

Domestic violence hotline calls will soon be invisible on your family phone plan

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Today, the Federal Communications Commission proposed rules to implement the Safe Connections Act, which President Joe Biden signed into law last December. Advocates consider the law a landmark move to stop tech abuse. Under the law, mobile service providers are required to help survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence access resources and maintain critical lines of communication with friends, family, and support organizations.

Under the proposed rules, mobile service providers are required to separate a survivor's line from a shared or family plan within two business days. Service providers must also "omit records of calls or text messages to certain hotlines from consumer-facing call and text message logs," so that abusers cannot see when survivors are seeking help. Additionally, the FCC plans to launch a "Lifeline" program, providing emergency communications support for up to six months for survivors who can't afford to pay for mobile services.

"These proposed rules would help survivors obtain separate service lines from shared accounts that include their abusers,

protect the privacy of calls made by survivors to domestic abuse hotlines, and provide support for survivors who suffer from financial hardship through our affordability programs," the FCC's announcement said.

The FCC has already consulted with tech associations and domestic violence support organizations in forming the proposed rules, but now the public has a chance to comment. An FCC spokesperson confirmed to Ars that comments are open now. Crystal Justice, the National Domestic Violence Hotline's chief external affairs officer, told Ars that it's critical for survivors to submit comments to help inform FCC rules with their experiences of tech abuse.

To express comments, visit [this link](#) and fill in "22-238" as the proceeding number. That will auto-populate a field that says "Supporting Survivors of Domestic and Sexual Violence."

FCC's spokesperson told Ars that the initial public comment period will be open for 30 days after the rules are published in the federal register, and then a reply comment period will be open for 30 days after the initial comment period ends.

FCC Chairwoman Jessica Rosenworcel released a statement today, asking the public to help the commission build a record "to explore how to help survivors of domestic violence stay connected."

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"What I learned is that domestic abuse often happens in silence," Rosenworcel said, explaining how abusers cut off partners from resources and support systems. She vowed that the Safe Connections Act will help to "break that silence."

FCC Commissioner Geoffrey Starks said that for more than 12 million domestic violence survivors in the US annually, access to "communications technology is critical—the difference between life and death."

The public comment period will be an important time for the FCC to continue learning, Justice told Ars. She said that the law is an important step to provide more resources to survivors, but it isn't necessarily perfect and may need to be adapted over time. For example, Justice noted that "timing is always important" when forming safety plans for survivors. So while the law's two-day waiting period to separate a phone line may seem like a fairly quick response time for the wireless industry, any delay could become an issue for survivors needing faster access to a secure phone line, Justice said.

The Electronic Frontier Foundation, which strongly supported the Safe Connections Act, published a blog from the EFF's director of federal affairs, India McKinney, saying that EFF would have preferred if the law "did not require survivors to provide paperwork to 'prove' their abuse." As currently written, the Safe Connections Act does not require that alleged abusers have been convicted but does require a copy of any documentation of the abuse, such as a police report, court statement, or signed affidavit from an official source, such as a licensed medical provider, mental health provider, or social worker.

"For many survivors, providing paperwork about their abuse from a third party is burdensome and traumatic, especially when it is required at the very moment when they are trying to free themselves from their abusers," McKinney wrote.

Phone companies partner with domestic violence hotline

In Rosenworcel's statement, the FCC chairwoman also announced a significant new partnership between the National Domestic Violence Hotline and the largest wireless service providers. This partnership will work to ensure that survivors reach agents who are prepared to field requests to separate phone

lines and connect survivors with additional resources.

Justice told Ars that the Hotline has had a long-running relationship with Verizon but that this new initiative is “the largest effort” the Hotline has ever launched with the wireless industry. Partners include AT&T, T-Mobile, Verizon, US Cellular, and the trade association CTIA.

Through the partnership, the Hotline trains customer service representatives to understand what survivors go through when they’re trying to escape traumatic experiences like domestic violence, stalking, or human trafficking. This gives phone company agents, Justice said, the language they need to communicate with survivors, provide support switching phone lines, and refer survivors to Hotline resources and other organizations across the country.

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