

**REMARKS OF  
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS  
CONGRESSWOMAN LUCY MCBATH'S CENSUS TOWN HALL  
TUCKER, GEORGIA  
FEBRUARY 15, 2020**

Thank you so much, Congresswoman McBath, for inviting me to join you in this important conversation about ensuring that all households are counted in the 2020 census. You'll hear from folks today about how the census can shape our future and I really admire the work that Congresswoman McBath, Fair Count and DeKalb County have been doing in this space.

Again, I'm Geoffrey Starks and I am a Commissioner at the Federal Communications Commission. I have several priorities including issues related to network security, diversity of media ownership, and equitable deployment of artificial intelligence technology. However, I always tell folks that my top priority is ensuring that every American, no matter their income-level, geographic location, race, citizenship status, or gender, is connected to affordable and reliable broadband.

Broadband access is a key component of ensuring that every American is counted in this upcoming census. I admire the work that Fair Count and other organizations are doing to ensure that there are trusted locations that disconnected families can visit to gain access to the internet in order to fill out their census.

But I must also say that it is dispiriting and disheartening to see that rural communities, communities of color, and the many ways in which those identities intersect, are the same communities that are being left behind. In 1995, that's 25 years ago, Larry Irving, a friend and colleague who I admire for the work he led as the head of the NTIA, coined the term the "digital divide" to describe the haves and have-nots in the digital age. And for the young folks in the room, this was during the time where they first began releasing Encyclopedia Britannica online. Honestly, that probably means nothing to the young folks in here so I'm just going to tell you this was pre-Google.

It's astonishing! Even then, we realized pre-Google that there were serious barriers preventing people from participating in this ever-evolving digital age. Now here we are, in 2020, still trying to figure out how best to get people online but the difference is, there are very serious ramifications for not having an ability to connect to the internet in your respective homes.

I began my tenure as an FCC Commissioner conceptualizing the problem of the digital divide in a slightly different way than Larry. I've labeled this issue as internet inequality because it is persistent and has hardened in the way that it disproportionately affects certain communities so I can't help but to label this as an issue of equity. More specifically, I believe that internet inequality impacts folks' individual dignity, our economy, and our democracy. And let me foot-stomp that last one. The Census is fundamentally about our democracy. The Census counts, and so do you.

In the long-term, I can say that we need to view the importance of broadband access in the same lens that we viewed the importance of electrification of the nation. It can't solely be about economic incentives; we must recognize the immediate moral imperative we have to ensure that every American has access to broadband in order to fully participate in a 21<sup>st</sup>-century society. Also, it's not just a matter of making sure that we have broadband infrastructure throughout our communities because that alone isn't enough. We must ask ourselves: Is this a

future-proof solution? If our broadband solutions are not affordable, resilient, and secure then we are addressing today's problems with yesterday's solutions. And I know we're here with the DeKalb County community today, so I just want to say that there should be no disparities between North Dekalb and South Dekalb because when we fail a certain segment of our community, we fail as a whole.

I want to close by saying that one of the best things we can do is to raise awareness about how broadband access impacts us in every facet of our lives whether that be socially, politically, or economically. And moreover, during this age of rapid technological advancement, broadband access impacts opportunity. And that is why we must all work together to end internet inequality and ensure that everyone has access to affordable and reliable broadband whether it be to find a job, connect with their family abroad, or even complete their 2020 census.

Thank you again to Congresswoman Lucy McBath for having me here today. I look forward to working with you and everyone here on ensuring that every American is counted.