



## **AARP VT H.216 Comments on Proposed Changes to Lifeline Program**

AARP VT welcomes the opportunity to submit comments regarding the pending changes in eligibility for Vermont's Lifeline Program contained in H. 216. AARP VT has approximately 130,000 members, many of whom are living on fixed incomes and who reside throughout the state. The affordability and the availability of essential services such as basic voice service and broadband access to the Internet are key issues for AARP's members. AARP fully supports state policies that further the goal of achieving a reliable, advanced telecommunications network that is affordable and accessible to all consumers, regardless of their age, income and location.

AARP is aware that eligibility for the federal Lifeline program is scheduled to change. Participation in the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, or the National School Lunch Program's Free Lunch program will no longer qualify a Vermont consumer for subsidized telephone service under the federal Lifeline program. H.216 would also eliminate any state eligibility criteria for the state Lifeline benefit that does not align with the new federal eligibility criteria, including eliminating the eligibility criteria specifically for low-income Vermonters aged 65+. Some customers who previously qualified due to their participation in LIHEAP, TANF, and or school lunch program may be able to continue participation in the Lifeline program under a different qualifier. Other consumers, however, whose eligibility has depended in the past exclusively on their participation in one of these



programs, will lose Lifeline subsidies. AARP is concerned in particular for the slightly more than 2000 current Lifeline beneficiaries who are aged 65+ and how they will be impacted. Older Vermonters are far more likely to sign up for seasonal fuel assistance benefits (LIHEAP) than other support programs, such as food stamps (called SNAP or 3Squares in Vermont). AARP believes that an extra effort needs to be made by the state to assure we not only do not lose more 65+ beneficiaries from the program, but that we gain new eligible beneficiaries in this category as well.

While AARP is disappointed to see eligibility options decrease we understand the necessity of the revisions to the state program to mirror the revisions to the federal program. Having state eligibility requirements that do not match federal requirements could increase the administrative and program costs of the state program. That said, AARP is very concerned about the low Lifeline participation levels in Vermont, especially by low-income older Vermonters who need to stay connected to emergency services, family and medical providers for their health and well-being.

AARP urges the Committee to require the state to undertake substantial outreach and consumer education regarding these changes in eligibility so that: (1) those consumers who will be losing Lifeline support (and who are not eligible through their participation in other programs) are adequately notified and can budget their limited income accordingly (or if possible, obtain eligibility through a different qualifying program); and (2) adequate notice is given to those consumers



who are now, for the first time, eligible to participate in the Lifeline Program. Moreover, the Department of Children and Families should be required to report back to the Legislature annually on the number of Vermonters enrolled in Lifeline, broken out by age categories, and also the efforts made to gain new enrollees.

AARP fully supports the state's Lifeline Program and stands ready to assist the state with consumer education outreach efforts so that consumers can benefit fully from the Program.

Respectfully submitted,

Philene Taormina, Director of Advocacy, AARP VT