

## Remarks of Commissioner Geoffrey Starks

### Telephone Town Hall with Rep. Yvette Clarke on the Role of Technology in the Face of COVID-19

Via Teleconference  
April 14, 2020

Thank you, Congresswoman, for inviting me to speak to your constituents today. I'm looking forward to the dialogue and hearing from the fellow panelists and answering any questions.

America is facing a historic challenge, and New York City is at the heart of it. Just a couple weeks ago, the New York Times [profiled](#) the hard work of the staff at the Brooklyn Medical Center – working long shifts and even falling sick themselves. The challenges are enormous but New Yorkers are rising to the occasion. Across the city, New Yorkers are volunteering at hospitals, donating to food banks and helping neighbors in need.

Social distancing appears to be flattening the curve, and we need to keep it up. While keeping Americans home unquestionably is the right call, it comes with a steep price tag. Last week, another 6 million Americans filed for unemployment, bringing the three-week nationwide total to a staggering [17 million](#). While more data is required—both on the breakdown of job losses and public health data—part of the early results have delivered a clear message: COVID-19 is disproportionately hitting densely populated urban areas and having a devastating impact on African-Americans and other communities of color.

The FCC is the federal agency responsible for ensuring that all Americans have access to quality, affordable communications services, including broadband. I believe the FCC must enact a “connectivity stimulus” to see Americans through the coronavirus crisis and power our economy. For the first time ever in responding to an emergency pandemic, Americans are relying on the internet extensively for an indeterminate amount of time. When public health requires social distancing and quarantine, closing the digital divide becomes central to our collective safety and economic security.

In particular, we should leverage the Commission's \$8 billion in universal service funding, and focus our efforts on students and vulnerable, struggling Americans. Over 45 million K-12 students nationwide have been sent home. School districts across the country are rolling out distance learning programs, but 12 million kids – including [300,000 in NYC](#) -- can't access them because they don't have a home broadband connection or the devices to use it. Our long-standing digital divide has morphed into a monstrous new COVID-19 divide for these young learners. We must connect these young learners with devices and Wi-Fi hotspots or fixed internet so that they don't get further behind. And the time is *now*.

Each week, as millions more Americans apply for unemployment and food assistance programs - the FCC needs to enhance its Lifeline program, the only federal program with the sole mission of bringing affordable communications to low-income Americans and a critical aspect of our social safety net in times of economic turmoil. This would not be the first time the FCC has expanded Lifeline in a crisis; the George W. Bush-era FCC strengthened its programming as a result of Hurricane Katrina. And we should be partnering with the relevant agencies to make sure people know about this critical program, which most of the people who are eligible for have never heard of. Even before the COVID-19 crisis, 38 million people were eligible but only 7 million enrolled. The FCC must do more to educate people about Lifeline so it can benefit the ones that need it most. And the time is *now*.

All broadband providers should join the effort to support Americans in need. We often think of the digital divide as a rural issue, but Census Bureau surveys show that three times as many households in urban areas remain unconnected as in rural areas. In urban areas, cost is often the problem. To meet the needs of low-income people, some broadband providers already offer a low-cost tier. In times of emergency, no American should go without a connection because of cost. We must do more for struggling families, who already bear too many burdens of this health crisis and its economic fallout.

One final issue that I raise given what a fierce champion that Congresswoman Clarke has been on this issue, and that is noting that internet connectivity plays a central role in our democracy, and encouraging everyone here to be sure to fill out your 2020 Census which is happening right now online for the first time ever. The Census counts, and so do you.

We're facing an unprecedented crisis, but the FCC has the tools to help – we just need the courage to use them. Thanks again for inviting me. I look forward to this discussion.