

STATEMENT OF COMMISSIONER MIGNON CLYBURN

Re: *In the Matter of Implementation of the Twenty-First Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act of 2010, Section 105, Relay Services for Deaf-Blind Individuals*, CG Docket No. 10-210.

“Once I knew only darkness and stillness . . . my life was without past or future,” Helen Keller said . . . “but a little word from the fingers of another fell into my hand that clutched at emptiness, and my heart leaped to the rapture of living.”

For Americans who are deaf-blind, connecting with family, friends, and fully participating in society can be a struggle. Tasks that are seemingly simple for many of us, such as sending emails or chatting on the phone, can be difficult or even impossible for deaf-blind individuals if they do not have access to adaptive equipment. Thankfully, that is changing, through enlightenment and technological advances, we are slowly but surely breaking down long standing barriers to enable more seamless means to communicate and engage.

I venture to say that there is no way that visionary champion Helen Keller could have imagined how truly transformative technology would be for this and the next generation of deaf-blind individuals. Technology is enabling all voices to be heard and we can now envision a wide array of hope and opportunities.

Unfortunately, the cost of these enabling devices puts many of these empowering technologies out of reach for too many. And while the percentage of Americans who are deaf-blind is small, our commitment to close any divide that prevents them from having access to life-changing technologies is not. Congress recognized this, in the Twenty-First Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act of 2010 (the CVAA), and directed the FCC to provide up to \$10 million annually to support programs that distribute communications equipment to low-income individuals who are deaf-blind.

I was pleased to support the Order establishing the pilot program in 2011 and, in the short time the pilot has been operating, the benefits have been many.

Program participant Ramona Rice explained that “[w]e live in a society where we have to connect,” but she added that for deaf-blind individuals, without access to technology, “it’s a very lonely world.” Ms. Rice indicated that she planned to use these new communications tools to help her return to school, and possibly, get back into the workforce. “I’ve been given a chance to be a productive member of society, and I thank you all genuinely, from my heart.”

A young college student named Burgon Jensen, shared her perspective: “I’m able to communicate with people anytime I need to. . . I don’t have to ask somebody else. I’m a lot more independent.” Her mother calls the equipment “miraculous” and a “game-changer!”

These stories are not unique and affirm that technology is one of the great equalizers of our time. It is empowering, it is inclusive, and it promotes independence. I am pleased to support today’s Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, which seeks comment on how best to create a permanent path to increased independence. Closing the affordability gap and providing life-changing equipment that better enables deaf-blind individuals to communicate is something we should all be proud to support.

I would be remiss if I did not highlight the fact that while consumers need access to affordable equipment -- and I am wholeheartedly supportive of this -- these devices are mere gadgets that could gather dust without access to broadband. This is why I remain vocal about the need to completely [revamp the Lifeline](#) and transform it into an inclusive, dignified, administratively sound program that will truly address the needs of qualified consumers with more robust service offerings. I look forward to working with my colleagues to achieve this goal.

Mr. Eddie Martinez Jr., thank you for your presence and participation this morning. I also wish to thank the Consumer and Government Affairs Bureau and in particular the Disability Rights Office for their unwavering dedication to break down barriers for persons with disabilities.