

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

2157 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

MAJORITY (202) 225-5051
MINORITY (202) 225-5074
<https://oversight.house.gov>

October 21, 2021

Ms. Jessica Rosenworcel
Acting Chairwoman
U.S. Federal Communications Commission
45 L Street N.E.
Washington, DC 20554

Dear Ms. Rosenworcel,

We are writing today to request information on the status of rural Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and their service to Americans. Lack of competition and overreporting of access data has led to poor customer service and communities being left decades behind the rest of the country. Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, rural Americans were suffering from the lack of reliable internet access. The pandemic exacerbated the divide, further hindering rural America's access to education and economic opportunity.

According to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), roughly 14.5 million Americans in 2021 lack access to high-speed broadband, which the FCC defines as download speeds of at least 25 mpbs.¹ A recent study by Broadband Now, an independent research group, found that in reality, 42 million Americans live in places where they cannot buy broadband internet service, most of them in rural areas.² This discrepancy is largely due to the fact that if an ISP offers service to at least one household in a census block, then the FCC counts the entire census block as covered by that provider.³ This, in addition to reliance on self-reported data, has led to overreported access, particularly for rural America.⁴

Further, a lack of competition in some markets fails to hold many rural providers accountable for poor service. For example, Suddenlink Communications, the seventh largest cable provider in the U.S., is the sole television and internet broadband service in several U.S. markets.⁵ Despite their reach, Suddenlink has a history of poor service for their consumers.

¹ U.S. FED. COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION, FCC 21-18, FOURTEENTH BROADBAND DEVELOPMENT REPORT 2 (Jan. 19, 2021), <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/FCC-21-18A1.pdf>

² John Busby, Julia Tanberk & Tyler Cooper, *BroadbandNow Estimates Availability for all 50 States; Confirms that More than 42 Million Americans Do Not Have Access to Broadband*, BROADBANDNOW RESEARCH (May 5, 2021), <https://broadbandnow.com/research/fcc-broadband-overreporting-by-state>.

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Suddenlink Communications*, BROADBANDNOW, <https://broadbandnow.com/Suddenlink-Communications> (last visited Oct. 4, 2021).

Suddenlink serves 17 states, with greatest coverage in Texas, West Virginia, and Louisiana.⁶ In fact, Suddenlink has been classified as the “most hated ISP” in four states, including Texas and West Virginia.⁷ The Virginia Public Service Commission went as far as to hold a local public hearing on the issues consumers face with Suddenlink due to the more than 1,900 service quality complaints they received.⁸ Yet connectivity, speed, and customer service issues remain nationwide, with customers reporting they cannot even reach a customer service agent to resolve the issues.⁹

The COVID-19 pandemic sharpened the dramatic divide between low-income and rural areas access to reliable internet leading to significant learning losses for students and a widening gap in economic recovery. Geographically, rural households with school-age kids were least likely to have high-speed internet, especially in the South, where 29 percent of households lacked high-speed internet.¹⁰ Rural students were twice as likely as urban students to report lacking adequate technology to complete their coursework during the pandemic.¹¹

The lack of reliable internet access has also inhibited the economic recovery for many rural communities. More than 31 percent of workers in urban areas reported working from home full time in the previous week due to the pandemic, compared with just 13.61 percent of rural workers.¹² This inability to provide flexible work from home options due to lack of reliable internet continues to hinder these communities preventing economic recovery and growth.

In order to help us better understand the problems with broadband access in rural communities and what the FCC is doing to address them, please provide the following documents and information no later than November 4, 2021:

1. A list of all rural broadband providers and their coverage areas.
2. The number of complaints filed with the FCC relating to internet access, speed, customer support, or any other issue relating to broadband access.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ FairShake Team, *The Most Hated Internet Service Providers in Every US State*, FAIR SHAKE, <https://fairshake.com/consumer-guides/mapped-the-most-hated-internet-service-providers-in-every-u-s-state/> (last visited Oct. 4, 2021).

⁸ *Suddenlink case: Princeton hearing the correct venue for addressing concerns*, BLUEFIELD DAILY TELEGRAPH (Sept. 8, 2021), https://www.bdtonline.com/opinion/suddenlink-case-princeton-hearing-the-correct-venue-for-addressing-concerns/article_4ac051c8-100a-11ec-a53d-5fa718f61414.html

⁹ *Suddenlink Communications Customer reviews*, BETTER BUSINESS BUREAU, <https://www.bbb.org/us/tx/lubbock/profile/cable-tv/suddenlink-communications-0945-10594/customer-reviews> (last visited Oct. 4, 2021).

¹⁰ Riordan Frost, *Pandemic Highlights Disparities in High-Speed Internet Service*, JOINT CTR. FOR HOUSING STUDIES OF HARVARD UNIV. (Sept. 8, 2021) <https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/blog/pandemic-highlights-disparities-high-speed-internet-service>.

¹¹ Caius Z. Willingham & Areeba Haider, *Rural Broadband Investments Promote Inclusive Economy*, CTR. FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS (Jul. 12, 2021), <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/news/2021/07/12/501530/rural-broadband-investments-promote-inclusive-economy/>.

¹² *Id.*

Ms. Jessica Rosenworcel

October 21, 2021

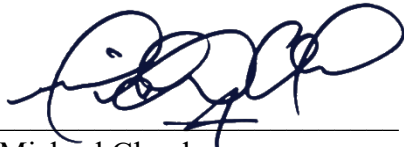
Page 3

3. A list of the top 10 companies with the largest number of complaints filed with the FCC.
4. A detailed explanation of what steps are taken to address complaints once they are filed with the FCC.
5. The number of enforcement actions the FCC Enforcement Bureau has taken in 2021.
6. The result of the enforcement actions taken in 2021.
7. An explanation as to why the FCC considers a census block “covered” if as few as only one or two residences in the block are served.
8. Information regarding whether the FCC still considers the minimum download speed of 25 megabits per second an acceptable metric.
9. Detailed explanation on when the FCC will release the updated broadband maps so that rural coverage can be more accurately addressed as required by the Broadband DATA Act.
10. An explanation of how and whether the FCC is encouraging competition in rural areas where there are fewer customers?

In addition to the above documents and information, we request a staff-level briefing no later than October 28, 2021. The Committee on Oversight and Reform is the principal oversight committee of the U.S. House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate “any matter” at “any time” under House Rule X.

Thank you in advance for your cooperation with this inquiry.

Sincerely,



Michael Cloud
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Economic and
Consumer Policy



James Comer
Ranking Member
Committee on Oversight and Reform



Jody Hice
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Government Operations



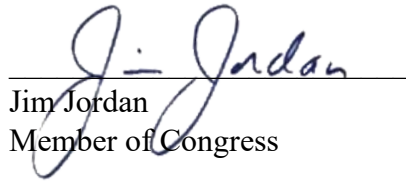
Glenn Grothman
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on National Security



Ralph Norman
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Environment



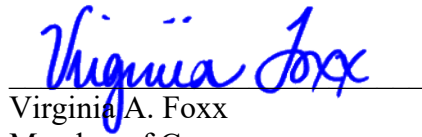
Nancy Mace
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Civil Rights and
Civil Liberties



Jim Jordan
Member of Congress



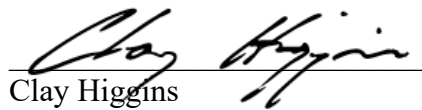
Paul A. Gosar, D.D.S.
Member of Congress



Virginia A. Foxx
Member of Congress



Bob Gibbs
Member of Congress



Clay Higgins
Member of Congress



Pete Sessions
Member of Congress



Fred Keller
Member of Congress



Andrew S. Clyde
Member of Congress



Scott Franklin
Member of Congress



Jake LaTurner
Member of Congress



Pat Fallon
Member of Congress



Yvette Herrell
Member of Congress

Ms. Jessica Rosenworcel

October 21, 2021

Page 5

cc: The Honorable Carolyn Maloney, Chairwoman
Committee on Oversight and Reform

The Honorable Gerald E. Connolly, Chairman
Subcommittee on Government Operations

The Honorable Stephen F. Lynch, Chairman
Subcommittee on National Security

The Honorable Raja Krishnamoorthi, Chairman
Subcommittee on Economic and Consumer Policy

The Honorable Ro Khanna, Chairman
Subcommittee on Environment

The Honorable Jamie Raskin, Chairman
Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties