

**STATEMENT OF COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
(AS DELIVERED)**

**BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE AND TRANSPORTATION
UNITED STATES SENATE**

**“OVERSIGHT OF THE FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION”
JUNE 24, 2020**

Chairman Wicker, Ranking Member Cantwell, and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to today’s hearing. It comes at a historic moment. So far, more than 2 million people in the United States have been infected with COVID-19 and over 119,000 have died. Unemployment has hit its highest levels since the Great Depression. Millions of children have missed months of in-classroom education. All this has profound implications for the FCC, and I look forward to discussing that with you.

Today, however, I also want to shed light on an additional perspective in my remarks by speaking not only as an FCC Commissioner, but as an African-American father of two young children who deeply cares about my country and my community. The civil protests of the last few weeks have sparked a movement that has centered around the Black experience in America. Each of us has our own unique, personal narrative about being Black in America. But there is also a common story, a shared collective experience, and over the last few weeks a tighter bond has formed through strong shared emotions: fear, frustration, and most of all, of course, hope.

Last week, alongside civil rights leaders—Reverend Al Sharpton, Marc Morial, Vanita Gupta, and Maurita Coley—I published an op-ed on broadband in America, with a particular focus on communities of color. Our historic failure to close the digital divide has had a devastating impact on American communities of color, both rural and urban, which the coming months and years will magnify exponentially without more urgent and successful intervention. In 2020, Black Americans and other people of color are still, by a wide margin, significantly less likely to have a home broadband connection than their counterparts. They have frequently worked around this by searching out libraries or restaurants offering free Wi-Fi. The pandemic has changed these fundamentals—shelter in place orders and closings have restricted or foreclosed completely the broadband access many of these public spaces provided, while classrooms and workplaces have moved to online virtual settings. Our long-standing digital divide has morphed into a monstrous COVID-19 divide.

A few thoughts:

Access to high quality broadband is a civil right we can’t afford to lose, but one that many can’t afford to have. We must focus on affordability as an access issue. Even before the pandemic, more than 18 million American households didn’t have broadband at home because it’s simply too expensive. With unemployment at Great Depression levels and people trying to

decide whether they have enough money for groceries or rent, this problem has undoubtedly worsened. There are a number of legislative proposals for broadband connections and devices for low-income families and the newly unemployed, and I can't overstate how I believe such efforts are essential to connecting and empowering all Americans. For my part, within the Commission's authority, I have long advocated that we require rural providers who build-out with universal service support to offer an affordable broadband option.

The Lifeline program remains disappointingly underused, and its benefits do not meet the needs of low-income consumers in this era of social distancing. The FCC must coordinate with agencies that administer services like SNAP or Medicaid that determine eligibility for the Lifeline program to ensure low-income communities learn about it and avail themselves of its benefits. Americans cannot afford for the government to work in silos and I'm thankful that 40 Senators signed a letter agreeing with that proposal, including many from this Committee, and I'm thankful for Senator Klobuchar's leadership on the congressional push for interagency coordination to increase Lifeline enrollment. We should also increase the voice and data offerings Lifeline covers to meet the connectivity needs of our low-income subscribers during this public health crisis.

We also need to focus on our youngest learners. Millions of students across the country remain disconnected, even though they spent this Spring in home "classrooms" away from school grounds. E-rate needs to meet the demands of the moment. To respond to the ongoing need for distance learning, we should permit schools to offer broadband connections including hotspots to their students. The outlook for school re-opening for the fall remains opaque, so this issue isn't going away.

I'm making my own investments to respond to these issues. Earlier this month, I announced my Digital Opportunity Equity Recognition, or DOER, program. With the help of an Advisory Board of digital equity champions, I will recognize organizations, companies and individuals who have helped make quality affordable broadband service available to unserved or underserved communities, with a particular focus on responding to the challenges of COVID-19.

The alarming current and predicted impacts of COVID-19 make clear that the people we all serve can no longer wait for connectivity. Inspired by the fierce urgency of now, always guided by hope, let us ensure that all communities have access to affordable and reliable broadband. If we do, I know we can create a better country for all.

Thank you again for inviting me today. I look forward to your questions.