Prepared Remarks of
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Federal Communications Commission
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"Delivering on the Promise of Equal Access to Broadband for People with Disabilities"

Thank you, Dale. It is such a pleasure to be here. Thank you, Kareem Dale for joining us. And thank you to the Martin Luther King, Jr. Library for hosting -- and AAPD and ITIF for co-sponsoring this event.

On my first full day as FCC Chairman, I delivered a speech to all FCC staff. I mentioned three people in my remarks who had taught me valuable lessons that led me to that podium on that day. Two were my mother and father. The third was Dale Hatfield.

The story I shared about my parents actually speaks to today's event.

When I was in high school, my dad took me into the dusty stacks of the MIT library, and showed me engineering plans he had drafted as a graduate student. They were for a device designed to someday help blind people "read" words on paper by translating text into physical signals.

The formulas and drawings didn't make much sense to me, but the core lesson has remained with me: Communications technology has the power to transform lives for the better.

And we're applying this lesson in the Broadband Plan that we'll be delivering to Congress and the President in 6 days.

Last year in the Recovery Act, Congress and the President charged the Commission with developing a strategy to bring high-speed Internet and its benefits to all Americans.

Broadband is our generation's major infrastructure challenge. It's like roads, canals, railroads and telephones for previous generations.

It's like electricity in its transformative power.

Broadband is a platform for opportunity and economic growth. Studies from the Brookings Institute, MIT, the World Bank, and others all tell us the same thing -- that even modest increases in broadband adoption can yield hundreds of thousands of new jobs. As we rebuild our economy, we must seize the opportunities and tackle the challenges of 21st century communications.

Broadband is a platform for innovation – allowing anyone, anywhere to dream big and bring those dreams to life – so long as they are connected to the Internet.

Broadband is also a platform for solutions to many of our country's most pressing challenges: education, health care, energy and public safety.

Few populations stand to benefit more from broadband than persons with disabilities.

Broadband has the potential to bridge gaps and provide opportunities that were inconceivable in the past.

Broadband allows people with disabilities to live independent lives in their communities of choice.

If you have broadband, you can telecommute or run a business out of your home; receive remote health and job-related support; or gain access to online educational classes and digital books

Broadband holds tremendous potential to enable people with disabilities to communicate and connect with others; to engage as part of our national civic discussion, as online forums are becoming the town-halls of the 21st century.

Broadband can make government more accessible. Our proceeding to development the National Broadband Plan has included over 40 public workshops. Previously, it would have been difficult to participate, but with broadband, people with disabilities can follow a live, close-captioned stream of these events and submit questions online – and people have.

Unfortunately, the promise of broadband for the 54 million Americans with disabilities is falling short of the reality.

A couple of weeks ago we released a paper on Broadband Adoption and Use in America. Our consumer survey showed that only 42 percent of people with disabilities use broadband at home, compared to 65 percent of people nationwide. An astounding 39% of all non-adopters have a disability.

The costs of this digital exclusion are great and getting greater. In the 21st century, high-speed Internet is essential to an individual's ability to participate in our economy and our democracy. Rather than closing the opportunity gap for people with disabilities, the Internet has the potential to exacerbate inequality – if we do nothing.

This is not acceptable. And we have a Congressional mandate to take action to ensure that people with disabilities are not left behind.

Historically, it has taken years – even decades – for people with disabilities to gain anything close to equal access to communications. This has been true for wireline telephones, televisions, and digital cell phones and other devices.

Designers of equipment, services and networks have too often neglected to consider accessibility issues in the design and development stage -- and retrofit solutions are expensive. This was the story with fixes that had to be made to digital wireless technologies to make them compatible with TTYs and hearing aids.

With broadband, we have the opportunity to consider accessibility issues relatively early in the deployment process, and enable people with disabilities to share fully in the benefits of broadband.

In order to realize broadband's potential for people with disabilities, though, we must address the barriers.

Devices, services, software, and content are often not accessible to people with disabilities. Assistive technologies are sometimes very expensive, not interoperable with the latest technologies, or are difficult to find and repair. People with disabilities also often do not get the training and support they need to use broadband technologies and services.

Industry innovation and collaborative efforts have tremendous potential to help close the gaps for people with disabilities.

In the last year, we've seen the introduction of Apple's smart phone that contains a built-in screen reader and captioning capabilities. Windows 7 supports a number of accessibility features, such as speech recognition, a magnifying window; an onscreen keyboard; and a screen reader. AT&T and AOL have teamed up to provide a real-time IM relay service. Google developed technologies which allow it to use voice recognition software to automatically caption videos on its You Tube site, and last week it announced that it would offer captions for ALL videos on the site.

We have a unique opportunity to build on these positive developments with the National Broadband Plan we will release next week.

The Plan's recommendations on how to expand the reach and depth of broadband's benefits to people with disabilities are guided by 4 principles: 1) Enhancing coordination; 2) Improving enforcement and implementation; 3) Using data wisely; and 4) Updating our policies for the 21st century.

Let me summarize some of what the Plan will recommend.

First, the Plan will recommend the formation of an interagency working group to coordinate policies that promote broadband adoption by people with disabilities. This group will help ensure that government leads by example, when it comes to accessibility

policy. It will help coordinate a government-wide assessment to make sure every agency is complying with requirements that federal information and communications technologies be accessible. This review should extend from websites that are used by the public to IT equipment purchased for agency use. All should be accessible.

The working group can also apply a common-sense test to existing policies to make sure they advance the broader objectives of promoting innovative, affordable accessibility solutions. Consider Medicare, which will pay for a piece of "durable medical equipment," such as an Augmentative and Alternative Communication device that costs $8,000 -- but not a $300 smart phone that can run $150 text-to-speech software that works more effectively and efficiently than the $8,000 device.

The working group can look at issues like that, and at ways to lower the costs of assistive technologies to ensure that they are keeping pace with other technological breakthroughs. For example, the group can explore efforts to use cloud computing and other platforms to allow people to access the assistive technologies they need anytime, anywhere, and on any device.

Second, the plan will recommend establishing an ongoing Accessibility and Innovation Forum, which will promote the use of collaborative, problem solving processes among a diverse group of stakeholders.

The forum will allow industry, consumers, academics, researchers, students, assistive technology vendors, third party application developers, and others to share best practices and new innovations and to learn from consumers about their needs.

The forum will hold workshops on a regular basis, both here in D.C. and out in the field. Some possible topics include industry best practices, cloud computing, wireless devices and applications, assistive technologies, and digital literacy.

The forum will have an online presence, and we intend to present an Annual Chairman's Award for Accessibility and Innovation.

Third, the plan will recommend that the FCC, Congress, and the Justice Department update our accessibility laws and policies – and ensure that they are enforced. I believe that legislation introduced by Congressman Ed Markey (D-MA) – the "21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act" (H.R. 3101) —should be a starting point for legislative discussions to achieve many of these updates.

To address barriers to services and equipment, the Plan will recommend updating the Section 255 telecom accessibility rules and the Hearing Aid Compatibility rules.

To address content barriers, the Plan will recommend opening a proceeding on the technical issues relating to captioning and video description of programming on the Internet, and the devices that are used to watch this programming. The plan will also recommend that DOJ determine the applicability of the ADA to commercial websites.

To address affordability barriers, the Plan will recommend that there should be federal support for those who cannot afford assistive technologies and who do not have access to assistive technologies through existing programs.

And to spur a broad range of innovative accessibility solutions, the Plan will recommend that Congress give the FCC authority under USF to provide up to $10 million per year to provide competitively-based funding to developers of innovative devices, components, software applications or other assistive technologies that promotes accessibility.

Our proceedings for the National Broadband Plan are already having an impact.

Many of you may have attended the FCC's field hearing in November at Gallaudet and heard Marlee Matlin's forceful remarks about the lack of captioning on the Internet. One of her many examples was that she could not watch herself on "Dancing with the Stars" on ABC.com. I'm happy to report that, before long, Disney stepped up to the plate. The company committed to captioning all of its long form programs that it puts on its online player at ABC.com, including reality and live shows like "Dancing With The Stars."

We also have found that new media tools have allowed us to tap into perspectives and new sources of information that would have been unimaginable and unreachable in the past. Let me read you the words of sandraleesmith46, posted on broadband.gov in December:

> [I am] a disabled citizen on a very tight budget. .. I have this computer as a gift from my sister, and I currently have wireless Internet access as part of my rent at the RV park where I live. . . I have difficulty getting out and doing many things physically, and to shop, bank, and the like. . . Before going on line, I rarely socialized because the physical effort to get there, to do so, was just too great. With the Internet, I can do so with little energy output, and enjoy doing so. Believe it or not, that is a big deal.

We as a society must believe sandraleesmith46 when she tells us that having access to broadband is a big deal.

We must embrace the cause and understand that if 39 percent of non-adopters have a disability, we will not close the adoption gap until we address the barriers faced by people with disabilities.

We must make clear that building in accessibility at the design and development stage is cost-effective, and that all of society benefits from the widespread use of accessibility features such as captioning, speech recognition, and speech output.

Delivering on the promise of equal access to the broadband infrastructure will require ongoing commitment and resources from both the public and private sectors. Our solutions must build from existing efforts, both in industry and in government. But our solutions must also tap new sources of information and innovation and utilize the tools of new media and open government.

Now is the time to engage in this endeavor in earnest and show that we do indeed believe that this is a big deal, for people with disabilities and for all Americans.

Thank you.