

**REMARKS OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS
ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON DIVERSITY AND DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT
VIA TELECONFERENCE
APRIL 28, 2020**

Good morning, and thank you for inviting me here to speak to this distinguished group of leaders and influencers. This Committee has been charged with a broad and deep agenda: to engage with the Commission on how to empower disadvantaged communities, how to accelerate small, minority-owned, and women-owned businesses into industries where they traditionally have not gained a significant foothold (including traditional media, digital news, and programming); and how to ensure that disadvantaged communities are not denied the wide range of opportunities made possible by broadband connectivity.

So many of you are on the front lines individually addressing these and related issues on a daily basis, and we at the Commission deeply appreciate you lending your time, knowledge and expertise to our efforts to better achieve equal opportunity for all Americans as we move toward a more diverse nation.

I'm sure you all, like me, are adjusting to working, communicating, and meeting remotely as we all must now do to stay healthy and to protect each other. I am thankful that technology allows us all to carry on the significant work of this agency and this Committee, the importance of which may just now be coming into full focus because of the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. I have to say that what I miss the most is people—every day, face-to-face human contact. I miss going to small towns and big cities and meeting people with stories to tell about how technology and what we do at the Commission is making a difference in their lives, or about how the lack of technology is affecting them.

I'm reminded of a trip I took in February to visit Albany, Georgia, which has been identified as one of the COVID hot spots and hardest hit areas in the state and the country. With a population of roughly 91,000, they've had more than 1,400 people test positive for the virus and 107 deaths, more than Atlanta's Fulton County which has a population of over 1 million. I didn't know at the time I was there where we would be today; folks in Albany were already experiencing a connectivity divide that most of us on this call will never have to deal with. During my Southern tour, I was focused mostly on individuals—school children who lacked connectivity at home and some even at their schools, families without the ability to search for jobs or access benefits online and the hardships that caused.

Two short months later, there's an acute need to focus as much on connectivity and basic survival for businesses as on individuals. Small businesses especially, which often times operate without a plan B if they have to close up shop for even a few days. Even before we began shutting down our cities and towns, I called for the FCC to enact a "connectivity stimulus" to see Americans through the coronavirus crisis and power our economy. I knew then that shelter-in-place mandates would mean increased dependency on broadband to support our everyday activities including work, school, and entertainment. 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.

Some local newspapers and broadcast stations that provide crucial localized services and information are struggling to keep operating. Several weeks ago we started hearing stories about how advertising dollars for newspapers and broadcasters were drying up as more public events were postponed or canceled, and companies in general became more reluctant to spend their dwindling revenues on ads. I suspect that many of these smaller operators and businesses are owned by people of color and women, already operating on a budget with no margins for error, and some may never recover.

Congress is paying attention and taking action, with programs and funding through the CARES Act and the Paycheck Protection Program targeted toward small businesses that may help some of these companies. But we are all reading about process roadblocks and red tape that may keep many from getting relief right now, when they need it to keep operating. As regulators, we can help by easing burdens resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent action by the Media Bureau has done just that: for example, granting flexibility to broadcast TV stations, waiving sponsorship ID requirements for COVID-related PSAs to air in donated airtime slots, and easing restrictions on shared local programming.

As the working groups present their reports today, I look forward to hearing your collective thoughts on how the stakes have changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For the Access to Capital Working Group, you certainly have had your work cut out for you. Moving the needle on broadcast ownership has never been easy, but we have to keep trying. I hope that your report, recommendations, and further deliberations address how we must respond to what I'm sure will be a disparate economic impact on people of color and women trying to become broadcasters. And now it's about more than finding capital and other resources to get in the broadcasting game; for the precious few who are already broadcast owners, how do we ensure that they stay in the game as they face these new economic challenges?

For the Digital Empowerment and Inclusion Working Group, I hope you will consider ways in which the FCC can use its authority to create a connectivity stimulus that will connect every student in the country to robust broadband and provide them with a device that will ensure their ability to keep learning.

To that end, today I'm proud to announce that I will be hosting a virtual conversation with HBCU Presidents on May 4th to discuss how the transition to online learning has impacted their students' ability to continue learning, innovating, and connecting. During this discussion, I look forward to hearing how these universities rose to the occasion to connect students without broadband access and get devices in the hands of those without laptops and tablets so they could complete their assignments online. HBCUs hold a unique position in this country and it is important that our next leaders have all the tools necessary to succeed.

But the need for connectivity does not end with our students. I hope you also explore ways to ensure that every household and small business is connected to the resources and services needed to survive and thrive beyond this crisis. We all know that internet inequality is

persistent, and that it disproportionately affects low-income Americans and communities of color—not unlike the impacts of COVID-19 infections on these communities. Universal connectivity is key to bringing all of us out of this crisis safely.

And for the Diversity in the Tech Sector Working Group, I hope you examine whether there will be new opportunities to steer those displaced from their jobs in sectors that may not fully rebound—especially women and people of color—into jobs in the tech sector. With 26.5 million unemployment claims filed over the last 5 weeks, it will be challenging to get people employed in many sectors, so what does that mean for the future of work? Can our newly heightened dependence on broadband ultimately offer broader career paths in the tech sector?

A final note on the importance of broadband and the contributions this Committee can make by focusing on connectivity issues. We know that broadcast is still the gold standard in reaching the most people, but it is undeniable that the internet is a powerful outlet. Coming out of this pandemic, consider whether there should be more of a focus on the internet, with its lower barriers to entry, as an equalizer that can allow more diverse voices to bypass traditional gatekeepers and allow more diversity to be both in front of and behind the camera.

Thank you again for allowing me to join you today, and I hope everyone stays healthy and safe.