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For Immediate Release

**FCC MAKES PERMANENT THE NATIONAL DEAF-BLIND EQUIPMENT
DISTRIBUTION PROGRAM**
*Successful Pilot Program for Low-Income Americans with
Hearing and Vision Loss Made Permanent*

WASHINGTON, August 4, 2016 – The Federal Communications Commission today adopted an order to make permanent its program that provides communications equipment to low-income individuals who are deaf-blind. The Commission launched the National Deaf-Blind Equipment Distribution Program (NDBEDP), also known as “iCanConnect,” as a pilot program in 2012. Since then, the program has provided up to \$10 million annually to support programs that distribute communications equipment, helping Americans with hearing and vision loss to connect with family and friends and become more independent.

Through iCanConnect, consumers who are deaf-blind and who meet income guidelines can receive free equipment designed to make telecommunications, Internet access, and advanced communications services accessible. Installation, training, and other technical support are also available. To date, thousands of Americans with hearing and vision loss have benefitted from the pilot program. Breaking down accessibility barriers for this population has afforded Americans with combined hearing and vision loss a means to enhance social interaction, acquire information, and obtain skills and training to become gainfully employed.

Today’s action, in the form of a Report and Order, uses the lessons learned over the past four years of the pilot program to adopt rules that will ensure a seamless transition to a permanent program that is efficient and effective. First, the rules maintain the program structure used in the pilot program, by which the Commission certifies one [entity](#) per state or territory to distribute equipment and provide related services. These certified entities may carry out these responsibilities either on their own or through collaborative arrangements. In addition, as was previously the case in the pilot program, a single entity can apply for certification to serve the residents of multiple states. The new rules also maintain existing certification criteria, which include expertise in the field of deaf-blindness, the ability to communicate effectively with individuals who are deaf-blind, adequate staffing and facilities, and experience with the distribution and use of communications equipment. Additionally, for the permanent program, the Commission will begin considering an entity’s administrative and financial management experience as a criteria for certification.

Today’s action also makes iCanConnect available to more consumers by extending the program to residents of the U.S. territories of Guam, Northern Marianas, and American Samoa, in addition to the 50 states, District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, for a total of 56

certified programs. The Commission has also retained requirements for income and disability eligibility and verification to participate in the program.

People who are both deaf and blind use varied methods of communication – including American Sign Language, spoken English, and braille – as well as a wide variety of communication technologies. As a result, each person has varied equipment and support needs. In order to ensure that each individual receives the equipment that is most suited to their needs, certified entities may receive reimbursement, up to their annual funding allocations, for the distribution of off-the-shelf and assistive equipment as well as for related services, which may include individualized assessments, equipment installation, and training. For the first time, the Commission will also allow reimbursement to state programs for train-the-trainer activities up to 2.5 percent of their funding allocations to address a persistent shortage of qualified staff to train deaf-blind individuals on how to use the equipment they receive.

In addition to defining the broad contours of the program, the rules adopted today:

- Continue support for national outreach to supplement local outreach efforts of the certified programs.
- Establish requirements for reimbursement claims, semiannual reports, record retention, annual audits, and other measures to ensure effective oversight of the program and to prevent waste, fraud and abuse.
- Establish performance goals and direct the development of performance measures for the program.
- Direct the establishment of a centralized database, which certified programs will use for reporting purposes and may use for generating reimbursement claims, to facilitate effective oversight and reduce administrative burdens.

Action by the Commission August 4, 2016 by Report and Order (FCC 16-101). Chairman Wheeler, Commissioners Clyburn, Rosenworcel and Pai approving. O’Rielly approving in part and concurring in part. Chairman Wheeler, Commissioners Clyburn, Rosenworcel, Pai and O’Rielly issuing separate statements.

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