

**REMARKS OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS
THRIVING WHILE BLACK: THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS
TECHNOLOGY IN ADDRESSING BLACK MENTAL HEALTH
VIA TELECONFERENCE
JULY 13, 2020**

Good afternoon and thank you all for participating in this important, timely, and necessary panel discussion about Black mental health. I organized this event today in recognition that we're not only living through a historic moment, but I believe it is the beginning of a historic movement in our nation. We are in the midst of an unprecedented public health crisis that has tragically claimed the lives of 130 thousand Americans. Recent federal data show us that Black and Latinx people are three times as likely to become infected with COVID-19 and two times as likely to die because of the virus in comparison to that of their white counterparts in America. At the same time, communities of color are more likely to be employed as essential workers putting them at greater risk for exposure. Additionally, our communities have suffered staggering job losses as cities and towns across the nation worked to contain the spread of the virus. And now our unemployment rates rival that of the Great Depression. On so many fronts, unaddressed inequities have been magnified during this pandemic, and have brought searing pain.

And with that pain comes the reminder that there is no one way to be Black 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. This has been magnified in the mental health crisis that impacts our communities. Recent data show that anxiety and depression for Black Americans has spiked from 36 percent to 41 percent in the week following the widely circulated videos of George Floyd's death. Where those numbers rightfully alarmed many, we also know that there has been longstanding work in our communities to call attention to a growing Black mental health crisis. This includes in 2019, when the Congressional Black Caucus established the Emergency Taskforce on Black Youth Suicide and Mental Health, which is chaired by Congresswoman Bonnie Watson Coleman, who has joined us here today. Some of the members of this taskforce are also present today as panelists including Dr. Michael A. Lindsey, David Johns, and Dr. Kia Darling-Hammond. The report produced by this taskforce alongside this moment in history presents a unique opportunity for policymakers to not only elevate an accurate narrative about Black mental health, but it also allows us a moment to produce policy solutions that center the needs of our most marginalized communities.

There is a distinct role for the Federal Communications Commission to play in this conversation. As you all know, the Commission has an important vote ahead of us in the coming days related to designating 988 the National Suicide Prevention Hotline. I know where I stand on helping to ensure that there is a three-digit dialing code for a national suicide and mental health crisis hotline that could literally save lives. I am also committed to connecting all Americans to affordable and reliable broadband which, if realized, will present opportunities for our communities to connect to lifesaving telehealth services, including mental health services.

Unfortunately, we're currently dealing with the reality of internet inequality, which has exacerbated other long-standing social gaps in every aspect of American life. Telehealth services surged during the coronavirus pandemic, and yet we have to deal with the harsh reality that Black communities disproportionately lack access to the telecommunications services that provide access to critical, life-saving care. This is why I have called for an expansion of the FCC's Lifeline program, which is the only federal subsidy that offers voice and broadband services at a subsidized rate to low-income Americans, to meet the critical needs of this moment in history. This program, which is vastly underutilized at an under-20 percent participation rate, can fulfill broadband and voice connection needs for many families that must choose between buying groceries versus purchasing an internet connection. I have called for the FCC to enter into MOUs with agencies such as the USDA and HHS, which administer programs like SNAP and Medicaid, which are two of the government services that automatically qualify households for the Lifeline program. The Commission must ensure that these eligible subscribers immediately learn about the Lifeline program and how to sign up for it. Americans can't afford for our government to work in silos right now.

And I want to be clear; these glaring inequities have been a historical, structural failure that have always deserved our attention. However, in this moment and in this movement, I challenge all of us to rise to the occasion and address the issues of the digital divide through a lens of equity with the understanding that broadband access is a civil right we can't afford to lose but many can't afford to have.

During this discussion today, our panelists will highlight the many ways in which Black people show up in their everydayness in this world: as the vulnerable and marginalized, as veterans, as LGBTQ+ and same-gender-loving people, as at-risk youth, and as people who are all deserving of policies that support our mental health and recognize that we matter. Thank you again for joining us for this panel today. I am looking forward to the discussion.