March 21, 2020

**Testimony to Senate Finance Committee Hearing “Economic Support for Alaskans Impacted by COVID-19”**

Good morning Madam Chair and members of the committee. My name is Christine O’Connor and I am the executive director of Alaska Telecom Association. With me on the line today, and available for questions are:

- From Alaska Communications: Heather Cavanaugh, Director of Corporate Communications, and Rick Benken, VP of Network Strategy, Engineering, & Operations
- From Arctic Slope Telephone Association Cooperative: Jens Laipenieks, CEO, and Luke Middle, Chief Technology Officer
- From GCI: Tyson Gallagher, Government Relations & Policy
- From MTA: Michael Burke, CEO

This morning I would like to give you a brief update on the status of Alaska’s telecom networks in light of the difficult circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 virus.

Our goal during this time is to keep our employees safe and our customers connected. Alaska’s telecom providers are following guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, as well as guidance from Speaker Edgmon and the Bush Caucus advising against travel to villages, or at a minimum consultation with local leaders.¹

In thinking about the capabilities of Alaska’s telecom networks, it is important to understand that they use different technologies which have different capabilities. In our more populated areas, the connection to the internet is an undersea fiber. Fiber is a robust connection, it’s scalable and allows relatively quick increases in response to demand. Over 80% of Alaskans are served by fiber backhaul. Regions without access to fiber middle mile may be connected to the internet by microwave and/or satellite connections. These technologies have more limited capacity, so local systems are calibrated for available bandwidth.

A recurring concern I’ve heard recently is about capacity, can the networks handle the influx of traffic from telework, distance education, quarantine, and people staying home to protect others through social isolation? Yes. The networks are handling the increased load at this time. To give a little perspective around this issue, Alaska Communications has shared that the increase in traffic they are seeing now is actually less than what they experienced when the last 2 versions of Call of Duty® were released. The networks are performing well.

¹ On March 16, 2020 Speaker Edgmon, Representative Foster, Representative Lincoln, and Representative Zulkosky released a letter to Alaskans, “urging each of you to reconsider any non-essential travel, especially to rural communities. If you plan to travel to a village, we encourage you to reach out to local leaders, comply with conditions they have in place, consider self-quarantine, and always self-monitor for known symptoms of COVID-19.” ATA members recognize the importance of this guidance from the Bush Caucus and are communicating with village leaders regarding potential travel.
All providers are monitoring usage levels. Monitoring network performance is standard practice to ensure proper traffic management, detect and resolve problems before they impact users, and minimize disruptions as quickly as possible. These things are baked in to how we operate networks and help ensure Alaskans remain connected.

ATA members are working in partnership with communities to expand access to residents. In the Matsu, MTA is working with the cities and Borough to create “drive-in hotspots” so people can access the internet from their cars, both providing access to those who may be lacking and supporting the social distancing that is so important to everyone’s safety.

We recognize that this situation is bringing severe economic burdens to many Alaskans. ATA’s members have committed to the Keep Americans Connected Pledge, which includes commitments to:

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 any American who needs them.

In addition to these measures, families needing greater assistance may qualify for discounted internet service through the Lifeline program. More information on this program is available on providers’ website or by calling their local provider.

We are actively working with all anchor institutions in our areas on what they need and how we can support them in the short term and long term. Also, we are keeping in close contact with other utilities in our areas and coordinating our efforts to the maximum extent possible. We are coordinating with the federal response teams and keeping them apprised, as well as various state agencies working on this crisis.

We are working with Rural Health Care program participants to increase bandwidth for health care facilities, as needed, at no charge. The length of time to implement increases will depend on Federal Communication Commission guidance and their waiver of certain rules which currently define bandwidth through Sep 30, 2020.

The other most frequent question we’ve received in the past week is about how we can help while schools are closed. ATA’s member companies, including those on the line, have made commitments to support students and teachers. ASTAC is providing credits for increased usage, Alaska Communications is providing free service, GCI is providing free service or upgrades, and MTA is offering free upgrades. Every provider is working with school districts throughout the state to identify solutions that fit their schools and the networks that are available. ATA is coordinating with Commissioner Johnson and the Alaska Council of School Administrators to do everything we can to help kids keep learning.

We assure you and all Alaskans that every telecommunications provider in Alaska is responding and is committed to keeping our state, our communities, and our neighbors connected.