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WHAT THE INDUSTRY READS FIRST

Digital Divide: Agencies Pushing ACP Re-funding, HUD Stepping Up

Despite uncertainty surrounding the Affordable Connectivity Program's future, government agencies are continuing to push more sign-ups for the broadband subsidy initiative. On Monday, the **FCC** and the **U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development** announced a formalized partnership to promote the program among federal housing assistance recipients.

FCC Commissioners are beating the ACP drum, with *Geoffrey Starks* joining HUD Secretary *Marcia Fudge* in Seattle Monday to announce the partnership. On Tuesday, FCC Chairwoman *Jessica Rosenworcel* heads to Salisbury University on Maryland's Eastern Shore along with Maryland Governor *Wes Moore* to highlight the impact of ACP in the state and to stress that more federal funding is needed to keep the program running. So far, Congress has not addressed re-funding ACP, which is expected to run out of money sometime next year.

State broadband offices are also closely following the status of ACP, which has more than 20 million households enrolled thus far. "I really do implore you to talk to your congressional delegations and get that program refunded. It is critical, not just to our goals of connecting all Americans, but to your goals of ensuring that the investments you make have the greatest return," *Jade Piros de Carvalho*, Director of Broadband Development for the Kansas Department of Commerce, said last week during a Fiber Connect panel.

Across the country, there's an estimated 48.6 million

households eligible for ACP according to Columbia University's Center on Policy and Social Policy. In Piros de Carvalho's home state of Kansas, only about 24% of eligible households are subscribing to ACP. In Louisiana, about half of potential eligible households are taking advantage of ACP.

"This summer, we actually started to lobby and use our position as a state office to go and discuss this with our congressional members and our senators in D.C. We had a sign-on letter that had 100 different organizations, ranging from the **Urban League** to all of the ISPs in the state to our Louisiana Association of Business and Industry, that we're all part of this letter that was urging our congressional delegation to look at this and make sure they consider it next spring," said Thomas Tyler of Connect LA. "I would encourage you all to reach out to your broadband offices to see if they're thinking of doing something like that because it's very powerful when you have something that such a variety of different organizations are sponsoring."

As for the new FCC-HUD partnership, this fits in Starks' legacy as a commissioner. The "Your Home, Your Internet Pilot Program," which seeks to get more folks in housing assistance signed up for free or low-cost internet, was a signature Starks effort. Under the new agreement, HUD will increase outreach activities for ACP, including at enrollment events at public housing with FCC sign-up stations. Both agencies will work to decrease the time it takes for recipients of HUD to sign up for the program and collaborate on messaging. HUD clarified that

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receiving benefits through ACP will not impact the amount of rent that HUD-assisted tenants pay.

HUD officials were also at Fiber Connect last week talking to ISPs about other ways the agency can assist in the quest to bring broadband to everyone. *Dina Lehmann-Kim*, program manager for HUD's digital inclusion program ConnectHomeUSA, talked up how housing assistance recipients could help fill the labor shortage gap many are concerned about. She noted that about 40% of heads of households are between 24-49, prime work ages, and many are also women.

Also attending the conference was *Erik Pechuekonis*, a Community Planning and Development Specialist who works with HUD's Section 108 Loan Guarantee Program. The principal objective of the committee development block grant program is to provide decent housing, suitable living environments and expand economic opportunities. While the loan program has been around for a while, HUD is just now looking to use it for broadband purposes, including loans to for-profit businesses, particularly businesses that focus on broadband and technology, as well as for acquisition, construction, reconstruction, rehabilitation, or installation of public facilities and improvements. "We can also function as a gap filler. So, if you don't get quite enough grant funding, we can step in and fill that role as well," Pechuekonis said.

PILLAI LEAVING ALTICE USA

Altice USA's EVP Chief Technology and Information Officer *Pragash Pillai* is going to leave the company at the end of the year to pursue the next chapter of his career. It's a move that's been in the works for some time. "Since late last year, Pragash Pillai has been discussing with me his future plans and his desire to one day lead a company," Altice USA CEO *Dennis Mathew* said in a Monday memo to employees obtained by CFX. "For those of you who know Pragash well, he has deep technical acumen, passion for his people, and personal diligence to drive the business forward, and the time has come where he has decided to pursue this next chapter of his career." *Luciano Ramos* has been promoted to EVP, Chief Technology & Information Officer, reporting to Mathew, while Pillai moves to Senior Advisor to the CEO. Ramos joined Altice earlier this year and previously led the Network Engineering and Technology Development group at **Rogers**. Mathews announced that he's hired *Nate Edwards* as EVP, Field Operations, which fits with his vision of creating a structure with two distinct groups—CTIO and Field Operations. Edwards spent 24 years at **AT&T** and the last four at **Lumen Technologies**, most recently as Head of Enterprise Delivery and Operations. Mathew praised the two and also threw accolades at Pillai, who he said led the charge to deploy fiber networks that

enabled the delivery of 8 Gbps symmetrical fiber service and drove its DOCSIS 3.1 market upgrades. There will be a chance to give Pillai well wishes in Denver in October. He's slated to be inducted into the **Cable TV Pioneers** on Oct 16 at its annual banquet at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts.

ACA CONNECTS SHAKE-UP

It's been a little over a year since *Grant Spellmeyer* took on the role of **ACA Connects** CEO, and the organization looks fairly different, at least when it comes to staff. Several long-time association employees are no longer at ACAC, with VP, Communications *Ted Hearn* the most recent exit. Hearn's handle on **X**, formerly **Twitter**, switched from @TedatACA to @TedatPolicyBand on Thursday. Members and reporters used to seeing his email around 5:30am ET every weekday morning with the ACA Connects Media Sweep, a round-up of news stories of interest, may have noticed the missive is now being sent from a generic ACA Connects email. And Hearn's missing from the ACAC staff page. He's not alone. *Caroline Persinger*, the association's grassroots manager, is also gone, as is ACAC Senior Director of Administration & Finance *Karen Yochum*, who started at the 30-year-old organization in its earliest days alongside former CEO *Matt Polka*. VP, Regulatory Affairs *Mike Jacobs* departed in July and joined **Lumen** as Assistant General Counsel, Federal Regulatory Affairs. Government Affairs SVP *Ross Lieberman* left the organization last summer and then joined member company **Hotwire Communications** as SVP, Government Affairs. ACA Connects said it doesn't comment on employee departures. As for Hearn, he still has that reporter mindset, sending out multiple news stories on his @TedatPolicyBand handle and updating his LinkedIn to say publisher of Policy Band. Hearn, who declined to comment for this story, started with ACA Connects in March of 2009 after serving as Washington News Editor for *Multichannel News* from 1994 to 2009. Another longtime DC association communications exec who also spent time as a trade reporter and often battled against Hearn and ACAC's positions on retransmission consent and broadcast matters is *Dennis Wharton*. Wharton retired as **NAB's** EVP of Communications in 2020, but he still keeps an eye on what's going on in the industry. Alerted of Hearn's departure, he said: "Ted's got an encyclopedic knowledge of the media biz and a Rolodex of reporters who call on him for insight on policy and regulation that's a mile long. ACA will be hard-pressed to fill Ted's shoes with anyone that comes close to matching his skills." We suspect he won't be out of the ballgame long (Hearn can be reached at tedhearn@gmail.com). As for who is at ACA Connects still, *John Higginbotham*, who was promoted by Polka to COO in 2021 after serving for one year as EVP, Membership & Finance, is still in his role, as are *Tomeika Slappy* (Assistant to the President & CEO),

Nathan Penrod (Digital Media Specialist), Stacey Leech (Senior Director of Meetings & Industry Affairs) and Brian Hurley, who was promoted to Chief Regulatory Counsel following Lieberman's departure. In June, *Bill Tortoriello* was tapped as Director, Regulatory Affairs. He previously worked with Spellmeyer at **USCellular**, where he was Director, Regulatory Policy. Spellmeyer was VP, Government Affairs at USCellular before joining ACAC, becoming the association's second-ever CEO following Polka, who retired last year after 25 years as its head.

WBD READIES RSN TRANSITIONS

It's been less than a month since **Warner Bros. Discovery** made its [exit from the RSN business](#) official, and where some of those RSNs could be headed is becoming clearer. A *Sports Business Journal* report revealed **WBD Sports** is [set to sell](#) its Pittsburgh and Houston RSNs to some of the teams in those respective markets. WBD Sports already struck an agreement with **Fenway Sports Group** to take control of **AT&T SportsNet Pittsburgh**, with the deal expected to close within the next several weeks. The Pirates, however, "are still considering cutting a deal with Fenway Sports Group to remain on a Pittsburgh-based RSN with the Penguins," but also might hand the rights to **MLB**. For Houston, WBD Sports is in talks with the Astros and Rockets for the two franchises to take over **AT&T SportsNet Southwest**. While not as imminent of a timeline, the deal is expected to be finalized before the start of the **NBA** season in late October. **AT&T SportsNet Rocky Mountain** seems to be heading toward closing down, but **Altitude Sports**—which has the rights to the Nuggets and Avalanche—has inquired about bringing the Rockies on. SBJ states another RSN in the Colorado market could be in play, as is MLB.

COX NOW PACKAGING MOBILE, INTERNET TOGETHER

Cox is the latest cable provider to pair together its mobile and broadband offering for a cheaper rate. Customers that previously were able to purchase a 250 Mbps broadband plan for \$69.99/month will now be able to sign up for the same plan for \$55/month with Cox Mobile. That \$14.99/month savings is also available on Cox's 100 Mbps, 500 Mbps and 1 Gig plans, according to the company's website. The discounted pricing will last for a 24-month promotional period.

SMARTMATIC ALLOWED TO INCLUDE MORE IN NEWSMAX SUIT

Smartmatic's defamation case against **Newsmax** is being allowed to move forward with an amended complaint with 26 on-air and online statements from the network that weren't included in Smartmatic's original filings. Delaware Supreme Court Judge *Eric Davis* ultimately determined that although the state's statute of limitations has lapsed for defamation

claims when it comes to the included statements, they strongly support claims made in the initial complaint. Depositions in the case have been scheduled to begin in September and run through November. Davis also oversaw **Dominion Voting Systems'** defamation suit against **Fox News**, one ultimately settled for more than \$787 million.

SCRIPPS CONTINUES OTA ENHANCEMENTS WITH TABLO

Scripps added another chapter to its Free TV Project. After acquiring the Canadian manufacturer **Nuvyyo** for \$14 million in 2022, Scripps is rolling out a new version of Nuvyyo's **Tablo** product for \$99.95. It's the first consumer technology device to enable whole-home viewing, recording of OTA broadcast programming and a selection of FAST channels without a subscription. The device works by pairing with a TV antenna and sends a live TV signal to smart devices, which allows users to view live broadcast TV from any location within their home. Tablo comes with over 50 hours of built-in recording storage and supports most connected TV platforms such as Amazon Fire TV and Roku. Customers can also purchase the Tablo Total System which comes with a 35-mile indoor TV antenna for \$109.95.

T-MOBILE REDUCING HEADCOUNT BY APPROXIMATELY 7%

T-Mobile announced last week that it is cutting jobs across the company, reducing the size of the company by just under 7%. In an email to employees, CEO *Mike Sievert* said the impact will be mostly felt in the corporate and back-office segments of the business, but some technology roles will also be cut. Retail and consumer care will be untouched. Impacted positions will mostly be those that are duplicative of other roles or don't fit with T-Mobile's ongoing priorities. "What it takes to attract and retain customers is materially more expensive than it was just a few quarters ago. We've been out-running this trend by accelerating merger synergies, and building our high-speed Internet business faster than expected, and out-performing in a few other areas," he said. "However, it is clear that doing everything we are doing and just doing it faster is not enough to deliver on these changing customer expectations going forward." The plan is to have all notifications complete by the end of September, and T-Mobile expects to incur a pre-tax charge of about \$450 million in 3Q23 related to the workforce reduction.

PEOPLE

Charter upped *Meg Hall* from GVP, Mobile & Enterprise to SVP, Corporate Software. Hall will oversee the systems and teams behind ordering, provisioning, telemetry, mobile, corporate and desktop systems. She'll report to EVP, Software Development and IT *Jake Perlman*.