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PSC Chair Urges Montanans to “Stay Connected” with Telephone Assistance

It may be hard to believe, but many people in our state do not have phone service in their homes. Often this is because they do not have the money to pay for the initial installation or to keep up with monthly bills. According to the Federal Communications Commission, approximately 6.3 million households across the country—or 5.4 percent of the entire U.S. population—do not have telephones in their homes. In Montana, the percentage of households without a phone is even higher at 8 percent. While many Montanans are using their phone lines to connect to the Internet and order books, movies, and other items; some residents do not even have the ability to call their family, their next-door neighbor, or 911. Greg Jergeson, Chair of the Montana Public Service Commission (PSC) is urging Montanans to “stay connected” by reaching out to those who can’t afford needed phone service, and urging them to participate in two programs--Link-Up and Lifeline--designed to assist individuals with both the installation and monthly phone costs of participating companies.

“For some Montanans phone service can be the difference between social connection and complete isolation. Also, access to local emergency services very likely saves lives,” observes Jergeson. “In these days of high-tech gadgetry, it is easy to forget that some Montanans cannot afford what is now considered a very basic communication tool, telephone service.”

September 13-19, 2010 has been designated nationally as “Lifeline Awareness Week” and the Montana PSC is using the opportunity to promote the programs. Link-Up provides a 50% reduction in the telephone service installation charge, up to a maximum of \$30, for most qualifying households that do not currently have telephone service. Under Lifeline, most telephone customers who are eligible for certain public assistance programs are also eligible to receive discounted basic telephone service; participants often save more than \$13 a month. Assistance levels may be higher in some instances; exact program details are available from local telephone companies. Additional information is also available at county offices of public assistance, the PSC at 1-800-646-6150, or <http://www.lifeline.gov>.

Made up of 5 elected commissioners, the PSC works to ensure that Montanans receive safe and reliable service from regulated public utilities while paying reasonable rates. Utilities regulated by the PSC generally include private investor-owned natural gas, electric, telephone, water, and sewer companies. In addition, the PSC regulates certain motor carriers, and oversees natural gas pipeline safety and intrastate railroad safety.

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