COMMERCE DEPARTMENT

October 7, 2021

Will Seuffert Executive Secretary Minnesota Public Utilities Commission 121 7th Place East, Suite 350 St. Paul, Minnesota 55101-2147

RE: **Comments of the Minnesota Department of Commerce** Docket No. P999/CI-21-72

Dear Mr. Seuffert:

Attached are the Comments of the Minnesota Department of Commerce in response to the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission's September 7, 2021 Notice of Comment Period on TAP Budget.

Sincerely,

/s/ DIANE DIETZ Rate Analyst

DD/ar Attachment

COMMERCE DEPARTMENT

Before the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission

Comments of the Minnesota Department of Commerce

Docket No. P999/CI-21-72

I. BACKGROUND

On January 15, 2019, the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (Commission) issued its *Order Setting TAP Credit Amount and Surcharge Level and Requiring Local Service Providers to Include TAP Information on Their Websites* in Docket Nos. P999/CI-17-677 and P999/CI-18-112. In that Order, the Telephone Assistance Plan (TAP) credit increased from \$3.50 to \$7.00 per month. The monthly TAP surcharge, which funds the TAP program, increased from \$.03 to \$.10 per access line. The changes to the TAP credit and surcharge were implemented on July 1, 2019, or the first billing cycle thereafter. Before the issuance of the January 15, 2019 Order, the TAP surcharge and available credit were last changed by the Commission in its August 10, 2013 Order in Docket No. P999/CI-13-213.

On January 22, 2021, the Commission issued its *Order Modifying Monthly TAP Program Credit and Surcharge and Reconvening Advisory Group* in Docket No. P999/CI-20-665. In that Order, the TAP credit increased from \$7.00 to \$10.00 per month. The monthly TAP surcharge, which funds the TAP program, decreased from \$.10 to \$.07 per access line, to be effective on April 1, 2021.

On August 2, 2021, the Commission issued its *Notice of Lifeline Outreach Filing Requirement for High Cost ETCs* in Docket Nos. P999/CI-20-747 and P999/PR-21-8. The Notice directed all High Cost ETCs to follow the Lifeline best practices requirements established in the Commission's July 20, 2021 Order in Docket Nos. P999/CI-20-747 and P999/PR-21-8.

II. STATUTORY AUTHORITY

Minnesota Statutes §§ 237.69 - .711 govern the TAP program. Minnesota Rule 7817 establishes rules for the implementation and operation of the TAP program.

III. COMMENTS

A. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Commission made significant increases to the TAP credit to accommodate the needs of subscribers. In its January 15, 2019 Order in Docket Nos. P999/CI-17-677 and P999/CI-18-112 (pages 2 and 3), the Commission made the following statement:

The OAG [Office of the Attorney General] noted that the number of TAP participants has dropped significantly since 2013, from over 73,000 to fewer than 20,000 stemming from a variety of causes, including that the credit cannot be used for cellular or wireless telephone service and the credit is too low for customers to see the value in applying for the program.

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The OAG recommended increasing the TAP credit from \$3.50 to \$9.00, increasing the TAP surcharge from \$0.03 to \$0.10, and directing Commission staff to make outreach and promotional efforts without waiting for the TAP/Lifeline Working Group report. . . the Commission believes that the best approach at this time is to increase the credit level awarded per month to \$7.00 per month with an increase in the surcharge level to \$0.10 per month.

The Commission's January 15, 2019 Order largely supported the OAG recommendation, but also recognized the uncertainty that the revised credit and surcharge would have on the TAP fund. This uncertainty appears to have been a consideration when the Commission chose a \$7.00 credit, rather than a \$9.00 credit, as proposed by the OAG.

In its January 22, 2021, in Docket No. P999/CI-20-665, the Commission again increased the monthly TAP credit (i.e., to \$10.00 per month) in recognition of the steady decline in TAP subscribership, despite Commission efforts to promote the program. At the same time, the Commission charged the TAP Advisory Group with the "important role in exploring communications trends, including changes in TAP's federal counterpart, Lifeline, and the migration away from landlines and toward mobile devices and broadband internet service."¹

B. DEPARTMENT PROPOSAL FOR TAP SURCHARGE AND CREDIT

The Department prepared Attachment A to estimate the impact on the TAP fund with various levels of TAP surcharges. As the TAP fund balance exceeded \$3 million on July 1, 2021, which may support a further increase in the TAP credit and/or a reduction in the TAP surcharge. If no changes are made, it is estimated that the fund balance will decline by approximately \$365,000 by June 30, 2022 However, since the higher TAP credit of \$10 was not implemented until April 1, 2021, it may be too soon to know how TAP subscribership will be affected. In coordination with the higher credit, the Commission staff recently convened a meeting of the TAP-Lifeline Advisory Group and the participants are charged with considering ways to promote the TAP program to eligible customers. Thus, the full impact of the recent increase in the monthly TAP credit on the level of TAP subscribership, and on the TAP fund balance, may take additional time to become fully realized. At this time, the Department supports maintaining the TAP credit at \$10 and the monthly TAP surcharge at \$.07.

C. CARRIER RESPONSIBILITIES TO PROMOTE AND ENROLL CUSTOMERS IN TAP

In its October 22, 2020 Comments on the TAP credit and surcharge in Docket Nos. P999/CI-20-665, the Department discussed several recent factors that appear to be related to the significant drop in TAP subscribership in recent years. One of these factors was the FCC's decision to gradually eliminate Lifeline support for voice service. In its October 22, 2020 comments, the Department made the following statement:

¹ See January 22, 2021 Order, in Docket No. P999/CI-20-665, page 3.

[T]he FCC's Lifeline Modernization Order initiated a process to eliminate a subsidy for voice service to eligible households. ² Recipients of Lifeline support, whose voice service does not include internet service that meets standards established by the FCC in its March 31, 2016 Order, saw a reduction in their Lifeline credits from \$9.25 to \$7.25 per month on December 1, 2019; saw a reduction in their Lifeline support to \$5.25 on December 1, 2020; and will see the elimination of the Lifeline benefit for voice service on December 1, 2021, except in areas where this is only one Lifeline provider.³ The FCC's plan for the gradual reduction and then elimination of Lifeline benefits for voice only customers will result in landline service becoming increasingly unaffordable for otherwise eligible recipients of Lifeline benefits. To the extent that the public interest supports affordable voice service for all Minnesotans, as the Department believes, the FCC's phase out of Lifeline's support for voice services leaves the TAP program as the sole vehicle to assist low income customers.

The final phase of the FCC's gradual phase-out of Lifeline credits to eligible customers, who subscribe to voice service only, is set to occur on December 1, 2021. The impact of the FCC's decision will be most significant to voice-only Lifeline customers on tribal lands, which currently receive an additional monthly Lifeline benefit of \$25.00, or a total credit of \$30.25. As TAP supports only voice service, the Commission may wish to mitigate possible adverse effects to the TAP program that could result from Lifeline no longer supporting voice service by reminding companies of the following:

- TAP program benefits remain available for voice service, even when the Lifeline benefit for voice has been eliminated, and is to be advertised no less than annually, as required by Minnesota Statute section 237.70, subdivision 7 (b) (c) and Minnesota Rules parts 7817.0300, subpart 5.B.4 and 7817.0400, subpart 1.
- 2) A TAP-only application is available on the Commission's website and each company should have a link on its website to the TAP-only application.⁴
- 3) TAP-only applications are to be submitted by the customer directly to the company. Each company is responsible for determining whether the customer applying for the TAP credit is eligible, based on the criteria identified on the application.
- 4) The Commission's June 8, 2018 Order Establishing Auto-enrollment, Use of National Application, and Delegation of Implementation Date in Docket No. P999/CI-18-223 requires the companies to automatically enroll customers in the TAP program if the customer subscribes to voice service and is being enrolled in the Lifeline program. This auto-enrollment in the TAP program for voice service is to continue, even though the customer's Lifeline benefit applies to broadband service.

 ² See FCC's March 31, 2016 Third Report and Order, Further Report and Order, and Order on Reconsideration (FCC 16-38).
³ See FCC's March 31, 2016 News Release entitled "FCC Modernizes Lifeline Program for the Digital Age. Link is at https://www.fcc.gov/document/fcc-modernizes-lifeline-program-digital-age. Also see

https://www.fcc.gov/general/lifeline-program-low-income-consumers

⁴ <u>https://mn.gov/puc/assets/2021%20TAP%20Application_tcm14-467828.pdf</u>

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5) A customer may obtain an eligibility determination to enroll in Lifeline from the National Verifier prior to the customer contacting the company. In the event a customer has been found by the National Verifier to be eligible for Lifeline, that determination may be accepted by the company to enroll the customer in the TAP program if the customer wishes to subscribe to a voice service, independent of whether the customer also subscribes to a broadband service and receives the Lifeline benefit.

IV. COMMISSION ALTERNATIVES

The TAP credit and surcharge

- A. 1. Maintain the current TAP credit and surcharge.
- A. 2. Modify the monthly TAP credit and/or surcharge as prescribed by the Commission.

Carrier Responsibilities on TAP

- B.1. Remind companies of the following:
 - a. TAP program benefits remain available for voice service, even when the Lifeline benefit for voice has been eliminated, and is to be advertised no less than annually, as required by Minnesota Statute section 237.70, subdivision 7 (b) (c) and Minnesota Rules parts 7817.0300, subpart 5.B.4 and 7817.0400, subpart 1.
 - b. A TAP-only application is available on the Commission's website and each company should have a link to the TAP-only application.
 - c. TAP-only applications are to be submitted by the customer directly to the company. Each company is responsible for determining whether the customer applying for the TAP credit is eligible, based on the criteria identified on the application.
 - d. The Commission's June 8, 2018 Order Establishing Auto-enrollment, Use of National Application, and Delegation of Implementation Date in Docket No. P999/CI-18-223 requires the companies to automatically enroll customers in the TAP program if the customer subscribes to voice service and is being enrolled in the Lifeline program. This auto-enrollment in the TAP program for voice service is to continue, even though the customer's Lifeline benefit applies to broadband service.
 - e. A customer may obtain an eligibility determination to enroll in Lifeline from the National Verifier prior to the customer contacting the company. In the event a customer has been found by the National Verifier to be eligible for Lifeline, that determination may be accepted by the company to enroll the customer in the TAP program if the customer wishes to subscribe to a voice service, independent of whether the customer also subscribes to a broadband service and receives the Lifeline benefit.
- B.2. Take other action as the Commission deems appropriate.

V. DEPARTMENT RECOMMENDATION

The Department recommends that the Commission adopt alternatives A.1 and B.1.a,b,c,d,e.

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I, Sharon Ferguson, hereby certify that I have this day, served copies of the following document on the attached list of persons by electronic filing, certified mail, e-mail, or by depositing a true and correct copy thereof properly enveloped with postage paid in the United States Mail at St. Paul, Minnesota.

Minnesota Department of Commerce Comments

Docket No. P999/CI-21-72

Dated this 7th day of October 2021

/s/Sharon Ferguson

First Name	Last Name	Email	Company Name	Address	Delivery Method	View Trade Secret	Service List Name
Linda	Chavez	linda.chavez@state.mn.us	Department of Commerce	85 7th Place E Ste 280 Saint Paul, MN 55101-2198	Electronic Service	No	OFF_SL_21-72_Official
Generic Notice	Commerce Attorneys		Office of the Attorney General-DOC	445 Minnesota Street Suite 1400 St. Paul, MN 55101	Electronic Service	Yes	OFF_SL_21-72_Official
Generic Notice	Residential Utilities Division		Office of the Attorney General-RUD	1400 BRM Tower 445 Minnesota St St. Paul, MN 551012131	Electronic Service	Yes	OFF_SL_21-72_Official
Will	Seuffert	Will.Seuffert@state.mn.us	Public Utilities Commission	121 7th PI E Ste 350 Saint Paul, MN 55101	Electronic Service	Yes	OFF_SL_21-72_Official

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U13417 Access One, Inc. Mark Lammert CPA 820 W Jackson Blvd, Suite 650 Chicago IL 60607

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U13745 BullsEye Telecom, Inc. Lisa Sichler 25925 Telegraph Rd Ste 210 Southfield MI 48033 *U14101* AEX Communications, Inc. Thomas M Fletcher 4445 W 77th St Ste 102 Edina MN 55435

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U6993 Vesta Solutions, Inc. Karen Higgs 500 West Monroe St FL 39 Chicago IL 60661

U11089 West Central Telephone Association Jennifer Grewe 308 Frontage Road PO Box 304 Sebeka MN 56477

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U10579

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U14089

Windstream NorthStar, LLC Gail Gauthier 4001 N Rodney Parham Rd Attn: Regulatory Compliance Little Rock AR 72212-2442

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U13727

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U12858 Windstream Lakedale Link, Inc. Gail Gauthier 4001 N Rodney Parham Rd Attn: Regulatory Compliance Little Rock AR 72212-2442

U14054 Windstream Norlight, LLC Gail Gauthier 4001 N Rodney Parham Rd Attn: Regulatory Compliance Little Rock AR 72212-2442

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