

Achieving Universal Service in the 700 islands of The Bahamas: Fact or Fiction?

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Introduction

Bridging the digital divide is important to support the principle identified by the 1995 United Nations Social Summit, that universal access to basic education and lifelong educational opportunities are preconditions for economic and human development.

Definition of Universal Service

- Universal Service – Provision of telecommunications services to all persons that request. (Individual Access)
- Universal Access – Persons have access to telecommunications services within a reasonable distance. (Shared Access)

Definition of Universal Service

The Bahamas

“The provision of basic telecommunications services, including emergency services and public pay apparatus, networked information services and access to the Internet, ...in all populated areas including settlements of 10 or more households. ... It is proposed therefore that as part of universal service, Internet access will be

Definition of Universal Service

provided free of charge to:

- all public and church-operated schools, public libraries, the College of The Bahamas, The Bahamas Technical and Vocational Institute, The Bahamas Hotel Training College, the Eugene Dupuch Law School; and
- all public hospitals, clinics, senior citizens' homes, and orphanages.”

The need for Universal Service

- The promotion of economic development.
- The elimination of disparity between rural and urban areas.
- Full participation in the 21st century.

The Universal Service Provider

This designation is normally made by way of mandatory license obligations on the incumbent operator.

The Bahamas

Section 8.4 of the TSP imposes obligations on the Universal Service Provider. It states that “Initially and for the duration of the Exclusivity Period, any obligation to provide universal service will be imposed upon BTC

The Universal Service Provider

(Bahamas Telecommunications Company Ltd.) as the dominant provider. Additionally the Public Utilities Commission may impose the obligation to provide universal service on any other telecommunication service provider in such circumstances as it may deem necessary.

The Universal Service Provider

Initially BTC will be obliged to:

- extend and upgrade its network to facilitate the provision of Internet service to all inhabited settlements of 10 or more households in The Bahamas;
- provide an adequate number of public pay apparatus in public place such as shopping centres, airports, health and community centres, major public highways, public parks and in densely populated areas;

The Universal Service Provider

- install a line at a standard single price to any applicant living within a specified distance of the network;
- provide free calls to emergency services to all subscribers and at all public pay apparatus, and to distress, emergency and safety services for shipping and aircraft in accordance with the Radio Regulations of the International Telecommunication Union;

The Universal Service Provider

- provide special equipment required by persons with hearing, sight or other disabilities to enable them to access voice telephone services at no extra cost or as instructed by the Commission;
- provide telecommunications services at reduced cost to support the provision of Internet services to designated places in the Family Islands;

The Universal Service Provider

- provide Internet access, inclusive of supporting telecommunications services, to all schools free of charge;
- make the same schedule of tariffs available to all users regardless of location throughout The Bahamas; and
- offer affordable tariffs for basic services.

Funding the Universal Service Obligation

1. Mandatory Service Obligations;
2. Market Based Reforms;
3. Cross Subsidization;
4. Access Deficit Charges; and
5. Universal Service Funds.

Funding the Universal Service Obligation

Section 8.3 of the TSP states that “The cost of Universal Service will be funded by means of contributions from all licensed telecommunications operators on a proportionate basis. These contributions will be placed into an account, a Universal Service Fund, which will be managed by the Public Utilities Commission.”

Funding the Universal Service Obligation

The Bahamas is an archipelago of 700 islands which extends 760 miles from the coast of Florida to just north of Haiti.



Funding the Universal Service Obligation

Table 1 illustrates the population distribution throughout the islands.

ISLAND	POPULATION	AREA SQ. MILES	POPULATION PER SQ. MILE	NO. OF HOUSEHOLDS
ALL BAHAMAS	303,611	5,382	56	88,107
NEW PROVIDENCE	210,832	80	2,635	59,807
GRAND BAHAMA	46,994	530	89	14,016
ABACO	13,170	649	20	3,980
ACKLINS	428	192	2	142
ANDROS	7,686	2,300	3	2,190
BERRY ISLANDS	709	12	59	275
BIMINIS	1,717	9	191	570
CAT ISLAND	1,647	150	11	575
CROOKED ISLAND	350	93	4	136
ELEUTHERA	7,999	187	43	2,440
EXUMA	3,571	112	32	1,157
HARBOUR ISLAND & SPANISH WELLS	3,166	13	244	1,096
INAGUA	969	599	2	308
LONG ISLAND	2,992	230	13	975
MAYAGUANA	259	110	2	99
RAGGED ISLAND	72	14	5	26
SAN SALVADOR & RUM CAY	1,050	93	11	315

Funding the Universal Service Obligation

Table 2 – Cost of providing service in selected islands – installing a telephone line

Source : BTC/NERA

ISLAND	COST – B\$
ABACO	\$906
ACKLINS	\$3,019
ANDROS	\$889
BIMINI	\$1,334
CAT ISLAND	\$2,308
ELEUTHERA	\$944
GARND BAHAMA	\$960
MAYAGUANA	\$4,103
NEW PROVIDENCE	\$511

Funding the Universal Service Obligation

Institutions that are to be provided Internet service free of charge include:

- 150 + public schools
- 32 church schools
- Over 15 libraries
- 4 tertiary institutions (COB has 2 campuses and 7 centres)
- 3 public hospitals
- 66 public clinics
- 15 senior citizen homes
- 8 orphanages

Conclusion

Universal service is a challenge in The Bahamas due to archipelagic nature and sparsely populated islands. Universal Service is achievable with adequate funding.

Thank You