

United States Senate

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ENERGY AND NATURAL
RESOURCES COMMITTEE
ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND
TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE
VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

October 1, 2015

The Honorable Roger Wicker
Chairman
Subcommittee on Communications,
Technology, Innovation & the Internet
512 Dirksen Senate Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Brian Schatz
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Communications,
Technology, Innovation & the Internet
512 Dirksen Senate Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Wicker and Ranking Member Schatz:

Universal service is a core pillar of our nation's communications policy and one that is particularly important to the people of West Virginia. As Senators who represent rural and remote states, you know how important access to communications services is to public safety, economic development, and education. Without access to broadband and mobile services, our rural communities and people cannot compete in the global economy. Over the last decade, the industry has made great strides in building out mobile infrastructure. Hundreds of millions of consumers now have access to advanced wireless communications, but significant coverage gaps still exist in West Virginia and across rural America. I respectfully request your leadership in convening a hearing of the Subcommittee on Communications, Technology, Innovation and the Internet to address the state of advanced wireless service in America today.

Over the last several years, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has been restructuring universal service policy. It does not appear that the data the FCC is using provides a clear and accurate picture of the state of wireless infrastructure deployment. According to the Seventeenth Annual Wireless Competition Report released in December 2014, 99.9 percent of Americans live in a census block that receives some service from some mobile wireless provider. While this data may be technically accurate, it bears no resemblance to the reality that many West Virginians face: they do not have access to reliable wireless services.

As a former businessman, I know that private companies need a fair return on their investment. Universal service funding was designed to make sure companies can generate a return on their network investment and sustain services in high cost areas of the nation. Companies will not invest in wireless infrastructure without the certainty that universal service support will be available to them. Right now, the FCC is not providing any certainty to them, which stifles investment across rural America.

In 2011, the FCC created a new universal service program designed specifically to support the deployment of advanced wireless infrastructure. This program should have provided the most

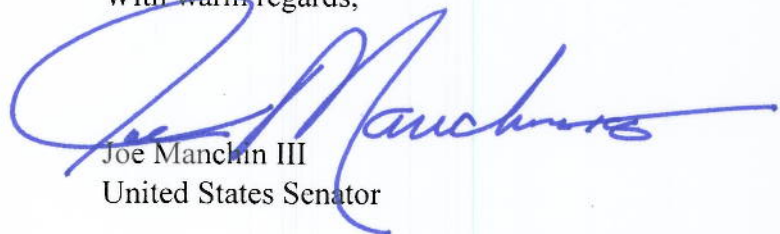
funding to the states with the lowest rates of wireless penetration. West Virginia had one the lowest rates of wireless service penetration when the Mobility Fund was initiated and, most disappointingly, that is where we remain today. The first round of the Mobility Fund failed West Virginia.

It is not clear how the FCC plans to proceed on the second round of funding for advanced wireless infrastructure. To my enormous frustration and that of my constituents, the FCC is poised to leave \$70 million on the table from Mobility Fund Phase I and is seeking comment on a proposal to reduce the scope of the Mobility Fund even further in the future. The FCC has a statutory mission to make sure all Americans have access to comparable communications services. Every day, I field inquiries from local officials about securing additional cell phone towers and improving wireless coverage. For example, Mayor Vivian Livingwood of Gilbert, West Virginia has been waiting two years on the improved infrastructure she was promised, and she's still waiting today. That is unacceptable.

The Commerce Committee has long been a champion of universal service policy. Our states depend on this vital program to make sure all of our constituents have access advanced communications networks. As we look forward to the rollout of wireless and broadband technologies across much of America, we cannot forget the millions of people who still lack access to these services. We have an opportunity to invest millions of dollars in wireless infrastructure if the FCC will move forward with the second round of grants from the Mobility Fund.

Thank you again for your leadership on these issues and for considering this request. I look forward to working together to improve the FCC's administration of the Mobility Fund.

With warm regards,



Joe Manchin III
United States Senator