

**REMARKS OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS
HBCU PRESIDENTS' ROUNDTABLE:
THE STATE OF CONNECTIVITY IN THE AGE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC
VIA VIDEO CONFERENCE
MAY 4, 2020**

Good afternoon Congresswoman Adams, Congressman Butterfield, our esteemed panelists, and all of you who have joined us online for this virtual meeting of HBCU leaders to discuss the state of connectivity for these institutions during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

I called for this convening because I recognize that Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are unique institutions and play a powerful role in this country. Some of our greatest leaders, both past and present, are products of HBCUs including, Thurgood Marshall, Toni Morrison, Marian Wright Edelman, Lonnie Johnson, John Wendell Thompson, as well as the Members of Congress who have joined us here today. As you can see from this notable group of HBCU alumni, to attend an HBCU is not only an opportunity to be challenged academically but it's also an opportunity to learn how to lead and serve our community.

We must be proactive and create a comprehensive approach to combat existing and potential challenges to broadband access. And this moment serves as an opportunity to do what HBCUs have historically done for our communities—advocate. According to the Pew Research Center, 34% of Black people in America do not have a home broadband connection. And a mere 58% of the Black community owns a laptop or desktop computer that is broadband-enabled. And as you probably have gathered from these numbers, Black people are more likely to be “smartphone-only” internet users. That means millions of Americans are operating on less than convenient and less than acceptable terms.

During my time at the Commission, I have focused my efforts on addressing internet inequality. And I use this term because we can no longer say that this is simply a digital divide. It has hardened -- the same people in the same neighborhoods have been left behind over and over again. And too often we think of this strictly as a rural-access issue; the numbers actually show that three times more households in urban communities remain unconnected as in rural areas. Further, research estimates that more than 18 million households lack broadband simply because it is too expensive. For many in our community, the number one barrier to adoption is affordability.

At the beginning of this pandemic, I proposed a connectivity stimulus where I called for an expansion of the FCC's Lifeline program, which is the only federal subsidy that gives low-income people access to vital voice and broadband services. Lifeline is a severely undersubscribed program with only 7 million households enrolled; there's approximately 38 million households that are eligible. I've called for the Commission to enter into MOUs with

other federal agencies that administer services that determine Lifeline eligibility in order to increase subscribership in a program that is part of our social safety net. That is why last week I was thrilled to see Senator Klobuchar, Senator Durbin, Congresswoman Fudge, Congresswoman Eshoo, and 140 Members of Congress write a letter to the Chairman advocating for interagency cooperation with the USDA and HHS with the goal of increasing subscribership in our Lifeline program. Additionally, I proposed that broadband providers move to meet the needs of ALL Americans, especially low-income people by offering an affordable, low-cost tier service. In times of emergency, no American should go without a connection because of cost. While we have seen some internet providers step up to expand discounted or free services to connect postsecondary students, more can and should be done, and in particular for those that have returned to low-income and rural households. They face significant barriers, and to support equitable achievement for these students, they must get connected. Too much is at stake.

There's a lot of speculation about whether this virus will come roaring back in the fall, so we must ensure that social distancing does not stop students from achieving academic success. And as I'm sure my guests here today will tell you, success for their students is not only the completion of coursework. Success is also the ability to receive academic advising which directly affects retention and graduation rates of which we know is tied to federal funds that institutions receive. Success also means students should be able to use their broadband connections to receive counseling services in order to maintain their mental health as this virus ravages Black communities across this nation.

Today, I encourage us all to remember that when we empower HBCUs, we are making an investment in our communities and the future of our nation. I hope today's conversation is meaningful to both our participants and our viewers online as we discuss the connectivity needs of students, faculty and staff at HBCUs.