

**Before the  
Federal Communications Commission  
Washington, D.C. 20554**

In the Matter of	)	
	)	
Advanced Methods to Target and Eliminate Unlawful Robocalls	)	CG Docket No. 17-59
	)	
Call Authentication Trust Anchor	)	WC Docket No. 17-97

**Reply Comments of  
WTA – Advocates for Rural Broadband**

WTA – Advocates for Rural Broadband (“WTA”) files these Reply Comments in response to the Declaratory Ruling and Third Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (“Third Notice”) adopted by the Commission on June 6, 2019 and the initial comments filed in the record on July 24, 2019.<sup>1</sup>

In its initial comments, WTA outlined its concerns with a mandatory SHAKEN/STIR adoption and explained the barriers preventing RLECs from adopting the standard.<sup>2</sup> Of note, WTA highlighted interconnection struggles in an all-IP world, limited provider resources, and the continued use of legacy tandems by larger providers as barriers that will prevent RLECs from becoming all-IP and adopting the SHAKEN/STIR framework. WTA also supported the use of a narrow safe harbor that only allows for the blocking of a call if it is between two SHAKEN/STIR providers and it lacks the necessary attestation. WTA also argued that any blocked caller should

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<sup>1</sup> *Declaratory Ruling and Third Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking*, Advanced Methods to Target and Eliminate Unlawful Robocalls, CG Docket No. 17-59, Call Authentication Trust Anchor, WC Docket No. 17-97, adopted on June 6, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Comments of WTA – Advocates for Rural Broadband, CG Docket No. 17-59, WC Docket No. 17-97, filed July 24, 2019, at 2.

receive notice that his or her call was not placed and that blocking providers should have a mechanism in place to ensure that future legitimate calls are properly placed.

The record is replete with various commenters sharing similar concerns - arguing that a poorly planned adoption could result in a “reverse call completion” issue due to calls being unnecessarily blocked. The Commission should consider these concerns and take the necessary steps to ensure that small providers and consumers are protected from undue harm.

**THERE ARE BARRIERS OUTSIDE OF RLEC CONTROL THAT PREVENT THEM FROM ADOPTING THE SHAKEN/STIR FRAMEWORK**

WTA applauds the Commission’s efforts in this proceeding as the ubiquity of robocalls and other unwanted calls reduce the value of voice telephony for consumers. Despite their limited staff and resources, WTA members regularly take steps to improve their networks in terms of reliability and security so that rural Americans can take advantage of the digital world just as their urban counterparts do. Therefore, WTA shares an interest in fixing this problem.

However, WTA advises the Commission that any SHAKEN/STIR adoption delays by RLECs are due to legitimate barriers, not undue holdups. Some RLECs are already using IP solutions to transfer calls within their own service territories, but others are unable to afford the costly upgrade to become all-IP enabled.<sup>3</sup> However, as WTA noted, many RLECs are reliant on interconnection arrangements with Regional Bell Operating Companies that force them to transmit and receive voice traffic in legacy Time-Division Multiplexing (“TDM”) format rather than Session Initiation Protocol (“SIP”) because the larger carriers still connect to the RLEC with

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<sup>3</sup> WTA Comments at 4, “... the cost of upgrading well into six figures and, as a result, is considered a long-term project (4-5 years) for the company.”

a legacy tandem. The Competitive Carrier Association (“CCA”) noted the same stating that “even carriers that do have the ability to verify calls through an IP-based network must overcome the issue that incoming calls routed through legacy TDM tandems may be incapable of attestation” via the framework. Until the legacy equipment that connects to rural providers is updated, rural providers will have no legitimate reason to upgrade their own equipment and adopt the framework.

WTA also highlighted the fact that the Commission must adopt rules that enable RLECs to connect efficiently and affordably to the Internet in order to achieve widespread adoption of the framework.<sup>4</sup> The regulation of voice interconnection agreements has proved critical to achieving universal voice service in the United States. Without it, uneven bargaining power would allow larger providers to force RLECs to accept undesirable facilities, meet points, and rates. WTA noted that its members have been “refused ethernet middle mile services and have been forced to use slower services” while some members have even been “threatened by one large provider with having to exchange all of their Internet traffic with it at a single location in a distant large city.”<sup>5</sup> NTCA – The Rural Broadband Association aptly points out that in public filings, larger providers have stated that “IP interconnection will take place on a nationwide basis, and at a relatively small number of places” and also called for “more efficient regional interconnection arrangements typically used for non-voice IP traffic.”<sup>6</sup> NTCA notes that this forces RLECs to consider “the untenable choice between offering their consumers the

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<sup>4</sup> WTA Comments at 5.

<sup>5</sup> Comments of NTCA – The Rural Broadband Association at 4, citing Ex parte letter of AT&T, GN Docket No. 13-5, WC Docket No. 13-97, WC Docket No. 10-90, filed Jan. 24, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> NTCA at 4, citing Ex parte letter of Sprint, WC Docket Nos. 10-90, 07-135, 05-337, 03-109; CC Docket Nos. 01-92, 96-45; and GN Docket No. 09-51, filed Oct. 3, 2011.

protections that SHAKEN/STIR offers and continuing to offer affordable voice service.”<sup>7</sup> WTA agrees with this assessment and believes that unregulated interconnection agreements will lead to increased prices and decreased service quality for RLEC customers.

As such, should the Commission eventually mandate SHAKEN/STIR adoption, effectively mandating a voice IP transition, the logical step would be to put in place rules to ensure that rural customers get to and from Internet exchange points and backbone routes in an efficient and affordable manner. WTA supports NTCA’s proposal to adopt a “narrow, simple, and straightforward ‘hold harmless’ provision for IP interconnection limited to agreements for the exchange of voice traffic between RLECs and other operators.”<sup>8</sup> Such a rule would be “similar to the ‘rural transport rule’ adopted in 2011,” which held that RLECs had no obligation to carry originating non-access traffic beyond their own service territories.<sup>9</sup> The bottom line is that the Commission should ensure that there is no disturbance to voice service in rural America. Putting rules in place to preserve the status quo of voice interconnection would greatly advance the goal of transitioning to an all-IP voice network capable of adopting the SHAKEN/STIR framework.

### **THE COMMISSION MUST ENSURE LEGITIMATE CALLS FROM RURAL CARRIERS ARE NOT BLOCKED**

In its initial comments, WTA called for safeguards to be put in place to ensure that calls made by rural Americans to their more urban counterparts are properly completed – avoiding the creation of a new reverse call completion problem. While not ideal for attesting calls, TDM remains a reliable form of delivering voice service. As CCA noted, its members “utilize TDM

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<sup>7</sup> NTCA Comments at 5.

<sup>8</sup> Id. at 6.

<sup>9</sup> Id.

technology – and in many cases, rural, elderly, and low-income consumers rely on such technology for their communications needs.”<sup>10</sup> Not putting safeguards in place would be a de facto penalty against rural Americans and undercut the principles of universal service.

In response to the Commission’s request for comment on its proposal to create a safe harbor for voice providers that choose to block calls that fail Caller ID authentication under the SHAKEN/STIR framework, WTA argued that a safe harbor must be “narrow and only allow for the blocking of a call between two framework participants.”<sup>11</sup> WTA added that the safe harbor should not “allow for the blocking of a call solely on the basis that it lacks Caller ID authentication under the framework.”<sup>12</sup> Other commentators shared similar sentiment. NTCA stated “the basic lack of authentication, standing alone, tells providers nothing about the nature of the call itself other than the accuracy of the caller-ID” and added “blocking a call on the basis of the lack of authentication will limit millions of consumers’ ability to trust in the reliability of the telephone network.” Others commenters with a business interest in reaching consumers contend that a safe harbor will only be appropriate once SHAKEN/STIR is fully adopted.<sup>13</sup>

WTA also argued that the Commission “should require the blocking provider to send a message to both the blocked carrier and the customer notifying him or her that the call was blocked.”<sup>14</sup> There must also be an adequate point of contact and mechanism in place that can be contacted to fix any instance where legitimate calls are being blocked. Without such notice, the

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<sup>10</sup> Comments of Competitive Carrier Association (“CCA”), CG Docket No. 17-59, WC Docket No. 17-97, filed July 24, 2019, at 5

<sup>11</sup> WTA Comments at 6.

<sup>12</sup> Id.

<sup>13</sup> Comments of ACA International, CG Docket No. 17-59, WC Docket No. 17-97, filed July 24, 2019, at 5; Comments of the Cloud Communications Alliance, CG Docket No. 17-59, WC Docket No. 17-97, filed July 24, 2019, at 2; Comments of Consumer Bankers Association, CG Docket No. 17-59, WC Docket No. 17-97, filed July 24, 2019, at 1; Comments of Incompas, CG Docket No. 17-59, WC Docket No. 17-97, filed July 24, 2019, at 4.

<sup>14</sup> WTA Comments at 7.

blocked caller and carrier would be unaware of the problem and would be unable to contact the blocking provider. Further, an intercept message gives “the blocked caller notice that his or her call was not placed and that the intended call recipient does not know that someone tried to contact him or her.”<sup>15</sup> NTCA notes “Callers on the originating side will be forced to resort to emailing relatives or friends (or potential employees) because calls placed fail to complete for reasons they do not understand.”<sup>16</sup> Understandably, there is wide support for a mandatory intercept message and remedial mechanism that can ensure inappropriately blocked calls will be placed in the future.<sup>17</sup> Notably, TCN Inc. remarks “a requirement also would decrease the Commission’s burden in resolving potential disputes by reducing the number of disputes filed with the Commission.”<sup>18</sup> WTA agrees and believes that such a mechanism must be a requirement in order for a carrier to take advantage of the potential safe harbor.

## CONCLUSION

There is agreement in the record for why many RLECs are currently unable to adopt the SHAKEN/STIR framework and why they may be unable to do so for some time. Notably, RLECs cannot transition to an all-IP voice network until the tandems they interconnect with are upgraded, and until then, RLECs will have no option but to continue to submit and receive their voice traffic in TDM format. In addition, voice interconnection must be modernized in order to translate the previous success of achieving universal TDM voice service into an all-IP world.

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<sup>15</sup> WTA Comments at 7.

<sup>16</sup> NTCA Comments at 14.

<sup>17</sup> Comments of TCN, Inc., CG Docket No. 17-59, WC Docket No. 17-97, filed on July 24, 2019, at 3; Comments of the American Association of Healthcare Administrative Management, CG Docket No. 17-59, WC Docket No. 17-97, filed July 24, 2019, at 4-5; Comments of ACA International at 10; Comments of the Cloud Communications Alliance at 9.

<sup>18</sup> TCN, Inc. Comments at 3-4.

Further, any potential safe harbor should only allow for a call to be blocked if it is between two framework participants and the call fails authentication. Calls placed by non-participants should not be blocked solely on the basis that they fail Caller ID authentication. Blocking providers should also provide a mechanism for alerting blocked callers or carriers to the fact that their calls have been blocked and to prevent further blocking where such blocking was inappropriate.

Respectfully submitted,

WTA – Advocates for Rural Broadband

By: /s/ Derrick B. Owens  
Derrick B. Owens  
Senior Vice President of Government & Industry Affairs  
400 Seventh Street, NW, Suite 406  
Washington, DC 20004  
(202) 548-0202

By: /s/ Bill Durdach  
Bill Durdach  
Director of Government Affairs  
400 Seventh Street, NW, Suite 406  
Washington, DC 20004  
(202) 548-0202

By: /s/ Gerard J. Duffy  
Gerard J. Duffy  
Regulatory Counsel  
Blooston, Mordkofsky, Dickens, Duffy & Prendergast, LLP  
2120 L Street NW, Suite 300  
Washington, DC 20037  
(202) 659-0830

August 23, 2019