

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION**

HEARING ON THE FCC'S FISCAL YEAR 2021 BUDGET REQUEST

**BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FINANCIAL SERVICES AND GENERAL GOVERNMENT
COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS
UNITED STATES SENATE
MARCH 10, 2020**

Chairman Kennedy, Ranking Member Coons, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to your review of the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC's) Fiscal Year 2021 budget. Budgets are, at their core, statements of priorities. At the FCC, our top priority should be ensuring that all Americans can access and benefit from modern communications networks. Today, I want to highlight three areas where the FCC must do more to advance that goal: responding to COVID-19, rural broadband deployment, and the C-Band.

First, the FCC and communications networks have an integral role to play in responding to the coronavirus. In times of emergency, Americans always pull together and help those most in need. This is no doubt true of COVID-19. With social distancing and even quarantine being required, as they may soon be in many American communities, broadband connections will become even more vital. Everyone in the telecommunications sector must step up. The time is now. Americans are going to need broadband in their homes—to help them telework to keep the economy strong; to help them understand medical information, and potentially connect with medical care via telemedicine; and to help our youngest learners continue to grow.

The FCC must join that effort immediately with emergency steps that bring broadband into homes in communities impacted by COVID-19. We should consider expediting waivers and experimental licenses that will expand network capabilities; creating additional Wi-Fi capacity by temporarily authorizing use of the 5.9 GHz band; awarding grants for capacity upgrades in underserved communities impacted by the coronavirus; and encouraging providers to offer low-cost program options that could extend a basic internet connection for millions of Americans and to deploy their emergency assets, such a cell sites on wheels, to unserved communities.

The FCC should also deploy a “connectivity and economic stimulus” plan to leverage and expand the effectiveness of the billions we administer annually in existing universal service programs. We should consider an emergency distribution of funds to rapidly increase the number of lendable hotspots available through schools and libraries. We should also urgently consider increasing the amount of money Lifeline—the only federal program designed to bring affordable communications to our most vulnerable Americans—provides for basic connectivity,

raising data caps, and easing enrollment burdens. This wouldn't be the first time the FCC has done so in a crisis—the George W. Bush-era FCC expanded the Lifeline program to include prepaid wireless service following Hurricane Katrina.

As the coronavirus forces more people to stay home, I know many people in the communications sector are concerned that some Lifeline beneficiaries who qualify based on their participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program may no longer be able to meet that program's work requirements. We will need to work through points like these that regard our larger social safety net, to be sure, but keeping SNAP beneficiaries connected is a problem the FCC can and must fix.

By increasing access to broadband, we can help ensure that people who need treatment can seek it safely and those who need to be at home can stay there. As yesterday's stock market activity made clear, this health crisis may have dramatic economic consequences. By deploying this "connectivity and economic stimulus," the FCC's funding programs can contribute to and amplify the stimulus packages that policymakers are now considering. We should start the FCC's emergency response today.

Second, we must maximize the impact of our universal service dollars so that all Americans have access to high-quality, affordable broadband. Earlier this year, the FCC created a \$20 billion fund for rural deployment, the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund. I grew up in Kansas, and support the infusion of resources for broadband, but I fear this fund was not designed with careful stewardship in mind. I have two major concerns. First, this fund distributes money based on broadband maps that we all know are terrible, and I remain troubled that we chose to send over \$16 billion out the door *before* we got our maps in order. Second, in designing this fund, the Commission made an eleventh-hour decision to exclude areas that have received funding from a state broadband subsidy program. While the FCC has so far offered only scant information on how this will work, we do know this: more than 30 states have some kind of state broadband program, and together these programs distribute well over one billion dollars. Before distributing the funds, the Commission must coordinate with affected states and remedy this fundamental error.

Finally, last month's vote on the C-Band put the interests of foreign satellite companies ahead of taxpayers. Everyone now appears to agree with the position that Chairman Kennedy and I championed last year: any transfer of this spectrum should be done via a public auction and not in a private transaction conducted by the companies with the most to gain. I fundamentally disagree with the Chairman's approach on the C-Band, which is why I voted against the nearly \$15 billion proposal that stretches our law too far and unjustly enriches foreign satellite operators who may not even keep their end of this bad bargain. I fervently hope that Congress will pass legislation like the SMART Act, which will clarify our authority and ensure that most auction proceeds stay in the United States and are spent meeting vital needs like rural broadband deployment and next-generation 911.

I look forward to your questions on these and other issues. Thank you again for the opportunity to raise these important issues before the Committee.