

LD 2193, SP932

“An Act to Improve Access to Affordable Wireless Communications by Allowing the Public Utilities Commission to Designate Eligible Telecommunications Carriers.”

This bill helps give low-income Mainers more affordable and better access to:

- a. a healthcare provider and telemedicine helping them avoid the hospital ER,
- b. remote learning opportunities through internet hot spots, etc.,
- c. emergency first responders and other 911 services, and
- d. broadband and wireless communications to help them find or keep a job.

Many Mainers who are eligible for this service are seniors or veterans residing in remote areas of the state.

Currently Maine’s Public Utilities Commission (PUC) does not have authority to determine which federal Lifeline program eligible telecommunications companies (ETC) serve Mainers. The Lifeline program is a 40-year-old federal telecommunications program that provides eligible low-income Americans discounted broadband and wireless telecommunications service at no state to the state.

This bill reclaims Maine’s authority from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) so the PUC can now approve new qualified Lifeline ETCs to bring this service to more eligible Mainers. Maine is one of six remaining states that still allow the FCC to select which Lifeline providers serve its citizens, but the FCC has failed to act for about 12 years. Therefore, the last four years New York, Tennessee, Alabama and Virginia passed similar legislation to reclaim this authority from the federal government; Maine can do the same.

What this means is that Maine’s Public Utilities Commission will have authority to start considering and approving new qualified Lifeline ETCs, which providers, that it approves to offer this service to eligible Mainers. It is needed because currently fewer than 20 percent of eligible Mainers participate in the program. If other states are an indicator, Maine’s low participation rate is due to the limited number of providers which likely focus their service in only a few areas of the state.

In summary, the bi-partisan support for this legislation reflects the need for more eligible low-income Mainers to have affordable access to broadband and wireless communications. Moreover, as Maine continues to build out its statewide telecommunications infrastructure more qualified telecommunications providers are needed; this bill helps address this need. It gives Maine’s PUC authority to approve additional Lifeline ETCs to bring affordable telecommunications services to lower income Mainers who need these essential services.

Statement by former Sen. Judson Hill for February 13, 2024, Maine Senate Energy, Utilities and Technology hearing

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LD 2193

Statement of Sen. Judson Hill attached.