

Remarks of FCC Commissioner Mignon L. Clyburn (as prepared for delivery)

Broadband Deployment Advisory Committee Meeting

Washington, D.C.

November 9, 2017

Elizabeth, thank you for that introduction, and to the members of BDAC, I remain grateful to you, for working hard and making a commitment to close those remaining digital and opportunity divides. Over the past few months, you have pushed for consensus on some of the most difficult issues surrounding broadband deployment, and for that and more, I thank you.

As you have no doubt discovered at home and during your deliberations, infrastructure deployment raises a host of thorny issues. That delicate balance brings an added layer of difficulty, if you try to solve them in an inclusive manner that respects state, local, and Tribal authority, but I continue to believe that the efforts are worth it. And after we table the debates and finally adopt those policies that address pole attachments, rights-of-way, siting and more, it may be tempting to sit back and declare victory. Though admittedly well-earned, I believe celebrating at that juncture would be premature. Even after the last trench has been dug, the last tower has been sited, and the last fiber has been lit, it may be tempting to declare victory, but celebrating at that juncture, would be premature.

Why? Because it would be obscuring a very simple reality: Not every broadband problem, is an infrastructure problem. There are many who do not understand or are unable to embrace technology as well as you and me (or at least you). They may need additional help with navigating the digital currents and, as I have often said, “build it and they will come” is no more than a field of dreams, particularly for low-income communities, if they cannot afford the service. Struggling families who can barely feed their children, want to give those children every tool they need to be competitive, but today they cannot afford it, and next week, I am afraid, we will make it even more difficult for them.

For the millions who depend on Lifeline, particularly those in our dense urban centers, infrastructure is not the problem, affordability is. And telling over seven million Americans that they will no longer be able to use the service they have chosen — because the company providing that service does not have a spectrum license for the area they live in — is simply put, a backwards form of government paternalism.

What type of signal are we sending to that homeless veteran, struggling with PTSD who uses his Lifeline phone to regularly call the Veterans Crisis Line? What are we saying to those Tribal communities, where household incomes are substantially lower and poverty and unemployment rates are substantially higher than the national average? There is one party in our Lifeline proceeding, that estimates as many as two-thirds of Alaskans living on Tribal lands, will lose Tribal Lifeline support.

Simply put, if you truly believe in the transformative power of broadband, as a tool of digital and economic empowerment, your focus cannot begin and end, with infrastructure. If you believe in universal access to 911, if you believe in education, or healthcare, or civic

engagement, if you believe that all of those national purposes are advanced by ensuring all Americans are connected, then you cannot ignore the affordability side of the equation.

The federal universal service program is a four-legged stool and if you fail to address, or saw down one leg, not only would we be unable to declare victory, we would have left millions of opportunities behind on a field of dreams deferred.

So I want to again thank you, for playing such a critical role in maintaining the integrity of our programs and I look forward to finding more ways for us to continue to work together to strengthen, not weaken our universal service stool.