

Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee

Max Taylor 271-1403

HB 627, relative to permitting the public utilities commission to approve new providers for the Lifeline program.

Hearing Date: April 3, 2025

Time Opened: 10:09 a.m.

Time Closed: 10:15 a.m.

Members of the Committee Present: Senators Watters, Pearl, McConkey and Rosenwald

Members of the Committee Absent : Senator Avard

Bill Analysis: This bill permits the public utilities commission to designate any commercial mobile service provider or telecommunications company as eligible for federal universal service support and to create rules for implementing this authority.

Sponsors:

Rep. Vose

Rep. Cormen

Rep. Edwards

Rep. Kuttab

Rep. Layon

Rep. Lynn

Rep. W. MacDonald

Who supports the bill: Representative Douglas Thomas (Rockingham County District 16)

Who opposes the bill:

Who is neutral on the bill: Josh Elliot (NH Department of Energy), Sarah Fuller (NH Public Utilities Commission)

Summary of testimony presented in support:

Representative Douglas Thomas

Rockingham County District 16

- Representative Thomas introduced HB 627 on behalf of Representative Michael Vose, the bill's prime sponsor.
- He explained the bill would allow the Public Utilities Commission to approve new providers for the federal Lifeline program, which offers discounted communication services to low-income consumers.

- He stated that the bill passed the House Science, Technology, and Energy Committee unanimously and cleared the House on the consent calendar.
- Representative Thomas explained that Lifeline, a Federal Communications Commission program, provides discounts on monthly phone, broadband, or bundled services to eligible low-income individuals to help ensure access to jobs, telemedicine, education, and emergency services.
- Currently, only 8% of New Hampshire residents can access these services because New Hampshire has not authorized cell carriers to provide them.
- He noted the FCC has not expanded eligibility since 2011 and that 45 other states have already reclaimed this designation authority from the FCC.
- HB 627 would allow the Public Utilities Commission to authorize smaller mobile providers to offer these services, increasing access to modern communication for low-income and underserved communities in the state.
- He clarified that Lifeline currently only applies to only landlines in New Hampshire, and this bill would extend the service to mobile phones.
- Senator Rosenwald asked whether these services would be provided through a competitive bidding process.
 - Representative Thomas responded that he was unsure, but assumed that once authorized, wireless carriers would offer the service voluntarily within their coverage areas, setting their own pricing structure under the Lifeline program.
- Senator Rosenwald asked how the Lifeline program is funded.
 - Representative Thomas said he did not know the details of the funding and would need to defer to Representative Vose.
- Senator Rosenwald asked how the program determines whether an individual qualifies as low income.
 - Representative Thomas assumed eligibility would be based on federal low-income guidelines, but again stated he did not have a definitive answer.

Summary of testimony presented in opposition: None.

Neutral Information Presented:

Josh Elliott

New Hampshire Department of Energy

- Mr. Elliott stated the Department of Energy is neutral on HB 627, which would allow the New Hampshire Public Utilities Commission to designate carriers for participation in the federal Lifeline program.

- He explained that currently, carriers must seek designation through the FCC, and the bill would provide an alternative state-level path for approval.
- Mr. Elliott stated the bill does not guarantee that additional providers will enter the market but creates an opportunity for them to do so by removing procedural barriers at the federal level.
- He emphasized that the bill essentially opens another door for carriers to participate in the Lifeline program, giving the Public Utilities Commission authority to approve applications for service provision in New Hampshire.

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Date Hearing Report completed: April 4, 2025