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MEMORANDUM

TO: Eileen Donoghue, City Manager 

FROM: Mirán Fernandez, Chief Information Officer

DATE: April 28, 2020

Re: **MOTION RESPONSE: 4/14/2020 by C. Chau** – Req. City Mgr. Contact Comcast, Verizon And Other Internet Providers To The City And Request/Negotiate Reduced Fees And Service Charges During The Covid-19 Emergency Period

In Massachusetts, the Department of Telecommunications and Cable (DTC) is the local franchising authority for rate regulation purposes, while the municipality is the issuing authority which grants the license to the cable operator. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is the authority for all other non-video related services such as Internet Service Providers (ISPs), telecommunications, and wireless services.

MIS recognizes two wired ISPs which service the city (Comcast and Verizon), has reached out to both of them, and has requested that they reduce fees and service charges during the COVID-19 emergency period, and their responses are summarized below. Also attached, please find the DTC's official *COVID-19 Response from Broadband and Telephone Service Providers* document.

Comcast has (1) dropped the monthly cost of their Internet Essentials program for low-income households to \$0 through 5/15/20, (2) instituted a no-shut off policy during the crisis for current customers who can't pay their bill, (3) opened their outdoor and small business hotspots to the public, (4) is offering new educational collections for all grade levels for free, and (5) is pausing data plans for 60 days giving all customer Unlimited data for no additional charge.

Verizon has (1) added a new discount Internet option for low-income households, (2) pledged to not terminate services during the crisis for nonpayment, (3) is waiving wireless data overage charges and late fees, (4) is providing consumers with free learning tools, and (5) is prioritizing first responder access.

Both vendors have been responsive throughout this crisis, and are available to answer additional questions should they arise.

COVID-19 Response from Broadband and Telephone Service Providers

The following information is intended to be a resource to help consumers concerned with service connectivity and limits to minutes and data caps in their service plans. The information contained herein is accurate as of the date of publication and will be updated if/when further information is available. For current offerings and changes to terms and conditions, contact your provider.

COVID-19 Response from Broadband and Telephone Service Providers

In response to COVID-19, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) launched the [Keep Americans Connected Initiative](#) to ensure that people do not lose their broadband or telephone connectivity during the pandemic. Over 600 broadband and telephone service providers in the country have signed on to commit to the following through May 13, 2020:

- (1) not terminate service to any residential or small business customers because of their inability to pay their bills due to the disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic;
- (2) waive any late fees that any residential or small business customers incur because of their economic circumstances related to the coronavirus pandemic; and
- (3) open its Wi-Fi hotspots to public.

Providers service Massachusetts residents that have signed the FCC's pledge include: AT&T, Charter Spectrum, Comcast, Consolidated, Cox, OTelco, RCN, Sprint, T-Mobile, and Verizon. To date, Magna5 (serving the Town of Richmond) has not signed the pledge, but the company has suspended disconnections for non-payment.

Additionally, many carriers are providing customers with unlimited or additional minutes and data until May 13, 2020. The Appendix contains specific COVID-19 related actions announced by service providers serving Massachusetts.

Visit <https://www.fcc.gov/keep-americans-connected> to view a list of companies and associations that have signed the pledge

Lifeline Program - Subsidized Phone and Internet Service

Lifeline is a federal program that provides free or low-cost phone or internet service to low-income households through a monthly service discount of up to \$9.25. Lifeline subscribers have the choice of applying their benefit discount to either (1) home phone service; (2) home internet service, where available, or (3) a wireless phone plan with data. The Lifeline Program subsidy does not cover the cost of a wireless device, but some Lifeline Providers may choose to offer an initial wireless device upon completing enrollment.

Only one Lifeline program discount is available per household, which is defined as any individual or group of individuals who live together at the same address and share income and expenses. Therefore, if there are multiple people living at the same address, but they do not share income, each individual will be eligible for Lifeline service.

In response to COVID-19, the FCC has extended benefit recertification deadlines until May 29, 2020 to ease the burden on current Lifeline subscribers who need to submit documentation to show they remain eligible to receive Lifeline service. The FCC has also waived the 30 day usage rule until May 29, 2020, and directed the Universal Service Administrative Company (USAC) to pause any involuntary de-enrollment of existing subscribers.

Eligibility: There are two ways to qualify for the Lifeline program: income-based eligibility (household income is at or below 135% of the federal poverty guidelines) or program-based eligibility (Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Supplemental Security Income, Federal Public Housing Assistance, Certain Federally-Recognized/State Tribal Assistance Programs, and Veteran's Pension or Survivor's Pension benefit). A full list of eligibility criteria, including the federal poverty guidelines, is available here: <https://www.lifelinesupport.org/do-i-qualify/>.

Enrolling in Lifeline: As of January 22, 2020, prior to enrolling with a Lifeline service provider, Massachusetts Lifeline applicants need to first verify their eligibility for the Lifeline Program using the National Verifier, a centralized system that is managed directly by USAC, the administrator of the Lifeline Program under the direction of the FCC. In order to verify eligibility, consumers will need to complete the standard Lifeline Program application as well as submit a copy of their proof of eligibility documentation. A full list of acceptable proof of eligibility documentation can be found here: <https://www.lifelinesupport.org/do-i-qualify/how-to-prove-participation/>. Consumers can apply online by visiting www.CheckLifeline.org/lifeline/.

For more information on how to enroll, Massachusetts consumers can visit the [Department of Telecommunications and Cable's website](#) for guidance (<https://www.mass.gov/how-to/apply-for-a-discounted-communications-service-through-the-lifeline-program>). Additionally, consumers can call the DTC's hotline, 800-392-6066, for assistance in applying or to get support with any challenges in the process (e.g., eligibility verification).

APPENDIX: WIRELESS LIFELINE IN MASSACHUSETTS

Service Provider	Lifeline Monthly Plan	Covid-19 Response
<u>Assurance Wireless</u>	-350 voice minutes -Unlimited texts -3GB data -Courtesy mobile device upon enrollment	Through May 20, 2020, all Assurance Wireless Lifeline customers will receive: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free unlimited domestic voice minutes • Free unlimited texting • A one-time allotment of 6GB in addition to regular monthly data allotment
<u>SafeLink Wireless</u>	-350 voice minutes -Unlimited texts -3GB data	Through April 28, 2020 all Safelink Wireless Lifeline customers will receive: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free unlimited domestic voice minutes • Free unlimited texts • Additional 5GB of data in addition to regular monthly data allotment
<u>StandUp Wireless</u>	-300 voice minutes -Unlimited texts -3GB data -Courtesy mobile device upon enrollment	Through May 15, 2020, all new and current StandUp Wireless customers will receive: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free unlimited voice minutes • Free unlimited texts • Additional 5GB (8GB total) Lifeline customers must be approved before 4/17/2020 to receive these additional benefits

Eligibility and enrollment information available online at <https://www.lifelinesupport.org/>

For more information on how to enroll, Massachusetts consumers can visit the [Department of Telecommunications and Cable's website](#) for guidance (<https://www.mass.gov/how-to/apply-for-a-discounted-communications-service-through-the-lifeline-program>). Additionally, consumers can call the DTC's hotline, 800-392-6066, for assistance in applying or to get support with any challenges in the process (e.g., eligibility verification).

APPENDIX: WIRED LIFELINE IN MASSACHUSETTS

Service Provider	Lifeline Monthly Plan	Covid 19 Response
Verizon	<p>Home phone: -Unlimited landline minutes, including long distance</p> <p>Home internet: -Fios internet service at a speed of 18 megabits per second or above - 250GB monthly data cap</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waiving coverage charges and late fees. Customers should contact Verizon’s customer service team to let them know they’re experiencing a hardship. • Two months waived internet and voice service charges for current Lifeline customers • Beginning April 3, 2020, Lifeline consumers may select any service speed in the Mix & Match plans and receive a \$20 monthly discount and router rental charges waived for 60 days. The plans with the discounted monthly prices are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 200/200 Mbps for \$19.99/month ○ 400/400 Mbps for \$39.99/month ○ Gigabit for \$59.99/month (includes Fios router)

Eligibility and enrollment information available online at <https://www.lifelinesupport.org/>

Please note that as a result of COVID-19, Verizon is not dispatching technicians for in-home or in-premise installations, with very limited exceptions. This means you may be unable to obtain new home phone or internet service with Verizon at this time. If you plan on requesting new service, contact Verizon to confirm whether a self-install will be possible.

For more information on how to enroll, Massachusetts consumers can visit the [Department of Telecommunications and Cable’s website](#) for guidance (<https://www.mass.gov/how-to/apply-for-a-discounted-communications-service-through-the-lifeline-program>). Additionally, consumers can call the DTC’s hotline, 800-392-6066, for assistance in applying or to get support with any challenges in the process (e.g., eligibility verification).

APPENDIX: WIRED SERVICE IN MASSACHUSETTS

Service Provider	COVID-19 Response <i>Offers active through May 13, 2020 unless otherwise noted</i>
<u>Comcast/Xfinity</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two months of complimentary internet access through the <u>Internet Essentials</u> service to new customers who are eligible, which includes MassHealth members. No credit check, shipping fee or term contract required for the service. • Waiving fees on late payments and not terminating service if customers contact Comcast/Xfinity to inform them of the hardship • Public <u>Wi-Fi hotspots</u> open for all • Increasing speed from 15/2 Mbps to 25/3 Mbps for new and existing internet customers • Unlimited data for home internet customers • Consumers with Xfinity internet and Xfinity voice service who fall behind on their monthly payments will have those services transferred to the Xfinity Assistance Plan for \$14.95/month with no equipment rental fee being charged. This plan will be in effect until May 13, 2020 and consumers will not be disconnected for non-payment during this time, but may have their internet speed reduced • Visit <u>https://corporate.comcast.com/covid-19</u> for updates
<u>Cox</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waiving fees on late payments and not terminating service. • New customers of their low-income internet service for families with school-aged children, Connect2Compete, will receive their first two months of service free effective March 16 through May 15 • Customers using Essential, Starter, StraightUp Internet or Connect2Compete internet plans are automatically upgraded to 50 Mbps through May 15. • Starter internet package is offered at \$19.99 through May 15 • Data usage overages are being eliminated through May 15 • Visit <u>https://www.cox.com/residential/support/coronavirus-response.html</u> for updates

Please note that as a result of COVID-19, providers may not be dispatching technicians for in-home or in-premise installations, with very limited exceptions. This means you may be unable to obtain new home phone or internet service with a provider at the moment. If you plan on requesting new service, contact the provider first to confirm whether a self-install will be possible.

<p><u>Spectrum Mobile - Charter Communications</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waiving fees on late payments and not terminating service • Public Wi-Fi hotspots open for all • <u>Free Spectrum broadband and Wi-Fi</u> for 60 days to households with children in grades K-12 and college students or educators. To get the deal, you cannot already have Spectrum broadband service at any level up to 100 Mbps. • Visit https://www.spectrum.net/support/internet/coronavirus-covid-19-information-spectrum-customers/ for updates
<p><u>Verizon</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waiving fees on late payments and not terminating service. Customers should contact Verizon to let them know they're experiencing a hardship • Waiving activation and upgrade fees when purchased through the specific channels (see website for more information) • Free international calling rates to countries defined by the Center for Disease Control as Level 3 (see website for information and exceptions) • Consumer Fios and DSL broadband internet plans have no data caps • Through April 30, Verizon will offer unlimited domestic calling to customers on limited-minute plans. • Visit https://www.verizon.com/about/news/covid-response-customers for updates

Please note that as a result of COVID-19, providers may not be dispatching technicians for in-home or in-premise installations, with very limited exceptions. This means you may be unable to obtain new home phone or internet service with a provider at the moment. If you plan on requesting new service, contact the provider first to confirm whether a self-install will be possible.

APPENDIX: WIRELESS SERVICE IN MASSACHUSETTS

Service Provider	COVID-19 Response <i>Offers active through May 13, 2020 unless otherwise noted</i>
<u>AT&T</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waiving fees on late payments and not terminating service. Customers must contact AT&T to inform them of the hardship by submitting a waiver request. • Public Wi-Fi hotspots open for all • Waiving domestic wireless plan overage charges for data, voice and text • Unlimited internet data for home internet customers • Two months of complimentary internet access through the Access from AT&T service for new customers who have at least one member of the household participating in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), National School Lunch Program or Head Start. • The timeframe to return DIRECTV, U-verse TV, or AT&T Internet equipment is extended from 21 days to 60 days • Increasing mobile hotspot data by 15GB/month for each line on an unlimited plan that includes a monthly tethering allotment. See website for more details • Visit https://about.att.com/pages/COVID-19.html for updates
<u>Boost Mobile</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complementary international calling rates from the U.S. to countries defined by the Center for Disease Control as Level 3 through April 30 • Reactivation fees for customers waived through April 30 • Customers with unlimited data plans will receive an additional 20GB of mobile hotspot on their plans through April 30 • Customers without unlimited plans will receive an additional 20GB of data on their plans through April 30 • Visit https://www.boostmobile.com/about/covid-19-response.html for updates

<p><u>Sprint</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waiving fees on late payments and not terminating service • Free international calling rates to countries defined by the Center for Disease Control as <u>Level 3</u> • Customers without unlimited plans will get 60 days of unlimited data (a minimum of two bill cycles) for free • Extra 20GB of mobile hotspot data to customers with hotspot-capable devices • Free next-day shipping for all orders on sprint.com • Visit https://www.sprint.com/en/landings/covid-19.html for updates
<p><u>T-Mobile</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waiving fees on late payments and not terminating service • All T-Mobile customers as of March 13, 2020 who have plans with data will automatically have unlimited smartphone data (excluding roaming) • More roaming access for Sprint customers on T-Mobile's network • An extra 20GB of hotspot (10GB/month for two months) for all T-Mobile postpaid and Metro by T-Mobile customers. See website for more information • Visit https://www.t-mobile.com/support/account/covid-19-updates for updates
<p><u>Verizon</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waiving fees on late payments and not terminating service. Wireless customers must fill out a <u>short form</u> to let Verizon know they are experiencing hardship • Waiving activation and upgrade fees when purchased through the specific channels (see website for more information) • Free international calling rates to countries defined by the Center for Disease Control as <u>Level 3 until 4/30</u> • Extra 15 GB of mobile hotspot data to be used between 03/25/2020 and 04/30/2020. To be eligible, you must be on a qualifying postpaid (unlimited or shared), Jetpack or prepaid plans. • Visit https://www.verizonwireless.com/support/covid-19-faqs/ for updates