose. Healthcare loses. Essential services lose. Local economies lose. Our national economy loses. Our national standing and global competitiveness loses, and we put the vitality and security of our nation at risk. The end of ACP puts networks, local ISPs, and BEAD infrastructure investments at risk and erodes public trust. Since, we just got started. Quitting now would be a waste.

In closing, I echo the understanding that "People and places thrive when everyone can participate." Economies thrive when everyone can participate. So, I ask everyone in this

room, Do you use a cell phone, computer or laptop? Do you have Internet access at home? Do you ever check emails from home? ...correspond with staff or constituents online?...attend a group meeting online? ...Review documents or do research online? .. make payments or check accounts? ...Purchase goods, food, or tickets online? ...Access health information or make appointments online? The modern world is driving all of us online.

As we face the potential but untimely and short-sighted end of ACP, I ask you to join more than 23 million households in an experiment: turn off your devices and go without using the Internet for the next five minutes, five hours, and five days. Yes, give it a try while reflecting on how the rest of your day will be impacted. How will loss of Internet access affect your professional life and personal life? What would be different for you without the Internet? Let's let this sink in for a moment. AND, then acknowledge again that as of April 30, 2024, just two days ago, more than 23 million households are now at risk of losing their Internet connectivity with the end of ACP.

Let's not let more than 23 million households and families disappear from the digital economy. Congress has the power to act now to keep those 23 million households of constituents connected, and I am here to remind you today, that the health and well-being of Americans, as well as the economic vitality and security of our nation, depend on it.