Remarks of FCC Commissioner Mignon L. Clyburn (as prepared)
5th Annual Telehealth Summit of South Carolina
Columbia, SC
March 30, 2017

Good afternoon. Thank you Director Poston for such a warm Palmetto State welcome. While it is always great to come home, I am especially honored to have the opportunity to share with you what the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is doing to support, the extraordinary innovation taking place at the intersection of technology, broadband and health.

The critically acclaimed television producer and writer Shonda Rhimes once said, "Boundaries don't keep other people out. They fence you in." Today, I am excited to say that we are committed to breaking boundaries, and connecting communities through the power of broadband and other advanced technologies. This commitment was reaffirmed two weeks ago, when FCC Chairman Pai announced the continuation of the Commission's Connect2Health[FCC] Task Force that I pushed for some three years ago.

We live in an interconnected world, where time and distance no longer limit us. With broadband connectivity, industries can grow, communities can prosper, and ideas can spread without high price marketers, physical office space middlemen, or other gate keepers standing in the way. A physician can diagnose a patient from anywhere in the world. Medical professionals can collaborate from the most remote region, to a densely populated community that may also have the unfortunate distinction of being a clinical desert. Anyone can be connected to anywhere in a matter of seconds, so long, as they have the proper tools. This is why I am particularly pleased to join you and applaud your recognition that the FCC's role here is extremely critical.

By our own account, 34 million Americans or roughly ten percent of our citizens lack access to high-speed broadband, defined now as download speeds of 25 megabits per second (Mbps). And for those living in areas, where connectivity is widely available, affordability is too often a major barrier to access. This is simply unacceptable. It cannot be allowed to continue, because if we couple this with the millions of people who lack access to high quality health care services, we have a clinical crisis on our hands. I am not sure if enough of us realize how incredibly fortunate we are to be living in the most enabling of times. Today, we are in a place and time, where broadband and technology can and should bring vital telehealth services into all communities, including rural areas and those with chronic shortages, when it comes to clinicians.

There are over 3,000 counties in the United States, and while they all have distinctive characteristics, too often many of them share an unfortunate rudimentary telehealth system, lack adequate resources, and have high rates of chronic disease. To address and remedy these challenges, we must address them head on, but what we must not do, is address them in the ways, we have grown accustomed to.

At the FCC, we actually have at our disposal, the data and the means, to direct our time and resources all the way down to the county level, where the picture is much different, than if we were to peer through the traditional national, regional or even a state lens. The wants and needs of Charleston differ from Oconee. The challenges in Allendale are not the same as those in

Union, and people who live in Darlington may not have the same outcomes, as those who call Greenville home. Technology, broadband and other advanced services, can empower and enable us to directly address and tailor-make health care delivery models and services, to all of these areas and places in between, and all of us would be doing less than our best, if we fail at fine tuning these efforts accordingly.

And it is in this spirit, that I am pleased to introduce to some and share again with others, the FCC's *Mapping Broadband Health in America* initiative. Launched by our Connect2Health[FCC] Task Force in August of last year, this tool represents a monumental step in identifying areas where there are opportunities for telehealth and complementary initiatives across the nation.

We believe that it will help bring more awareness to the importance of providing communities with advanced health services through an innovative mapping platform. It is designed to assist those committed to closing infrastructure gaps, to ensure that everyone has access to the technology necessary, and enable quick and top-rated health care assistance.

Now you might ask, how can a mere map assist us in remedying our health care woes? This interactive tool, will enable those in both the public and private sectors to access and analyze statistics about broadband connectivity, as well as health and other indexes on a national, state, and county level. This is significant for several reasons. First, it will not only allow communities to understand how they compare to others in their respective states, or other parts of the country, but health care providers now will be able to effortlessly pinpoint areas that need additional attention and support.

For example, while 90 percent of the United States has access to broadband, the number drops to 83 percent in South Carolina. While Richland County is holding strong with 98 percent broadband access, there are still many areas of South Carolina with far less connectivity. Fairfield County for instance, only has 54 percent coverage and over in Greenwood County, which has a population of just over 69,000, only six percent of the population has what the FCC considers real broadband access.

Now imagine being able to overlay this broadband data, with key health information all the way down to the county level. This is exactly what the FCC's mapping tool provides, and it is up and running today. You know all too well the statewide numbers: 12 percent of our citizens have diabetes, 32 percent suffer from obesity, and there are about 64 physicians available for every 100,000 of our citizens. The map gets even more specific, as it can look at the average number of sick days we have, which in case you were wondering, averages 3.6 days per month in South Carolina.

Using this data, the FCC has also been able to identify, what we call the 100 "critical need" counties, meaning those communities with limited broadband access and very high health needs. In South Carolina, four counties made the list: Chesterfield, Edgefield, Greenwood and Marlboro.

And as you can see, the detailed information provided by this tool is key to pinpoint specific areas in need of better broadband access and better health care options. And because of the map's granularity, it can help the FCC and other agencies, formulate additional policies and specific regulatory actions that are smarter and more targeted, which in turn could further reduce gaps and enhance connectivity. Additionally, the mapping tool will offer industry stakeholders insight on possible collaborations and partnerships, as a means to strengthen broadband access and help link communities with fast connectivity.

With continued collaboration among government agencies at the state and federal levels, broadband service providers, technology companies and stakeholders, will be better able to develop and address health care and connectivity challenges across the country. Because of the unique partnerships that are forming between public and private entities and increasingly quick communications taking place between doctors and patients, more illnesses are being cured, recovery turnarounds are shrinking, and lives are being saved.

Time and time again, I have witnessed the effect broadband has on health care. I traveled with the Connect2Health[FCC] Task Force on a number of "Beyond the Beltway" visits, to better understand how local communities, policymakers, physicians, and entrepreneurs employ their resources and utilize broadband to meet the needs of their community.

One of our more recent visits was to Houston, Texas. There we had the opportunity to discuss how broadband-connected environments can be used to improve mental and behavioral health. In 2014, we had the chance to visit the University of Virginia Center for Telehealth, where we saw first-hand, the true intersection of broadband and health policy. It was at UVA that we saw stroke neurologists and rural doctors connect through broadband to save stroke patients' lives, and decrease recovery periods.

Then in October, as part of my #ConnectingCommunities tour, I joined with Senator Shelley Moore Capito, for a tour of health facilities in West Virginia. We visited Preston Memorial Hospital, one of 20 critical-access hospitals in the state. During the visit, I spoke with hospital administrators and physicians about a telehealth program they are developing to treat infectious diseases. Despite opening a brand new, $38.5 million facility in 2015, the hospital faces challenges when it comes to broadband connectivity. In Preston County, where the hospital is based, nearly 40 percent of the population is without real broadband. Without high-speed connectivity, the hospital's goal of bringing telehealth services into their patients' homes will never be fully realized.

So now comes the question, of what we can do to tackle these challenges. Previously I have asked, what additional steps can the Commission take to maximize the benefits and opportunities, of the agency's Healthcare Connect Fund (HCF). While the $400 million a year program has historically been undersubscribed, requests for support in funding year 2015, the most recent available, reached a historic high of nearly $378 million. Given the finite funding available for this program, I believe we should constantly be thinking about the best ways to improve its effectiveness.

One such idea, is the *RURAL Telehealth Act,* introduced during the last Congress. This bipartisan bill recognizes, that non-rural hospitals and health-care providers, may be best positioned to bring telehealth services to their communities. I welcome your thoughts on how this legislation would impact South Carolinians, our fellow citizens and your goal of bringing advanced telehealth services to communities most in need.

With today's technological advances, there are a plethora of available possibilities in the realm of telehealth, starting with the ability to connect patients to doctors in a matter of seconds. Palmetto Care Connections is helping to change lives, through its initiative to break the boundaries between communities, and help create an interconnected ecosystem between health care and broadband. I applaud you for your efforts, and thank you for your tremendous accomplishments.

Together, we will break boundaries at the intersection of broadband and health policy and show the world, just how much Palmetto cares.

Thank you.