

**STATEMENT OF COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION**

**BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS & TECHNOLOGY
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY & COMMERCE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**TRUMP FCC: FOUR YEARS OF LOST OPPORTUNITIES
WASHINGTON, DC**

SEPTEMBER 17, 2020

Chairman Doyle, Ranking Member Latta, Chairman Pallone, Ranking Member Walden, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

Our long-standing digital divide has evolved into a monstrous COVID-19 divide. To respond to this crisis, we must do more. When this pandemic first hit, I highlighted the critical role that broadband would play in our response. I called for the Commission to adopt a “connectivity stimulus” to increase access to broadband service by expanding the Lifeline program, funding the purchase and distribution of mobile hotspots by schools and libraries, opening up new spectrum bands on a temporary basis, and encouraging broadband service providers to waive their data caps and increase or expand their affordable offerings. Over the last six months, some of those proposals have been adopted, but much remains to be done.

The need for affordable broadband is particularly great among American communities of color. Black, Indigenous, and Latinx Americans remain significantly less likely to have a home broadband connection than their counterparts. By a wide margin, these families disproportionately rely on public Wi-Fi, frequently offered by libraries and fast-food restaurants. As the father of two young children, I was heartbroken to see recent [pictures](#) of two little girls sitting with their laptops and notepads doing their schoolwork outside a Taco Bell in Salinas, California. As with many other inequities, COVID-19 has made internet inequality worse, with mandatory closings and social distancing cutting off the public Wi-Fi on which many people without home broadband rely.

The FCC has its own role to play. We should start by addressing the Lifeline program, which was designed to help connect the most vulnerable Americans. Even as we celebrate Lifeline Awareness Week this week, only about 20 percent of eligible households participate in the program, and its current benefits are wholly inadequate for this moment. The FCC should enter into formal agreements with agencies that administer services like SNAP and Medicaid that determine eligibility for Lifeline to ensure low-income communities learn about this critical program. Americans cannot afford for the government to work in silos and I’m thankful that 144 members of Congress signed a letter agreeing with that proposal, including many from this Committee. We also should provide the necessary support to allow low-income consumers to receive unlimited voice and data during this public health crisis.

We also need to take a fresh look at the E-Rate program. School has started across the country, and families like mine have created virtual “classrooms” around kitchen tables and on living room floors. But more than 15 million students still lack broadband at home and the devices to use it, millions of whom are students of color. Earlier this month, the Colorado Attorney General petitioned the FCC to waive its E-Rate rules to permit schools and libraries to offer broadband connections, including hotspots, to their students. I’ve called for similar action for months, and we should take up the merits of that petition immediately.

The work shouldn’t stop there. We have an affordability problem in this country. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, one researcher found that broadband prices were too high for more than 18 million households that otherwise have service in their neighborhoods. As I said the last time I testified before this Committee, the FCC needs to better understand why so many families remain without connections and what would constitute an affordable offering. Ultimately, the FCC should require USF auction winners to offer an affordable broadband service option.

As we invest in bringing broadband to every American home, we should be guided by the best data available. For too many years, the FCC has acknowledged that we don’t really know where broadband is and is not in this country—and hasn’t solved the problem. I supported the Broadband DATA Act, which set a deadline for the FCC to buckle down and fix the data. That deadline is next Monday, and I have seen no evidence that the Commission is on track to adopt the required rules in time. That’s a shame. As our recent enforcement action against BarrierFree demonstrates, errors in the deployment data carriers submit to the FCC can have enormous consequences. Getting the rules for how we verify data and respond to challenges to our maps right is critical, and I will keep calling for the FCC to make mapping a priority in reality, not just rhetoric.

These issues demand the Commission’s unwavering focus. Unfortunately, there are some who would use the FCC as political weapon against their perceived adversaries during an election year. The President’s Executive Order on Section 230 and NTIA’s subsequent Petition for Rulemaking claim to champion free speech, but they are really about working the refs at a pivotal moment for the President’s political future. The FCC should reject NTIA’s proposals and focus on bridging the digital divide.

The current and predicted impacts of COVID-19 make clear that Americans can no longer wait for high-quality, affordable broadband. That’s why I’ve made my own investments to respond to these issues. Working with an Advisory Board of experts, this week I announced the first honorees of my Digital Opportunity Equity Recognition (DOER) program. From rural areas to urban corridors, students to seniors, the collective scope of their accomplishments is impressive: nationwide efforts that cover all 50 states; hundreds of community hotspots; connections for over 600,000 students to devices and broadband during the pandemic; connections to 16,000 public housing units; thousands of miles of rural connectivity; support for thousands of school districts, 160 library branches and community locations such as hospitals; and outreach and support to over 400 tribal communities to name a few. I’m honored to

recognize the people and organizations that are working to connect all Americans to reliable, equitable, and affordable broadband services.

But the fight for equity isn't limited to telecommunications services. In the wake of the larger movement for racial justice, the Commission must do its part to advance policies that center our most marginalized and create opportunities internally to ensure we have more diverse voices at the table. That's why I was proud to work with Chairman Pai to develop the FCC's Early Career Staff Diversity Initiative announced last week. Under this program, the Commission will offer paid internships for students who may otherwise be unable to afford to live in DC for a semester, and specifically increase recruitment for internships and entry-level positions from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and other Minority Serving Institutions. We can and should take steps to proactively usher in a diverse generation of policy advocates in the communications sector to create meaningful change for our shared future.

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