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Via Email: [ESJActionPlan@cpuc.ca.gov](mailto:ESJActionPlan@cpuc.ca.gov)

Business and Community Outreach Team  
California Public Utilities Commission  
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**Subject: Comments of the California Emerging Technology Fund on  
Draft Environmental and Social Justice (ESJ) Action Plan 2.0**

Dear Business and Community Outreach Team:

The California Emerging Technology Fund (CETF) is pleased to have the opportunity offer comments on the broadband-related goals contained in the Draft Environmental and Social Justice (ESJ) Action Plan 2.0.

CETF was directed to be established by the Commission in 2005 as a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to close the Digital Divide in California. To this end, CETF works with federal, state and local agencies, the Legislature, Governor's Office, local governments, Tribal Nations, community-based organizations (CBOs), Regional Broadband Consortia, Internet Service Providers (ISPs), and other stakeholders on issues to close the Digital Divide, including acceleration of broadband deployment and adoption and achieving Digital Equity. CETF has been an active party in dozens of Commission dockets on broadband and corporate consolidations of Internet Service Providers (ISPs) over many years.

CETF commends the Commission on its innovative work developing and updating the ESJ Action Plan. This ESJ Action Plan is important for environment and social justice to be achieved in the area of the Digital Divide, which includes important social justice issues such as the Digital Equity, the Homework Gap, and lack of access to infrastructure in rural, remote and Tribal Nation areas. During the pandemic, this Commission recognized that broadband is an essential service for residents, in that it provides access to important health information, government services and benefits, and key applications such as distance learning, telework and telehealth. As a result, CETF is pleased that the Draft Action Plan 2.0 contains a detailed Appendix A, which is a tentative workplan which seeks to further its updated goals and objectives.

In commenting on the updated ESJ Action Plan and proposed workplan, it is important to share the CETF perspective that the Digital Divide is just another manifestation of the Economic Divide and that concentrated and persistent poverty is rooted in systemic racism. The same is true of Environmental and Social Injustice.

Digitally-disadvantaged households tend to be low-income and communities of color. The inter-related factor and forces in low-income communities constitute a “wall of poverty” that requires focused and intensified comprehensive strategies to overcome, including integrating Digital Inclusion—the acceleration of broadband deployment and adoption—into all other strategies. Similarly, achieving Environmental and Social Justice requires an integrated approach and mutually-reinforcing strategies which embrace Digital Inclusion.

For more than a decade, CETF has declared Digital Equity as a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Civil Right. Thus, CETF views the ESJ Action Plan as foundational for all Commission regulatory proceedings. The Action Plan should be an overarching context for all rules and regulations which compels the regulated entities to contribute to achieving Environmental and Social Justice and Digital Equity to the fullest extent that it is within their power to affect.

Therefore, it is with the lens of Digital Equity as a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Civil Right that CETF submits the following comments for consideration:

1. Expand the Telecommunications Education and Assistance in Multiple Languages (TEAM) program discussed at page 8 of the Action Plan which works with *telephone* consumers, to include *Internet* consumers. The Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) that perform this work in over a dozen languages are invaluable in their role as trusted sources of information for limited-English speaking, minority and immigrant communities needing information on their communications and Internet services. Much more could be accomplished if the TEAMS program could expand to address Internet consumer issues, as well as telephone issues.
2. On page 8 of the Action Plan, the fourth bullet discusses the 2017 Internet for All Act, and discusses elimination of the Digital Divide “by enhancing broadband infrastructure and access of service via key public purpose programs such as California LifeLine and the California Advanced Services Fund.” CETF suggests this bullet be updated with two recent developments, California Senate Bill 156 and the Federal Infrastructure bill. This discussion should be expanded to include discussion of more than just broadband infrastructure access, but include broadband adoption and Digital Equity issues for ESJ communities.

3. Goal 3.4, at page 21: Edit the draft goal as follows: “Ensure implementation of new investments that offer ESJ communities’ access to high quality, reliable and cybersecure communications services at affordable rates with adequate data, speed and latency to access modern applications accessible in nearby urban areas.”
4. In Appendix A, ESJ Action Items, CETF commends the Commission for its proposed Item 2.3.3., which encourages regulated entities to share information with consumers about affordable broadband plans. It reads:

“Leverage Scale of California Alternative Rates for Energy (CARE) and Energy Savings Assistance (ESA) Programs to Cross-Refer to Other CPUC Initiatives. Regulated entities are directed to share information with consumers about affordable broadband plans and other clean energy programs. . . . Follow implementation and pursue additional opportunities for customer-focused coordination.”

CETF is extremely pleased to see the Commission propose as action items the tracking of effectiveness of cross-marketing and cross-referral efforts, and the consideration of opportunities to deepen coordination efforts to maximum program update of income qualified, disadvantaged and hard-to-reach customers, many of which reside in ESJ communities.

As to the tracking items, CETF recommends that the number of unconnected customers who signed up for affordable broadband or LifeLine plans at home by the regulated entities would be important to track progress on the digital adoption issues in the state.

Further, CETF recommends that CBOs that are engaged by regulated entities to reach out to ESJ communities for clean energy, Energy Efficiency, Demand Response and other programs be explicitly allowed to distribute materials containing information about affordable broadband and LifeLine plans, so long as the cost to the regulated ratepayers is minimal or zero. This approach was taken on a voluntary basis by the three IOUs in an agreement with CETF in the CARE/ESA application proceedings.<sup>1</sup>

5. In Appendix A, Item 3.4.1. “Increase Collaboration and Knowledge Share across Telecommunications Public Purpose Programs,” CETF commends this effort to bring together various public purpose program staff in the

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<sup>1</sup> See D.21-06-015, Decision on Large Investor-Owned Utilities’ and Marin Clean Energy’s California Alternative Rates for Energy (CARE), Energy Savings Assistance (ESA), and Family Electric Rate Assistance (FERA) Program Applications for Program Years 2021-2026), issued June 7, 2021, where CETF entered into an MOU with three major IOU’s to have their CBOs distribute affordable broadband plan information to low-income households and place information about affordable broadband offers and California LifeLine programs on their websites targeted to low-income households, among other things.

telecommunications subject area to focus on how to best approach and impact ESJ communities. CETF suggests that in some of these sessions that CETF and experienced CBOs that perform this work in ESJ communities be invited to present their perspectives on best practices.

6. In Appendix A, Section 3.4.4, “Continue Understanding Challenges of ESJ Communities with Communications Affordability” CETF recommends a strong focus on ensuring affordable broadband plans by every Internet service provider. These affordable broadband rates need to be offered on a statewide basis, and be in the range of \$10-\$20 per month. In reaching out to CBOs, CETF encourages the net be cast wide to ensure all communities who are disadvantaged are represented. Areas of focus should include ensuring easy sign-up process for such plans, more consistent with the sign-up process for LifeLine plans by wireless providers. CETF also suggests a focus on adequate data being provided in such affordable plans for its customers to be able to perform modern functions, including video conferencing, distance learning, and telehealth applications.

Finally, CETF recommends ISPs be required to market their affordable broadband plans and place them in easy to find places on their websites. In-language and in-culture advertising tactics are also recommended for ESJ communities. Given that ISPs are sometimes reluctant to advertise affordable offers, the Commission should consider requesting ISPs to contribute to fund to perform advertising, or to have a central website where all such affordable offers may be easily found by those who need them.

7. In Appendix A, Section 3.4.6, “Lessons Learned from LifeLine Assessment,” CETF recommends a significant improvement be made in the way LifeLine applicants apply for the program. The current application process is clunky, time consuming, and difficult, as well as the renewal process. For ESJ applicants such as homeless persons or limited-English speaking persons, the barriers are even higher. While it is important to ensure eligibility criteria is satisfied, it is also important to ensure the programs serves those it is intended to serve.
8. In Appendix A, Section 3.4.7, “Continue Efforts to Increase Access to Lifeline Programs for Vulnerable Populations,” CETF recommends continued focus on foster youth, those living in affordable housing, those in extreme poverty, the unhoused, and people with disabilities. CETF recommends that focus groups be formed on each of these groups to ensure that their unique needs are being met in a satisfactory manner.

CETF thanks the Commission for its thoughtful approach to this important topic and welcomes any questions.

Sincerely yours,



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