

**Remarks of
Commissioner Geoffrey Starks at
the 2020 INCOMPAS Show**

September 15, 2020

Thank you, Angie, for that introduction, and congratulations to the INCOMPAS team for successfully bringing this event online. I know it's been a challenging year for your members, and I am grateful for the opportunity to tell you about my vision for digital equity and have a conversation with Angie about the important issues facing the Commission.

The FCC's top priority must be connecting all Americans to modern high-speed communications networks. I don't need to tell you—especially those of you working every day to connect your communities—that even basic internet access hasn't reached all Americans. Broadband is the essential tool of our digital world—something everyone needs to get a job, do their homework, pay their bills, and accomplish every other online task many of us take for granted. We haven't finished the work of getting access to all Americans.

It has been 25 years since the phrase “digital divide” was first introduced. Clearly, we are not talking about a temporary condition. Low-income people, people of color, and people in rural areas either aren't getting online or are making great sacrifices to get connected. That means driving to the library to fill out job applications and joining the waitlist for a Wi-Fi hotspot. It also means that, when so much debate and education and community building happen online, important perspectives are being left out.

Solving this problem was always a moral imperative, and COVID-19 has raised the stakes. When this pandemic first hit, I called for 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, many with the help of INCOMPAS members.

But much remains to be done. INCOMPAS and many other organizations have called on Congress to provide emergency broadband funding through the COVID crisis. I agree. I also think the FCC should act now. We should start by addressing the Lifeline program, which was designed to help connect the most vulnerable Americans. At a time when so many need Lifeline's benefits, fewer than 20 percent of eligible households participate in the program, and its current benefits are wholly inadequate for this moment.

We should also make our E-Rate rules meet this moment, when more than 15 million students still lack broadband at home and the devices to use it. 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. We should grant that petition immediately.

More broadly, we need to tackle our country's long-term broadband affordability problem. In recent months, the FCC has focused much of broadband deployment work on rural areas. Connecting rural areas is important, but it won't solve the whole problem. Census Bureau surveys show that three times as many households in urban areas remain unconnected as in rural areas. Black and brown households are disproportionately less likely to have a fixed broadband connection than their white counterparts. I recently published an op-ed with civil rights leaders that highlighted the need for bold and expansive action that will enact inclusive connectivity policies that center on communities of color. That means fixing our broadband data, promoting competition, and requiring USF auction winners to provide an affordable option.

On a related note, I recently announced that I have established the Early Career Staff Diversity Initiative alongside Chairman Pai. Our goal is to create inclusive policies that promote the interests of all Americans and that is why we need to hear a variety of perspectives from people of all backgrounds. Through this initiative, the Commission will offer a select number of paid internships to those who are financially unable to participate in unpaid roles and we will increase recruitment of students from HBCUs, Minority Serving Institutions, and affinity groups such as the National Black Law Students Association, for all of our early career programs. It is time for our policies and the people advocating for them to reflect the diversity of America.

I look forward to working with you all on these priorities. Thank you again for the chance to speak with you all today.