

**Remarks of Commissioner Geoffrey Starks**  
**Field Hearing on Resilient Communications Networks**  
**San Juan, Puerto Rico**  
**February 21, 2020**

Thank you all for joining us today to hear about a critical topic: resiliency in our communications networks. I am grateful to all of today's speakers for their participation today. And I am especially thankful to the School of Law for hosting this convening. In a few moments, I will introduce our first panel of speakers, but I want to begin by briefly setting the stage for our discussion today.

One of the Commission's primary duties is to promote access to communications services so that all Americans can access and share critical information—especially in support of public safety. As our communications networks have expanded, we sometimes take stable, reliable access to communications—and the access to friends and family, emergency services, employment, and all of the many benefits those networks provide—for granted. Puerto Rico's experience, especially in the wake of Hurricanes Irma and Maria, shows that we shouldn't.

The severity of those storms cannot be overstated. As people in this room know all too well, between 3,000 and 5,000 people died. The storms also proved devastating for Puerto Rico's infrastructure. Nearly the entire population went without power, and the vast majority of communications networks went down. The human toll of that infrastructure failure was severe and widespread. In a May 2019 report titled, *Connecting the Dots: The Telecommunications Crisis in Puerto Rico*, Free Press documented the experiences of people who lost communications access in their own words. I urge you all to read the full report, so I'll share just two of the stories they received here:

Maria Colon in San Juan wrote: "I live in the San Juan metropolitan area. My mother lives on the west side of the island. I was not able to communicate with her for 5 days. I couldn't access any reception and her land line was completely out of service. Due to lack of gas and road obstructions I couldn't get to her. I [must] say those were the most difficult days since she is elderly and depends on the phone to let her needs known. Finally, I was able to go see her in person."

Hector Santana in Carolina wrote: "In the beginning of the hurricane the hospital my mom worked at was filled with people who were on the floor crying over the fact that their homes were more than likely destroyed and that their families were still in their homes and [they had] no way of being able to contact them."

Stories like these drive home the conclusion that the federal government, and the FCC in particular, responded far too slowly in the aftermath. As a former enforcement official, I believe in accountability, and it is imperative that the FCC hold itself accountable as well because we needed to do better. For months after Hurricane Maria, critical communications infrastructure remained out of service, making it overwhelmingly difficult for Puerto Ricans to access potentially lifesaving information. I believe that the Commission must learn from that history, and from the tireless efforts of many people and organizations in Puerto Rico to repair damaged

infrastructure, make Puerto Rico's communications networks more resilient, and close the digital divide that existed here even before Hurricane Maria. Let me be even clearer: I call on the FCC to bring the full strength of its resources and to come to Puerto Rico, engage with all stakeholders here to understand what happened to the communications networks on the island and its people, understand what can be done better, and issue a report after a thorough assessment.

The FCC does have some initiatives in progress that have the potential to make a difference. In particular, we recently announced the procedures for distributing \$691 million in funding for fixed broadband networks in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. I am hopeful that those funds will make a significant impact on the digital divide here.

Time is of the essence. The recent earthquakes that Puerto Rico has experienced have put Puerto Rico's communications networks through a stress test. Thousands have been displaced from their homes and the island's already fragile electric grid has suffered further degradation—leading to more communications outages. These concerns are compounded by the fact that the next hurricane season is rapidly approaching. On a broader scale, we know that climate change will put more and more Americans in path of weather-related disasters of increasing ferocity. In that way, Puerto Rico has something to teach the world. No other place has had its people and networks tested like here. Lessons from Puerto Ricans about what has and has not worked to improve resiliency should inform the FCC's work here and throughout the United States and the globe.

To support that effort, I have asked stakeholders from local government, the labor movement, the healthcare and education sectors, disaster recovery workers, and the communications sector to share their views and on-the-ground experience. I have asked them to address the steps taken to improve the resiliency of communications networks since Hurricanes Irma and Maria, how communications networks and recovery efforts performed during recent earthquakes, what additional actions are needed to ensure that communications networks are always available, particularly to meet public safety needs, and the importance of reliable, high-quality connections. My hope is that the testimony we hear today can help shape the significant and important work ahead at the FCC, including the sharing of outage reporting information, deploying universal service funds in Puerto Rico, and considering policies to help communications networks continue working even in extreme circumstances. We are going to keep this hearing on schedule, however, because I also want to reserve time here today for one-on-one conversations with individuals who have taken time to be here today. It is essential that the voices of Puerto Ricans impacted by these disasters be heard, and I want to listen to you. When the second panel finishes, the witnesses will be released, and I hope many of you will stay and share with me how the loss of communications access has impacted your life.

Finally, I'd like to underscore that today's discussion is just one part of what I hope will be an ongoing discussion and collaboration. In preparation for today's event, my staff and I have had the opportunity to communicate with dozens of people who care passionately about Puerto Rico and improving its infrastructure. I hope you will all keep reaching out and allow me to do the same. Thank you for being here.