

It's All Up To Us

Let Federal and State Policymakers Know Where You Stand

Ask Federal and State Policymakers to Support Telecommunications Policies to Strengthen Universal, High Quality Services and Good Jobs.

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Communications Workers of America

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Telecommunications Policy Framework For the 21st Century

Communications

Workers

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The telecommunications industry is at a critical juncture. The emergence of a new tele-communications system based on high-speed networks delivering voice, data and video services to all Americans opens up tremendous opportunities to improve the quality of our lives. Advanced communications networks are essential to economic growth, and can increase democratic and civic participation, improve delivery of health care, education, job training, public safety and other vital public services.

But even as carriers invest in modern networks, government and regulators face tough choices to ensure that the benefits of advanced technology flow not only to those who can afford the most advanced network services but to all Americans, regardless of income or geography. Policymakers should seek broad input from citizens, advocates, public interest groups, and labor in making those choices.

CWA believes that unfettered market competition alone will not deliver affordable quality communications services to all Americans. We support a telecommunications policy that involves appropriate government action to ensure that all Americans participate equally in the benefits promised by the information revolution.

Basic Goals For Communications Policy

Three basic principles developed by Union Network International, a worldwide coalition of 2½ million members, should guide telecommunications policies.

Universal, Affordable Service. Every resident and business must have affordable access not only to telephone service, **but also to high-speed communications networks.** Universal access is fundamental to effective communications, quality of life, economic development, public safety, security and democratic participation.

Quality Service, Quality Jobs. Consumer and service quality protections should cover all residential and business customers no matter where they live, which carrier they choose, or what technology they select to provide their services. Telecommunications services should meet the highest standards of quality, reliability, and safety. Quality service depends primarily on sufficient investment in telecommunications infrastructure and adequate staffing provided by trained, well-compensated career employees.

Financial Equity and Transparency. Communications providers must meet the highest standards of ethics in their corporate practices, including financial transparency and accountability. Consumer protections against practices such as slamming and cramming should be extended to all carriers and not limited to traditional wireline carriers.

Current Policies Are Failing

Unfortunately, current federal and state policies are taking us in the wrong direction.

The Digital Divide is Deepening. Millions of Americans — especially in rural areas and low-income urban areas — do not have access to high-speed broadband because it does not yet pay for providers to invest in these areas. The US is ranked 16th among countries for broadband penetration.

The Vital Public Network is Deteriorating. The vast majority of Americans still relies on the public switched telephone network (PSTN) for basic voice communications and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. This vital network is deteriorating because carriers increasingly divert capital resources to build more profitable high-speed networks for the businesses and communities that can most afford them.

Good Jobs are Disappearing. Some communications carriers take the low-road to competition, replacing good, career oriented, and well-compensated jobs with jobs — often provided by outside contractors — with less pay, little or no benefits and no job security.

We Need a Telecom Policy For the Future

The following policies will enable our nation and our states to lead the way in achieving the goals of universal, affordable, high-speed telecom services with high quality jobs provided by responsible corporate citizens.

Strong Consumer Protections. Policymakers should require and enforce strong consumer protections on all carriers of voice service including traditional wireline, wireless and VoIP/cable telephony providers. Critical consumer protections applying to all carriers include, at a minimum: protections against slamming, cramming and other unfair and deceptive practices; public safety requirements to provide 911 and E911 services; requirements to provide advance notice of termination of service, contract disclosures and privacy protections; and requirements to ensure that customers with special needs continue to receive services that render telecommunications accessible including Lifeline and relay services for the hearing impaired.

High Quality Services. Policymakers should strengthen service quality regulation, applicable to all carriers. State and federal regulators should adopt standards requiring all broadband providers to report actual speed and reliability of broadband service. Policymakers should require carriers to provide a free domestic telephone service center to resolve problems or initiate an inquiry. Service standards should be reinforced with penalties to be paid by carriers for substandard service and should apply to all providers regardless of the technology used to deliver the services. Increased competition doesn't warrant the removal or relaxation of service quality standards. If competition improves service quality, then providers have nothing to worry about. However, if competition fails, then consumers are protected.

A Reliable, Secure & Well Maintained Network. The traditional network is eroding as capital is shifted to wireless and broadband sectors. Consequently, the viability and reliability of the entire network is increasingly at risk. All providers that use the public switched network should share in the cost of maintenance and upgrading of that network because all carriers — whether traditional wireline, CLECs, wireless, or cable/VoIP providers — benefit from the ability to interconnect with the network.

Protect Basic Rates. State commissions should continue to regulate the rates, terms, and conditions of basic telephone service. This will ensure that all consumers have access to basic telephone service at just and reasonable rates and that they are provided in a safe and reasonable manner. In addition, Lifeline and Link-Up programs that enable low-income residents to afford telecommunications services should be strengthened.

Universal High Speed Broadband. Policymakers should adopt the following policies to accelerate deployment of universal affordable high-speed networks serving all regions and all consumers.

- *Establish a Universal Service Fund to support universal broadband access to underserved high-cost areas and low-income households. All providers of voice and data service should contribute to the fund.*

- *Support broadband connections for all public safety and first responders. Policymakers should provide funding so that police, fire, emergency personnel and other first responders have access to high-speed networks to improve service delivery.*

- *Establish reasonable deployment timetables for investment in high-speed networks in underserved, high-cost rural areas and low-income communities.*

- *Establish a state broadband authority to collect data on the state of broadband deployment throughout the state, reevaluate technologies and programs to encourage broadband services, facilitate public-private partnerships to aggregate demand making build-out more economical, and to provide financing in the form of loans to credit-worthy projects that provide broadband access to underserved areas.*

- *Provide tax credits and subsidies for broadband deployment. The amount of the tax credit could be on a sliding scale, with larger credits to carriers that invest in high-speed networks delivering upwards of 10 mbps and to carriers that invest in high-cost rural areas or low-income communities.*

- *Rationalize tax and fee structures in a revenue neutral manner. Currently, different taxes and fees apply to wireline, wireless and video providers. However, carriers providing similar services should be taxed at an equal rate. The state would then collect the taxes and fees and disburse revenue back to the localities in a revenue neutral manner.*

- *Leverage funding in other public programs for broadband deployment. Many states give extra points in competitive bidding for the federal low-income housing credit to developers that commit to build broadband networks in their housing projects. Similarly, the state could explore ways to use public health, education and job training dollars to support broadband access to more efficiently deliver publicly funded health care, education or job training.*

- *Require public reporting of speed and reliability of broadband networks. Consumers must have access to this information to make educated decisions among competing broadband providers.*