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Examining Internet Inequality:
A Call for a Data-Driven 10 Year Look-Back of the FCC's High Cost Program

Thank you so much, Jim, for the kind introduction. Also, thank you to the Broadband Communities team for organizing a great event and inviting me here today to discuss an issue that I care so deeply about which is getting high-speed, affordable broadband to every person across this country.

I really wish I could have made it here yesterday as well because I know Jon Sallet at the Benton Foundation gave a stellar presentation on his new work, "Broadband for America's Future: A Vision for the 2020s." The National Broadband Plan was released in 2010 so I'm glad to see we have an advocate in this space who is thinking about creative and forward-thinking policies that will address internet inequality. Jon and I share similar views. We recognize that broadband access is necessary if we truly want to empower our communities in this digital age. So, thank you to Jon and the Benton Foundation team for all of their hard work on this project. I really look forward to diving into it and engaging with you all more.

Let me get back to why I'm here today. My number one priority at the Federal Communications Commission is to reduce internet inequality—so much so that it was even the topic of my first speech as an FCC Commissioner. I am passionate about working tirelessly to resolve this issue because I see up close how the lack of access to broadband impacts individual dignity, our economy, and our democracy.

I'm going to assume that when most of us woke up this morning, we probably reached for our phones. After we scrolled through our friends' pictures of their children in pumpkin patches, we did something that really made a difference in our day. Many of us used our devices to check the news so we can be a part of an informed electorate in our town's upcoming city council election. Some of us emailed our child's teacher about a concern with a recent test score. And some of us requested a refill online through a specialty pharmacy for a disease-modifying medication. A lot of us did this without thinking twice about it because the internet is so much a part of every single aspect of our lives and we expect it to be there. We expect it to be reliable. We expect it to be fast.

However, this expectation is not the reality for millions of Americans across this nation. And I can speak to that because over the last nine months, I have traveled across this country from pueblos in New Mexico to homeless shelters in San Francisco to learn about how the lack of access to broadband impacts communities across this nation.

And what I have seen has been nothing short of alarming.

There are people across this country that are pulling up to their town's public library so that they can get help building a resume or applying jobs online. I know about families on

month-long waiting lists to check out wi-fi hotspots for their homes. And I hear about farmers who have to drive great lengths and sit at the top of the hill to get an internet connection to download and upload crop information.

This is concerning because the internet has the potential to be an equalizer in this country. And unfortunately, the same communities that are feeling the effects of poverty, isolation, and lack of opportunities are the same communities that are being left behind in the digital age. We know that access is essential, and we cannot fail these vulnerable communities.

One thing we must remember is that robust data and sound policy-making are interconnected. As you all already know, the Federal Communications Commission just proposed $20.4 billion dollars towards the 10-year Rural Digital Opportunity Fund also known as RDOF.

And let me tell you, as a son of Kansas, I'm all about making sure that we have the resources needed to adequately address connectivity in rural communities. The issue I take with this proposal is that we do not yet have reliable data to tell us where broadband exists and where it does not.

We need to better understand how our High-Cost Program/Connect America Fund has historically performed so that we can better tailor the performance of the RDOF for the next 10 years. Sometimes you have to look back to understand how best to move forward. That's why I'm calling for the FCC to conduct a data driven 10-year look-back on how our program has effectively performed in bringing broadband to our remote areas. Where have we succeeded? Where did we miss? Under our programming, which communities have had their connectivity needs met in the way that we expected? Which haven't, and why? Or are there areas where we in fact already provided High-Cost/CAF funding but they're still behind in their connectivity needs, and if so, why?

I want to be crystal clear, this study is not at all an attempt to undermine this program or change it in some fundamental way. I want to understand where we have been most successful so that we can improve this program. We've had a buildout program for years. The data is out there for us to study so that we know how to bring that impact to communities in need. Because most importantly, I don't want to wake up in 10 years, and live in a world where the FCC does not have any better understanding of how and why we still find significant numbers of our communities left out of our digital world.

As I have previously stated, I think that plans for the future of Universal Service need to start from a foundation of accurate data and maps and build from there. Unfortunately, that accuracy cannot be seen in the Form 477 data that the Commission collects. In fact, it was earlier this year when it was discovered that BarrierFree had a 62-million-person error in its data reporting. Yet this is the data that we are relying on to rollout $16 billion out of the $20 billion set aside for the RDOF.

You know what I do trust? I trust the conversations I have with individuals and groups who email my office, visit me at the Commission, and meet with me when I'm on the road to tell me their stories about how the lack of broadband access is impacting their community. And folks, they have looked at the maps, and they know there are discrepancies and they want us to fix them.

Additionally, I want to be clear about what I mean when I say internet inequality. It is not good enough to simply deploy broadband. We need to ensure that broadband access is affordable as well. This brings me to Lifeline.

There are people in this country who are struggling to put food on their tables, to put their kids through schools, and to care for ailing relatives. The least that we can do as a country is to ensure that they have access to voice and broadband services that allow these individuals to fully participate in a 21st century society.

We must do everything we can to protect the Lifeline program and we must ensure that people who are eligible to participate in this program are signed up for it. As I mentioned previously, I've visited a number of homeless shelters during my time as a Commissioner. At each shelter, I've met with people experiencing homelessness who are Lifeline subscribers or are eligible Lifeline subscribers. They have told me about how important it is for them to have access to a phone because that is what is needed when seeking employment, making a doctor's appointment, or even staying connected to loved ones. Homeless shelters should be the place where folks receive food, warmth and clothing. I also believe that they should receive information about Lifeline so they know there is a program that exists that can assist them in staying connected. Every time I meet with leadership and staff at these shelters, I also make sure they are aware of the program and how it can help their visitors get back on their feet.

As a former FCC enforcement bureau official, when I hear the language of waste, fraud, and abuse as it relates to the Lifeline program, I can't help but agree that we need to protect the integrity of this program. But what I also know is that we need to make sure we are doing a better job of first giving people who are most in need, straps on their boots before we are demanding that they pull themselves up by their bootstraps.

I also want to say that through all this darkness, there is some light out there and I see that in the leadership in towns across this country. A few weeks ago, I met Debbie Saunders, the library director in Gallipolis, Ohio. Like I find in many small towns, the public library there is abuzz with vibrant energy. And if the library is a hub of the town, then Debbie is a shining star. Debbie is excited, innovative, and working so very hard to make sure that her community has everything they need to succeed. Debbie started a wi-fi hotspot lending program at her library that has a six-week waiting period. Six-weeks, everyone! Can you imagine waiting six-weeks before you can actually use the internet at home? I can't imagine going six minutes without access to the internet. My staffers can speak to that because the only time I'm not connected is when the plane is taking off and the flight crew hasn't yet turned on the Wi-Fi.

I want ubiquitous connectivity to be the reality of everyone across this country. My goal is to make internet inequality a thing of the past that is only illustrated in my daughter's college textbooks. And it's not going to be easy. There was an episode of "Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee" when Jerry Seinfeld asked President Obama what sport is most like politics. President Obama said it's most like football because there are a lot of players, a lot of specialization, and a lot of attrition. You get one yard, you get sacked, you get three yards, and then it's third and fifteen. But every once in a while, you'll see a hole and there's open field.

And right now, I see an open field and I want us, as a nation, to score a game-winning touchdown in this battle to defeat internet inequality.

Thank you all again for having me here and I sincerely look forward to working with you all as we fight to end internet inequality in this country we call home.