

**REMARKS OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS
MEDIAJUSTICE #RIGHT2CONNECT TOWN HALL
VIA VIDEO CONFERENCE
APRIL 16, 2020**

Thank you, Steve, and MediaJustice for inviting me to speak at this timely and important event. It's great to be here with so many individuals and organizations representing those who have been marginalized, overlooked, or even forgotten. You all have been on the front lines; not just as thought leaders, but working to achieve equity and opportunity for all. Perhaps at no other time has your advocacy been more important than now, when our Nation and the world face the historic challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. I am pleased to lend my voice to ongoing efforts to ensure that all Americans have access to broadband as a right.

I have called for the FCC to enact a "connectivity stimulus" to see Americans through the coronavirus crisis and power our economy. While a lot of data are still coming in, 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. On a personal note, I read a [report](#) this week that Black residents of Kansas City make up 50% of those testing positive for the coronavirus, while they are only 30% of the population. Similar results are being reported in cities all around the country. Our longstanding digital divide has morphed into a monstrous new COVID-19 divide, and we have to act NOW to close that divide.

For the over 45 million K-12 students sent home from school, some more than 2 months ago, we must act NOW. In particular, we should leverage the Commission's \$8 billion in universal service funding, and focus our efforts on students and vulnerable, struggling Americans. It is estimated that at least 12 million students lack broadband at their homes or the devices to use it. Plan B for those students to connect to Wi-Fi at the local library or McDonalds is no longer an option. We must quickly get these students connected with devices and Wi-Fi hotspots or fixed internet so that they don't get further behind.

For the nearly 22 million newly unemployed who have filed claims for unemployment payments over the past month, we must act NOW. And for the low-income, displaced, homeless, food insecure, and social service dependent, we must act NOW. Many companies have stepped up with low-cost service offerings, increased minutes and data caps to accommodate the many ways that we are now dependent on internet connectivity, and pledges not to disconnect customers who can't pay their bills. But the FCC can do more.

Recent data show that only about 7 million households are enrolled in the Lifeline program, roughly a 19 percent participation rate among those who are eligible. We must get better at getting the word out about Lifeline, 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. The FCC also should be working to strengthen and expand the reach of Lifeline, as the George W. Bush-era FCC did in response to Hurricane Katrina.

Finally, for the incarcerated, we must act NOW. It's great that the [call was answered](#) by Congress to make phone calls and video visitation free for inmates housed in the 122 federal prisons across the country during the pandemic. But inmates and detainees in state and local prisons and jails need that same relief.

In closing, I want to assure you that I will continue to look for ways that the FCC can help ease the burden of this unprecedented crisis on our students and vulnerable communities. Thanks again for inviting me.