



Oregon Citizens' Utility Board

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**Testimony of Samuel Pastrick
Regarding HB 2507
Before the House Committee on Economic Recovery & Prosperity**

Chair Lively, Vice Chairs Cate and Kropf, members of the Committee:

For the record, my name is Samuel Pastrick. I'm the Advocacy and Development Manager at Oregon Citizens' Utility Board (CUB). CUB is a membership-based 501(c)3 nonprofit consumer advocacy organization that represents and advocates for the broad interests of residential energy and telecommunications utility customers. I am pleased to submit this testimony in support of HB 2507 and encourage the Committee's swift movement toward passage.

HB 2507 represents two minor, though critical, changes to Oregon statute governing the Oregon Telephone Assistance Program (OTAP). The first change would clarify the Oregon Public Utility Commission's (PUC) authority to manage the program, independent of the federal government, to better meet the evolving communication needs of economically vulnerable Oregonians. The second change would simply extend the program's current sunset of 2023 to 2030.

The Oregon Legislature established a Residential Service Protection Fund in 1987 to, among other policy goals, create OTAP as a state-based counterpart to the federal Lifeline Program. OTAP and Lifeline help Oregon households with low incomes pay for their phone or internet access service from traditional telecommunications utilities and certain wireless providers.

For decades, the Oregon Public Utility Commission has expertly managed OTAP and, for the purpose of streamlining assistance, also handled verification processes for the federal Lifeline program. Lifeline and OTAP have and continue to work in concert with one another to furnish bill payment assistance to Oregonians in need of financial assistance.

At the same time, federal policy goals do not always align with Oregon's policy goals. A discrete example is declining support for voice (traditional, wireless, and internet-based phone) service from the Lifeline program. In just a matter of months, Lifeline will no longer offer support for voice services to OTAP eligible households.

Oregon has taken a different approach by continuing to offer support for traditional and wireless voice options, in addition to internet access services. CUB supports this policy decision because it is in the best interest of residential customers.

Notwithstanding pending or potential policy changes to the federal Lifeline program, widespread and affordable phone and internet access services are essential for education, employment, social engagement, civic participation, and medical care. This is especially true in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and even more so for households with low incomes.

The Oregon Legislature has already recognized this point, and its relationship to OTAP. Last summer, the Emergency Board unanimously approved CUB's proposal to allocate \$3.5 million federal COVID-19 relief dollars to bolster OTAP. These monies increased the monthly OTAP subsidy to \$12, which resulted in increased program enrollment.

Oregonians are hurting. The economic impacts of COVID-19 may persist for some time. In a time of crisis, particularly a global pandemic, households with low incomes suffer the first and greatest, and are least positioned for recovery. This is why the state's ongoing investment in and promotion of OTAP is so important.

Once again: CUB urges the Committee's support for HB 2507.

Respectfully,

Samuel Pastrick / samuel@oregoncub.org