



BEFORE THE PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION  
OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA

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Order Instituting Rulemaking to Update the  
California Universal Telephone Service  
(LifeLine) Program.

Rulemaking 20-02-008

**OPENING COMMENTS OF THE PUBLIC ADVOCATES OFFICE  
ON THE FINAL PROPOSAL SUBMITTED BY THE LIFELINE RENEWAL  
WORKING GROUP FOR IMPROVING THE RENEWALS PROCESS**

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February 16, 2021

## I. INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Pursuant to the October 21, 2020 *E-Mail Ruling Regarding Renewals Improvements Procedural Schedule* (Ruling),<sup>1</sup> the Public Advocates Office at the California Public Utilities Commission (Cal Advocates) timely<sup>2</sup> submits these Opening Comments on the February 5, 2021 *Final Proposal Submitted by the Renewal Working Group for Improving the Renewal Process* (Proposal) as part of the ongoing Rulemaking (R.) 20-02-008 updating the California Universal Telephone Service Program (LifeLine).<sup>3</sup>

The California LifeLine Renewal Working Group (Working Group) was formed in accordance with the April 13, 2020 *Assigned Commissioner's Scoping Memo and Ruling* (Scoping Memo) in R.20-02-008 and tasked with recommending improvements to the current LifeLine renewals process.<sup>4</sup> The Proposal represents months of collaborative work by a diverse stakeholder group including Cal Advocates and other consumer advocacy organizations as well as wireless and wireline LifeLine service providers.<sup>5</sup> The Proposal outlines five key recommendations for the California Public Utilities Commission's (Commission) consideration to address a variety of issues concerning the current LifeLine renewals process.<sup>6</sup> The Proposal also delineates next steps for the Commission to expedite the implementation of these recommendations.<sup>7</sup>

The Scoping Memo identified improving the LifeLine renewals process as a priority for this proceeding since this process has suffered from low success rates and has been in need of

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<sup>1</sup> *E-Mail Ruling Regarding Renewals Improvements Procedural Schedule*, R.20-02-008, October 21, 2020 [hereinafter Ruling].

<sup>2</sup> The Ruling states that Opening Comments are due ten days after service of the Working Group's proposal, which occurred on Friday, February 5, 2021. Ten days after February 5, 2021, is Monday, February 15, 2021, which is Presidents' Day. Rule 1.15 of the Commission's Rules of Practice and Procedure provides that when a due date falls on a Saturday, Sunday, holiday, or other day when the Commission offices are closed, the time limited is extended to include the first day thereafter. In this instance, the first day thereafter is Tuesday, February 16, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> *Final Proposal Submitted by the Lifeline Renewal Working Group* [hereinafter Proposal], R.20-02-008, February 5, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> *Assigned Commissioner's Scoping Memo and Ruling*, R.20-02-008, April 13, 2020, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Proposal, p. 1, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Proposal, pp. 3, 4, 6, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Proposal, pp. 3-11.

significant overhaul for years.<sup>8,2</sup> Cal Advocates supports the Proposal because it serves as an important steppingstone to improve the LifeLine program’s renewals process for millions of LifeLine participants. Cal Advocates further notes that its position outlined in the Proposal<sup>10</sup> may provide the Commission with greater insight into specific elements that must be considered while implementing the Working Group’s recommendations.<sup>11</sup>

While all of the Working Group’s recommendations will have a positive impact on the renewals process, the Commission’s implementation of the Proposal should consider how each of the recommendations addresses the fundamental issue impacting LifeLine renewals: LifeLine participants’ low rates of renewal form submissions. To increase LifeLine participants’ renewal form submission rates, the Commission should explore mechanisms and barriers to implement the Working Group’s “Third Party Database Access” recommendation, since it would allow an automatic renewal of participants’ LifeLine benefits and obviate the need for renewal form submission. The Commission should also use the workshop recommended in the Proposal to discuss potential barriers in implementation and identify alternative solutions to address this key issue in the renewals process.

## II. DISCUSSION

### A. The Commission’s Efforts for Implementing the Working Group’s Proposal Should be Guided by the Goal of Improving Lifeline Participants’ Low Renewal Form Submission Rates.

As the Commission implements the Proposal, its efforts should be guided towards improving LifeLine participants’ low rates of renewal form submission during the annual renewals process. LifeLine participants are required to submit a renewal form to LifeLine’s Third Party Administrator (TPA) confirming their eligibility on an annual basis to continue

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<sup>8</sup> *Assigned Commissioner’s Scoping Memo and Ruling*, R. 20-02-008, April 13, 2020, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Proposal, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> *See generally* Proposal, Attachment B, under “Position of Members,” “The Public Advocates Office.”

<sup>11</sup> For example, *see* Proposal, Attachment B, recommendation “Improve Third-Party Administrator Communication with Subscriber.” Cal Advocates notes that “any additional communication should include consistent messaging across the SMS and Robocall platforms and the communications should include clear actionable steps or a customer service number for the subscriber, wherever possible.”

receiving LifeLine services.<sup>12,13</sup> The low renewal form submission rate is a pervasive issue in the LifeLine renewals process and a major reason why subscribers are denied a renewal of their LifeLine service. For example, from October 2019 to March 2020, approximately 350,000 LifeLine participants failed to successfully complete the renewals process and were denied renewal of their LifeLine service.<sup>14</sup> Of these 350,000 participants, 91 percent were denied for failing to return their renewal forms to the TPA.<sup>15</sup> This trend can also be extrapolated from the data provided in the Proposal on correctable denial counts during the renewals process; more than 60 percent of subscribers that were sent correctable denial forms failed to return their forms back to the TPA and were consequently removed from the program.<sup>16</sup>

While the Proposal's recommendations may help address this key issue, their impact in improving LifeLine participants' renewal form submission rate will ultimately depend on their actual implementation. For example, the "Third Party Database Access" recommendation would fundamentally improve the renewal process: if access to qualifying social safety net programs, such as CalFresh, is used to automatically renew participants' LifeLine benefits, it would limit the need for subscribers to submit their renewal forms to the TPA altogether.<sup>17</sup> However, as the Proposal notes, operational and legal barriers may limit the recommendation's implementation.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, as the Commission undertakes action to explore and implement the Proposal, it should seek to identify barriers to implementing the recommendations with an eye toward addressing the issue of low renewal form submission rate. Furthermore, if the Commission finds that the recommendations may not be implementable or may not improve renewal form submission rates, it should use the scheduled solutions-based workshop set forth in the

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<sup>12</sup> LifeLine's Third Party Administrator is contracted by the Commission to handle the administration of the LifeLine program in California. Its responsibilities include, among other things, sending, receiving, and processing the annual renewal forms for LifeLine participants.

<sup>13</sup> General Order 153, Section 4.5.

<sup>14</sup> Data shared via email from the Communication Division's Staff to the California LifeLine Renewal Working Group members, July 15, 2020 12:01 PM.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> Proposal, pp. 7-8, Figure 1.

<sup>17</sup> Proposal, pp. 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* For example, in one email communication from the Communication Division's Staff to the California LifeLine Renewal Working Group members, on September 9, 2020 12:28 PM, the Staff noted that certain California rules that require customer consent as part of the renewal process may limit the implementation of automatic renewals.

Proposal’s “Conclusion and Next Steps” section to identify alternative strategies and solutions to address this key issue.<sup>19</sup>

### **III. CONCLUSION**

Cal Advocates appreciates the opportunity to participate in the Working Group and help improve the California LifeLine renewals process. The Proposal is an important milestone to address long-standing issues in the renewals process. As the Commission takes its next steps to improve the renewals process, Cal Advocates urges the Commission to further explore and implement the Working Group’s Proposal with a focus on addressing the core issue of LifeLine participants’ low renewal form submission rates.

Respectfully submitted,

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<sup>19</sup> Proposal, p. 9.