

Statement of the Communications Workers of America (CWA) to House Committee on Energy and Commerce, Subcommittee on Communications and Technology hearing

March 5, 2025

The Communications Workers of America (“CWA”) represents working people in telecommunications, media, information technology, public service, manufacturing, airlines, and other fields. Since 2006, through its “Speed Matters” campaign, CWA has advocated in support of efforts to help bring affordable, high speed Internet to all Americans while creating quality jobs.¹

CWA members are broadband technicians and support representatives at many of the nation's large and small broadband providers who hear from customers daily about the problems of limited bandwidth over outdated or inadequate technologies. Through their union, CWA members advocate in support of public investment and oversight to support universal access to high quality internet access for all Americans. CWA advocated for robust broadband deployment funding in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to definitively address the digital divide and find common ground across partisan divides.²

As states developed their plans for the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program, CWA members across the country brought their technical knowledge to state broadband offices, sharing insights on local deployment challenges and different broadband delivery methods. CWA local leaders held hundreds of meetings with state officials, undertook community outreach to raise the profile of broadband investments, and worked together with

¹ CWA, “Speed Matters: CWA's Campaign for High-Speed, Universal Internet Access for Jobs and Economic Growth,” (Oct. 1, 2006), https://cwa-union.org/news/entry/speed_matters_cwas_campaign_for_high-speed_universal_internet_access_for_jo.

² See CWA, “CWA Statement on the Passage of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act,” (Nov. 6, 2025), <https://cwa-union.org/news/releases/cwa-statement-on-passage-of-infrastructure-investment-and-jobs-act>; CWA's comments in response to NTIA's Notice and Request for Comment Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act Implementation, Docket No. 220105-0002, RIN 0660-ZA33, NTIA-2021-0002 (Feb. 4, 2022), https://downloads.regulations.gov/NTIA-2021-0002-0213/attachment_1.pdf.

industry to promote investment in high quality training programs.³ As of February 2025, CWA members served on 9 state and local broadband advisory boards.⁴

Fiber is the best performing technology of today and tomorrow

CWA members know from on-the-job training and experience that fiber-optic broadband is superior to other technologies. In 2022, CWA commissioned a report from an engineering firm to compare the costs and quality of fixed wireless versus fiber-optic broadband technologies for rural communities. The report found that “fiber represents the most fiscally prudent expenditure of public funds in most circumstances because of its longevity and technical advantages.”⁵ CTC’s cost analysis of fiber and fixed wireless deployments found that while fiber’s upfront capital costs are higher than those of fixed wireless in many circumstances, the total cost of ownership over 30 years is comparable for fiber and fixed wireless, and fiber provides much higher quality service.⁶

Similarly, low-earth-orbit satellite service has limited bandwidth – as more users connect to a given satellite network, speeds drop, making large-scale adoption impractical.⁷ Satellite also has inconsistent speeds and inadequate upload speeds to meet the current definition of

³ Masha Abarinova, “With BEAD looming, workforce safety remains a big problem,” Fierce Network (Oct. 10, 2024), <https://www.fierce-network.com/broadband/bead-looming-workforce-safety-remains-big-problem>; Labor Tribune, “Missouri adopts CWA Labor standards for \$1.7B broadband expansion program,” (Jan. 15, 2024); Tucson.com, “Arizona opinion: Broadband buildout requires good local workforce,” (Apr. 10, 2024), https://tucson.com/opinion/column/arizona-opinion-broadband-buildout-requires-good-local-workforce/article_ea4b53fe-f5b4-11ee-8fac-df4da81be811.html; Press Release, “CTC Partners with CWA to Implement Communications Workers of America Broadband JATC-Upper Midwest Apprenticeship Program,” CTC (Sep. 11, 2024), <https://www.goctc.com/ctc-partners-with-cwa-for-apprenticeship-program>; Sean Buckley, “Lighting up the next-generation fiber broadband workforce,” Lightwaveonline (July 18, 2024), <https://www.lightwaveonline.com/broadband/article/55089280/lighting-up-the-next-generation-fiber-broadband-workforce>.

⁴ As of February 2025, CWA members served on state and local broadband taskforces in Arizona, Idaho, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Wisconsin.

⁵ CTC Technology, “Fixed Wireless Technologies and Their Suitability for Broadband Delivery”, 49-51 (June 2022), <https://www.benton.org/sites/default/files/FixedWireless.pdf>.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Newsweek, “Satellite May Sound Like the Future, But it Could Stick Broadband Users in the Past” (September 6, 2023), www.newsweek.com/satellite-may-sound-like-future-it-could-stick-broadband-users-past-1824701.

broadband.⁸ Starlink satellites have a short lifespan of approximately five years, requiring continuous spending on launches, maintenance, and user equipment upgrades just to keep the current service running.⁹

A well-trained workforce and quality networks go hand-in-hand

CWA advocates for long-term sustainability in the telecommunications industry when it comes to investments in infrastructure *and* investments in people. In creating the BEAD program, Congress recognized that a well-trained workforce and good jobs go hand-in-hand with a well-built network that will be a good investment of public dollars.

Unfortunately, in recent decades, the telecommunications industry has engaged in a race to the bottom to cut costs and increase profits through union-busting and outsourcing of construction to low-road contractors that fail to pay living wages or properly train workers. Contractors that lack proper training and safety protocols can endanger workers and the public, and affect service quality. Telecommunications work has considerable safety implications. CWA members have seen issues like ungrounded strands causing electrocution risk to workers and the public, and contractors using weak bolts to secure heavy cables, increasing the likelihood that cables will fall and injure the public. In a nationwide survey of CWA technician members, respondents reported that contractors cause quality problems leading to higher costs (96%), service quality problems for customers (81%), and safety risks for workers or the public (57%).¹⁰ Unsafe work both endangers the public and can cause outages, service quality issues, and network resiliency issues. For example, the October 2007 Guejito Fire in California, which was linked to 40 firefighter injuries and two fatalities, was ignited when a Cox Communications lashing wire came into contact with an SDG&E 12kV overhead conductor. After the fire, San

⁸ Starlink reports average upload speeds of 5 to 20 Mbps, below what is necessary for modern broadband applications, <https://www.starlink.com/legal/documents/DOC-1400-28829-70> (last accessed February 16, 2025).

⁹ Space Magazine, Starlink satellites: Facts, tracking and impact on astronomy (January 30, 2025), <https://www.space.com/spacex-starlink-satellites.html>.

¹⁰ Communications Workers of America, "AT&T's Web of Subcontractors: Building Next Generation Networks with Low-Wage Labor," October 2020, <https://cwa-union.org/sites/default/files/20201005attsubcontractorreport.pdf>.

Diego Gas and Electric (SDG&E) documented a 3.3-foot clearance between the SDG&E conductors and Cox lines, which violated state safety requirements. Similarly, after the October 2020 Silverado Fire in Orange County which forced 60,000 people to evacuate their homes, Southern California Edison reported that a lashing wire that was attached to an underbuilt telecommunication line may have caused the ignition of the fire.¹¹

Work conditions also affect the ability to keep a stable and well-trained workforce. Wages in the telecommunications sector have stagnated, particularly for low-wage workers. Productivity growth is a standard benchmark for wage growth, and typical wage growth in the telecommunications industry has consistently lagged behind productivity growth in the economy as a whole.¹² The lowest-wage telecommunications workers (at the 10th percentile in the wage distribution) have seen inflation-adjusted wages fall 0.3% annually since the 1970s, while the median telecommunications worker wage increased just 0.4% annually, compared with 1.8% annual productivity growth in that period.¹³ During that time period, union density also declined steeply, from the majority (roughly 60%) of telecommunications workers represented by a union in the 1970s to about 11% today.¹⁴

Wage stagnation translates into difficulty hiring and retaining workers, and creates problems for the stability and health of the telecommunications labor market. For example, a 2022 survey of NTCA-member companies found that 58% of respondents are experiencing a longer average recruiting time for new hires in hourly positions compared to three years

¹¹ Joint Reply Comments of Communications Workers of America, District 9 and the Coalition of California Utility Employees on “One-Touch Make-Ready” Proposal, April 28, 2021, Order Instituting Investigation into the Creation of a Shared Database or Statewide Census of Utility Poles and Conduit in California, I.17-06-027, And Related Matter, R.17-06-028, pp. 8-9.

¹² John Schmitt and Jori Kandra, Economic Policy Institute, Decades of Slow Wage Growth for Telecommunications Workers (Oct. 2020), <https://www.epi.org/publication/decades-of-slow-wage-growth-for-telecommunication-workers/>.

¹³ Id.; Telecommunications Interagency Working Group: Recommendations to Address Workforce Needs, Submitted to the United States Congress, January 13, 2023, <https://www.fcc.gov/document/telecom-interagency-working-group-report-workforce-needs>.

¹⁴ Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Union Members - 2024,” <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/union2.pdf>, January 28, 2025.

earlier.¹⁵ In a survey of CWA technicians who left employment at AT&T between 2016 and 2021 – often due to the job cuts by the telecom giant – 74% stated they would be interested in returning to the broadband workforce if a good job were available. As one technician stated, “There are no good jobs in the broadband sector. Companies want people with 10-15 years experience and want to pay them \$15/hr.” Another technician stated, “too often experienced telecom individuals are underpaid and overworked... [until companies change this] the best talent will always look elsewhere.”¹⁶

We cannot expect to have the workforce needed to build and maintain our networks if we do not create good jobs that will attract and retain a well-trained workforce. The BEAD program recognizes this problem. In creating BEAD, Congress required that states must consider an applicant’s labor practices. NTIA provided further guidance for states on what could be included in that category, and states were given the flexibility to adapt their program to the specific workforce demands in their state. While wages have stagnated for telecom technicians in the past few decades due to the factors discussed above, Congress recognized that BEAD was an opportunity to incentivize employers to invest more in training and career pathways for technicians, and create the sustainable workforce that will ultimately be necessary to keep Americans connected.

States have put significant time and resources into BEAD and are now ready to make awards. There is broad bipartisan support against any pause or overhaul of the BEAD program.

Across the country, 30 states are already reviewing and accepting bids for work, and four have already finished granting and have received full approval for their programs.¹⁷ States have

¹⁵ NTCA, 2022 Compensation + Benefits Report, <https://www.ntca.org/publications/human-resources/2022-compensation-benefits-report> (last visited Jan. 5, 2023)

¹⁶ Communications Workers of America, Characteristics of the Broadband Labor Market, https://cwa-union.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/cwa_broadband_labor_market_slide_deck.pdf.

¹⁷ NTIA, “BEAD Progress Dashboard,” <https://www.ntia.gov/funding-programs/internet-all/broadband-equity-access-and-deployment-bead-program/progress-dashboardprogress-dashboard>

invested tremendous time and resources into planning the best and most cost-effective solutions for their communities, and the flexibility of the program has meant that they have been able to tailor their program to their needs. Broadband offices have hired staff, mapped out service areas, completed challenge processes, and worked with industry. Internet service providers have also invested significant time and effort to engage state-by-state on BEAD proposals and companies have planned their capital investments to dovetail with BEAD opportunities.

There is broad bipartisan consensus among state officials that BEAD awards and deployments should be allowed to move forward. At an American Enterprise Institute webinar on the BEAD program, state broadband officials from Louisiana, Virginia, and Colorado cautioned against a pause and significant overhaul of the BEAD program.¹⁸ This sentiment was shared by Sens. Dan Sullivan, Shelly Capito and Jacky Rosen during Howard Lutnick's confirmation hearing as the Secretary of Commerce in January.¹⁹

Every state participated in the program and received approval from NTIA on their initial proposals. States are now on the cusp of getting shovels in the ground. Pressing pause on the program now would be a tremendous waste of resources. While NTIA could provide waivers to states that want to pause and adjust their state plans, NTIA should not take a wholesale approach of mandating changes to state plans that would slow down deployments.

Unnecessary delay and upending of the program would punish states that have been diligent and have worked to enact their plans as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Residents in rural and unserved areas have waited long enough. Many states are ready to award the funds and build networks and should not be slowed down with revised standards,

¹⁸ Jake Neenan, "Don't Hit Pause Button on BEAD, Say State Broadband Officers," Broadband Breakfast (Jan. 9, 2025),

<https://broadbandbreakfast.com/dont-hit-pause-button-on-bead-say-state-broadband-officers/>.

¹⁹ Linda Hardesty, "Some Republican senators are concerned about a pause to BEAD," Fierce Network (Feb. 7, 2025),

<https://www.fierce-network.com/broadband/even-some-republican-senators-are-concerned-about-pause-bead>.

new mandates or requirements. If NTIA wants to offer additional flexibility, it can do so through waivers for particular states, and not delay states that are ready to move forward today.

Respectfully submitted,

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