FCC E-Rate Hotspot Order: Key Features for Ed Tech Directors

In a significant move to bridge the digital divide, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) approved new rules in July to support Wi-Fi hotspots through the E-Rate program. Mission Telecom strongly supports the order, especially at a time when Congress has failed to renew funding for the Affordable Connectivity Program, and many school children may have lost the connectivity necessary to complete schoolwork. Here are the top features of the new order:

1. **Off-Premises Use of Wi-Fi Hotspots:** Schools and libraries can now use E-Rate funding to purchase Wi-Fi hotspots and mobile wireless internet services for off-premises use. This means students and library patrons can borrow these devices to access the internet from home, addressing the "Homework Gap" and ensuring continuous learning.
2. **Three-Year Budget Mechanism:** The order introduces a budget mechanism that sets a limit on the amount of support an applicant can request over a three-year period. For schools, the budget is calculated based on student counts, while library budgets will use square footage.
3. **Device and Wireless Service Limits:** The FCC has set a pre-discount cap of $15 per month for recurring mobile wireless internet services and $90 for Wi-Fi hotspots. These limits are based on average costs from the ECF program. While taxes and state electronic waste fees are excluded from these caps, other reasonable expenses like delivery, activation, and configuration fees are included.
4. **Safeguards and Compliance**: The order also requires compliance with the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA), which mandates internet filters to protect minors, and strict documentation requirements for auditing purposes. Additionally, there are rules to prevent duplicative funding from other programs. Finally, service providers are required to report data usage, and lines of service with no usage for three consecutive months must be terminated.

These updates to the E-Rate program are a crucial step towards ensuring equitable access to educational resources. To learn more about Mission Telecom or to sign up for a free trial of our unlimited 4G and 5G wireless services, please visit missiontelecom.org. Or visit our exhibit at the Ed Tech Leaders Alliance Conference 2024.

About the author: Mark is the Director of Broadband Operations. Before joining Mission Telecom, Mark served as the Senior Manager of Broadband Programs for the Colorado Broadband Office, where he managed a team working on federal broadband grant programs, including Capital Projects Funds (CPF) and the Broadband, Equity, Access and Deployment (BEAD) Program.

In addition, Mark was appointed by Governor Polis to serve on the Colorado Broadband Deployment Board, funding state and federal grants to connect unserved and underserved Coloradans.

Mark began his career as a Legislative Assistant in the U.S. Congress, focusing on telecommunications, spectrum, rural broadband, and IT issues. He also worked as a Senior Business Operations Analyst at DISH Network, managing projects related to providing world-class customer experience.

Mark earned a master's degree from the Interdisciplinary Telecommunications Program at the University of Colorado-Boulder, where he was the top graduate.