

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell Q&A

U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation Hearing, “The State of Broadband Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic”

Witnesses: Mr. Steven Berry, President and Chief Executive Officer, Competitive Carriers Association, Ms. Shirley Bloomfield, Chief Executive Officer, NTCA - The Rural Broadband Association, Mr. Gene Kimmelman, Senior Advisor, Public Knowledge, Mr. Jonathan Spalter, President and Chief Executive Officer, USTelecom - The Broadband Association

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CANTWELL: Thank you. Mr. Kimmelman, we’re hearing you loud and clear, by the way. I wanted to ask you, your testimony—I think you have a longer version of it that cited many issues—but particularly you’re calling for a comprehensive legislative package that goes beyond short-term measures. And I couldn’t agree with you more. I think the witnesses have outlined why this is so critical, the question is, what are the solutions? So, you mention a couple of things in your testimony—more competition, some reliance on municipal entities, you bring up both something creative that West Virginia did in working with their communities, and obviously this horrific example you have of Yakima county, which is one of the hardest-hit COVID spots, I think it is the most hard-hit West Coast county, Yakima, Washington, where 30% of students do not have access to internet services. So, what one or two things should we be doing now to try to address this in a more comprehensive way?

And I’m intrigued by your statement about the press and the delivery of information too. You know, we have been pushing to have the next PPP coverage make sure that broadcasters and news entities also can apply, because we’ve lost tens of thousands more jobs from broadcasters, and I want the local information to be there. So, if you have any other ideas what we should be doing there I’d like to hear them, but what one or two things should we be doing on broadband now to be more comprehensive than the current programs we have?

KIMMELMAN: You just have to, first of all, expand Lifeline, E-Rate, money to telehealth, you’re already taking some of these initiatives. That’s the stopgap to get us over. We need to update the universal service fund, we need broader contributions, broader players in the broadband service ecosystem. It’s going to take a lot more money, the infrastructure is extensive, that’s why we call for sharing, you need oversight, and the competition is critical because we know we’re not going to be regulating every jot and tittle here, so there’s a variety of ways to let communities participate more, open the door to more competition, don’t let states block competition in broadband.

And on the democracy front, what we’ve learned is, that as we rely on broadband, the way in which we get that critical local news and information from broadcasters and newspapers increasingly depends on internet delivery. And in the digital marketplace, we’re seeing the flow of advertising revenue diminish most dramatically for newspapers. It will come for broadcasting as well, we need a new business model there. And I believe that what we’re seeing with the explosion of the internet is, with all the good information, there’s a lot of pollution. And that bad information—disinformation, falsehood, both about the virus and more broadly—is dangerous to our democracy. So I believe you need a specialized fund—like the Superfund was for toxic waste cleanup—let’s get information cleanup, and let’s get it resourced

to support news-gathering, fact-checking, helping people navigate their way to get around disinformation and falsehood. So I call, really a comprehensive program, it's time to update the law and address all of this together, because all of these issues are intertwined.

CANTWELL: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.