

**REMARKS OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS
TO THE 9TH ANNUAL
SCHOOLS, HEALTH, & LIBRARIES BROADBAND COALITION (SHLB)
CONFERENCE
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Good afternoon, I'm FCC Commissioner Geoffrey Starks. Thank you very much for inviting me to spend time with you today. First off, I'd like to thank you all for being part of the great work that SHLB does making sure that schools, hospitals, and libraries have access to high quality broadband. This work helps to ensure that benefits of broadband reach farther through telemedicine— making high quality health care available everywhere; through digital learning— bringing a world of knowledge and opportunity into every classroom; or through libraries providing resources as digital hubs in communities.

I don't think that it will surprise any of you to hear that my top priority at the FCC is getting people connected to high-quality affordable broadband. In the past we have referred to the difference between people and communities who are and aren't connected as a digital divide—but I see the digital divide hardening into something worse— a pervasive state of digital inequality. Millions of Americans still do not have access to or cannot afford high speed broadband. If we want a better, more equal future, we must start by making sure that all communities are connected.

Today, I'd like to focus on ways that libraries are serving communities and getting people connected. But, before I highlight that great and innovative work, I want to take a few minutes to talk about broadband data and mapping, the mess the Commission has made in this area, and how potential solutions from Congress may provide a path forward.

The Commission's most important mission is to make sure that everyone has access to affordable, high-quality broadband. In order to do that, the Commission has to know where broadband is and is not. Unfortunately, right now, the Commission doesn't seem to know these basic facts. The FCC's broadband deployment data and maps are flawed, and this problem that needs to be fixed as quickly as possible so that the Commission has the information it needs to make good broadband policy decisions.

One main problem with the Commission's broadband maps is that they overstate service availability. Because of the way the Commission collects and reports broadband deployment data, the maps show an entire census block as "served" if one provider reports service at any one location in the block. And, when the FCC's maps show an area as served, that area is potentially blocked from Universal Service Broadband support for years to come.

Overstating service isn't the only problem with the FCC's maps. They also depict carrier-reported data without subjecting it to audits, or, in certain cases, even basic sanity checks. The FCC's recently-released broadband deployment report is, unfortunately, a glaring demonstration of this problem. The first draft of this Report was based on data that overstated high speed broadband connections by more than 62 million – that's more than the populations of Washington, Texas, Michigan, and Illinois put together. This is troubling because the FCC never

caught the error, an outside party did. The fact that such a large error made it into a report that the FCC circulated and publicized raises serious questions about its ability to analyze and process data. It should have raised a red flag or set off some sort of alarm. We need a change.

This summer, the Commission started a process to fix its data and mapping problems. Unfortunately, this process is only a nudge in the right direction—it makes some minor fixes but leaves glaring problems unaddressed and it doesn't contain any timelines for when improvements will be made. This is particularly troubling because the Commission has proposed, in the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund proceeding, to continue using its current flawed broadband maps and data to target \$16 billion in USF funding over the upcoming decade. As long as broadband data continues to play a role in the Commission's policy making, it is our responsibility to ensure the data is accurate.

I'm not convinced that the FCC is going to get its data and maps right anytime soon without some guidance. Fortunately, Congress has taken up the issue. A bill under consideration in the House - the Broadband Data Act, introduced last month by Congressman Loeb sack, and co-sponsored by Congressmen Latta, McEachin, and Long - provides exactly the sort of guidance needed. This bill would take important and meaningful steps to ensure that the FCC collects the right information and creates useful maps with it. The bill would require granular data collection with a challenge process and would recognize and consider information from state, local, and Tribal governments. Like the Commission's recent mapping order, the bill would require the FCC to create a dataset of all locations in the U.S. where broadband can be installed to serve as a foundation for mapping reported broadband availability data. But, the bill takes the next logical step and would require the FCC and other Federal agencies making broadband policy and funding decisions to use the map. Last month, the House held a hearing on this and four other bills that address data and mapping issues. The Senate is considering similar bills, one of which is co-sponsored by more than half of the Senate.

So that's what the FCC and Congress are up to in the areas of broadband data and mapping. Now I want to turn to the great work you are doing to expand the way broadband benefits communities. In particular, the importance and work of our libraries in communities can't be overstated.

Libraries are still, as Andrew Carnegie said, "Palaces for the People." The Municipal Library in Columbus Ohio has three words carved in granite above its front door – the words are: "Open To All." I think these words set out a simple, but profoundly important statement of the mission, role, importance, and potential of libraries everywhere. Libraries are open to all members of a community as a place to gather, learn, connect, and innovate. They also provide a safe and warm place to be welcomed, sit, read the news, and charge your phone or computer.

When you visit today's libraries, they are a long ways from the Dewey decimal system. I have observed at least four ways that libraries today are serving Americans in exciting new ways as 21st Century Community Tech Hubs, and are "meeting people where they are." First, libraries are providing internet access to Americans who otherwise lack it—they are lending their Wi-Fi signals and, in some cases, are lending connectivity itself. For example, at many public libraries, community members can check out Wi-Fi hotspots and take vital broadband

connectivity home – where entire families can benefit from it. Lending hot spots provides a connection when the internet is available in neighborhoods, but not at an affordable rate. This is a key problem and I appreciate this innovative approach that libraries are taking to address it.

Second, libraries still serve an indispensable role in communities as a place to learn, offering reading and literacy programs geared toward very young children, for teens, and for adults. In addition, libraries also provide essential information to newly-arrived refugees who are working to establish a place for themselves and their families in the U.S.

But libraries are us even higher – they are-conceiving notions of what it means to be fully literate, reaching deeper into communities to teach digital literacy as well. The Boston Public Library calls this the “Tech Goes Home” program. It’s a fifteen-week course that teaches computer and internet skills, helps people purchase low-cost internet subscription services, and helps them acquire the hardware they need to access the internet at home. I heard countless stories of proud, graduating members of the community who had never even turned on a computer, least of all been connected before.

There is a small, but powerful public library—it’s like the little engine that could from the children’s storybook—the Grove Hall Branch of the Boston Public Library—between Roxbury and Dorchester, two communities on Boston’s South side. This library is connected to the Grove Hall Senior Center and I met two special senior citizens there who had recently graduated from Tech Goes Home. One graduate, Ms. Eleanor, learned to use the internet and gained the confidence to do it on her own. With a sparkle in her eye and a little waggle, she told me that she uses her new Chromebook to learn to line dance by watching YouTube videos at home. The other graduate, Ms. Linda, told me that she took the program to learn about using email and Netflix. She had never used email before and never had an answer when people asked her: “do you have an email address?” Now, she brings her Chromebook to the library to check her email. She told me that one of the first emails she received was from her doctor.

Third, I have seen how libraries play a critical role in getting people back on their feet – assisting those particularly looking to secure employment. This is an important trend and it’s not an exception or a corner case—libraries are providing these types of resources throughout the country. 73% of public libraries provide help with job applications and interviewing skills. 68% have programs to help library customers use electronic search tools to find job openings, and over a third of libraries offer work spaces for mobile workers.

These services are playing a critical role in communities and people are taking advantage of them. The Columbus Ohio Public Library ranks looking for jobs as the number one activity customers engage in while at the library. And, I learned during my visit to the Boston Public Library that 40% of the customers who borrowed Wi-Fi hotspots from the library used them to look for a job.

Some libraries have developed programs for teaching life skills to people experiencing homelessness who are looking to secure employment and housing. The library system in Winston-Salem North Carolina recognized the role that libraries play for the homeless community and, for the past decade, has been working to develop programs specifically to address that community’s needs. The library now has a full-time peer support specialist on staff

dedicated to understanding and meeting the needs of people who are experiencing homelessness that are making use of the library.

And finally, libraries also play a stabilizing role as “2nd Responders” in communities in the wake of disaster and disruption. Shortly after hurricane Sandy, the Far Rockaway branch of the Queens Library in New York City had no heat or power but continued its “children’s hour” story time program in the library parking lot. The librarians hoped to give children a sense of normalcy during a time when nearly everything in the community was disrupted. In other examples, a library in Orlando hosted an art gallery as a means for people to express and share their reactions to the Pulse nightclub mass shooting in 2016. And, in Santa Barbara, California, the public library invited people to share stories and lessons in the aftermath of the deadly and devastating Thomas wildfire in late 2017. These are just a few examples of the ways that libraries help to facilitate recovery in communities affected by disasters.

The work that libraries are doing is so important to me that I am leaving this lunch and literally going directly to the airport to travel to southern Ohio to visit libraries and to learn, first hand, about the work they are doing.

So, to wrap up, if you were keeping score on my remarks, you might have written down, “FCC: 0”; “libraries as anchor institutions serving communities: 1.” These topics are, in fact, closely related, libraries are doing critical work filling in gaps in connectivity and reaching communities that have been left behind. This work is tremendously important, and the FCC should continue to support it – I’ll do everything I can to make sure that happens. But, the FCC also has an important role to play in finding and eliminating gaps in connectivity so that everyone can benefit from the economic and civic dividends that come along with connectivity. The FCC has to use the best possible data about where broadband is and isn’t available in order to make effective policy decisions. I’m already fighting for improvements in the way the FCC collects and uses data.

Thanks again for inviting me to spend time with you today – I truly appreciate it.