



Virginia Board for People with Disabilities

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Virginia Board for People with Disabilities

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Virginia Board for People with Disabilities rejects FCC Chairman Ajit Pai's claims regarding net neutrality for individuals with disabilities

Richmond, Va. – On Thursday, November 30, Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Chairman Ajit Pai, speaking at Project Goal's Conference on Aging and Technology in Washington, D.C., [endorsed the claim](#) that current federal net neutrality regulations are harmful to the elderly, sick, and people with disabilities.

The Virginia Board for People with Disabilities rejects this position and strongly urges all five FCC Commissioners, and the citizens of Virginia, to carefully consider the true impact a repeal of these regulations would have on the disability community.

Unrestricted access to the Internet has been revolutionary and life-changing for the disability community over the past three decades and the impact of internet-based services and supports on the quality of life for individuals with disabilities has been immeasurable. Numerous advancements in person-to-person communications, healthcare resource availability, at-home supports, and employment opportunities have led to game-changing improvements in the financial security, employability, socialization, and general well-being for individuals with disabilities, who collectively represent one of America's most vulnerable and under-served communities.

Even with these advancements, unemployment remains endemic in the disability community and access to services and supports remains a critical problem in every state. As Virginia's Developmental Disability Council, the Board is keenly aware of these issues, as are its

counterparts in the 55 other U.S. states and territories.

While the Internet existed for many years without the explicit net neutrality regulations currently under review, it was only after major last-mile Internet Services Providers began seeking loopholes and publically exploiting the generally neutral existing framework that it became necessary to formally enshrine those regulations. The proposal to undo that work threatens to undo years, if not decades, of advances in critical quality of life areas for individuals with disabilities.

The argument that the repeal of net neutrality will benefit people with disabilities, the sick, and the elderly rests primarily on the purported benefits of paid-prioritization for select online resources, such as telemedicine. While the Board supports efforts by Internet providers to enhance and improve these services whenever possible, [current FCC regulations do not hinder such improvements](#). Capabilities to provide services to individuals with disabilities have already received carve-outs under current regulatory guidelines. Several types of communications services, for example, including telemedicine, may already be, and often are, prioritized to increase speed and lower latency under existing rules pertaining to non-Broadband Internet Access Service (non-BIAS) data services.

Furthermore, a repeal of Net neutrality regulations would pose two threats to individuals with disabilities: First, it is likely that access to critical resources and supports for individuals with disabilities would be threatened in favor of paid-prioritization deals with select service providers, leading to massive and potentially unsustainable issues in capability and continuity of care. Major Internet service providers, including several of those operating in Virginia, have already begun walking back prior public commitments to neutral access for all. It is also likely that access to at least some non-prioritized services could be cut entirely, particularly in rural areas, where these resources are already limited, and where there are already shortages of competing broadband providers from which to choose.

Secondly, the Board is aware of no model in which the absence of a net neutrality framework produced lower costs or significant improvements in services, particularly on an international level, where the effects of neutrality-free models are visible and measurable in a number of other countries. Instead of lowering costs, repeal of these regulations would likely lead to higher costs for consumers either directly, through increased access fees, or indirectly, through increased fees for individual services and websites, as companies attempt to adjust to increase costs imposed upon them by ISPs for continued or preferred access to consumers.

Higher costs for Internet access would disproportionately affect people with disabilities. Unemployment and poverty are critical problems throughout the disability community: [only 37 percent of working-age individuals with disabilities are employed](#), less than half the 81 percent of working-age people without disabilities who have jobs. Access to services and supports remain hugely problematic, with many individuals waiting years and, in some cases, decades, for public assistance via waiting lists that are frequently thousands of people long. As a result of these issues, people with disabilities in Virginia, and throughout the United States, face a

myriad of financial challenges; many of them seemingly overwhelming. Any move that would increase the cost of Internet access, a vital lifeline for many people with disabilities, would be harmful to those individuals and could threaten to price them out of the market entirely.

While the debate regarding net neutrality is nearing its deadline and the arguments both for and against are often buried in deeply technical rhetoric, the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities firmly rejects the assertion that a repeal would work to the benefit of individuals with disabilities. In fact, a repeal of net neutrality would have negative consequences for many people with disabilities by increasing the costs of accessing internet-based services and supports, including communication services and telehealth services, making it likely that any repeal would be *more* harmful to the disability community than the general population as a whole.

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