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MEDIA RELEASE

ICASA engages with licensees to open their services to all South Africans as the country fights the scourge of the COVID-19 pandemic

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Pretoria – In light of the recent developments with regards to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) has written to licensees in an effort to ensure that they make communication services available to all South Africans.

These engagements take place in the context of the expected surge in usage of data as the majority of South Africans across all sectors have no option but work from home, learn from home and carry on their day to day life activities (i.e. shopping, entertainment, etc.) from home through technological means. This will result in a spike in data usage, particularly as consumers also access information with regards to the pandemic – thus placing strain on the capacity of networks.

“In this context it is therefore critical that the Authority consider regulatory concessions or relaxations to enable the sector to meet the demands of the business unusual environment occasioned by the pandemic,” said ICASA’s Acting Chairperson, Dr. Keabetswe Modimoeng.

The engagements are taking place across all sectors regulated by ICASA, and include consideration of the measures outlined below.

Telecommunications: ICASA is requesting all network service providers to heed the call to enable the country to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, by facilitating easy and affordable (and/or free) access to data. In this regard, the Authority is engaging the sector on possible ways of radio frequency spectrum relief for the duration of the declared state of disaster to ease congestion, ensure good quality of broadband services, and enable licensees to lower cost of access to consumers (particularly in relation to education, emergency and other social services).

Furthermore, to the extent that the licensees will wish to tailor packages (specifically data packages) to respond to the pandemic, the Authority will consider relaxation of the tariff notification filing requirements to enable speedy roll-out of such packages.

Broadcasting: As regards broadcasting, ICASA is engaging with licensees to facilitate ease of access to information about the pandemic to all South Africans. All individual and class broadcasting services are required to make Public Service Announcements (PSAs) about the COVID-19 in the public interest, and as required by the relevant authorities.

Over and above this, the subscription broadcasting services licensees have been requested to open both their audio and television bouquets to consumers that do not subscribe to their services. This will assist the public to have access to information that they can use to deal with the scourge of the virus that is facing the country.

Postal services: The postal services sector (both reserved and unreserved services) has been requested to advise ICASA of measures they have taken or intend to take to assist customers during this disaster period.

Innovative use of spectrum (TV Whitespaces): Against the background of the regulations on the use of TV Whitespaces, ICASA recently commissioned TV Whitespaces Databases to enable the use of TV whitespaces spectrum for the roll-out of data services, particularly in rural and remote areas. Several trials were conducted in this regard in the recent past. In order to ensure that rural and marginalised communities are also catered for during this period, ICASA calls on all service providers who meet the proposed minimum certification requirements to make use of the database for purposes of providing affordable and/or free access to data to rural consumers during this period.

"The Authority believes that these measures are critical during this period of declared state of disaster. They are in line with the Authority's mandate of regulating in the public interest to enable the ICT sector to implement critical measures that would see South Africans being able to deal with the pandemic", concludes Dr. Modimoeng.

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