

**REMARKS OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS
BLACK IS TECH VIRTUAL CONFERENCE
SEPTEMBER 24, 2020**

Thank you to the Black is Tech team for organizing this virtual conference and inviting me to speak today. I know we were all hoping to be together in New York for this event but like many of you, when I began working from home in March, I did not know that we would still be in the midst of this crisis at the close of September. But it goes without saying that our community has been especially hard hit by COVID-19, and so I am honored to join you all virtually. We're dealing with a host of problems that have been bubbling underneath the surface for some time now -- issues of economic security, racial justice, and the digital divide, just to name a few. This COVID-19 pandemic has revealed what happens when we fail to deal with persistent issues of equity and fairness. But, the optimist in me firmly believes that there are better days ahead. That's one thing that I love about the technology space. It gives us an opportunity to be innovative, solve complex problems, and imagine and create for a world that doesn't presently exist.

Unfortunately, there are not always opportunities for everyone to equitably participate in this powerful and imaginative space. And there are few reasons for this but today I'm not only going to focus on the problems that exist, which is something that is routine and easy to do in the midst of such despair, I'd also like to present some actionable solutions.

At the Federal Communications Commission, my number one priority is addressing internet inequality. I am particularly concerned about access to and adoption of broadband in low-income communities and communities of color. Over the last few years, rural areas have received a lot of attention from the Commission and the larger telecom space. And as a Kansan, I understand the rural broadband access issue is real, however, I think we fail to take an intersectional approach to much of our policy work. When we talk about the digital divide, we need to peel back the layers. When we do, it is readily apparent that nearly three times the people who live in urban areas remain unconnected to broadband as those in rural areas. Additionally, according to Pew Research data, 34% of Black people in America do not have a home broadband connection, a disproportionately higher percentage than their white counterparts. That is why we need to solve the issue of affordability and expand the Commission's Lifeline and E-Rate programs that are designed to meet the connectivity needs of low-income households and students across the nation.

This matters because solving the digital divide is inextricably tied to the success of our current and future Black innovators and change makers who reside in communities like Oakland, California; Albany, Georgia; and Detroit, Michigan. Access to broadband means that we have the opportunity to create and shape economic and social outcomes both presently and in the future. And if we aren't a part of these decisions, others will continue to shape those outcomes for us.

When we're thinking about the future of work, for example, we know that Black communities will be disproportionately impacted by increased automation and digitalization in the workforce. We need to reskill and upskill people whose jobs will be replaced by technology or those who will increasingly need to work alongside technology. The future of our economy is dependent on how we treat our most vulnerable communities including those most susceptible to job displacement or disruption. But the fact of the matter is that we can't ensure everyone is prepared to participate in a changing workforce without also ensuring that everyone across this country has an affordable, reliable broadband connection. And it is past time for our policies to meet the moment, but where there are gaps, we're going to be dependent on folks present here today to continue making investments in our youngest learners, bolster our anchor institutions, including HBCUs, and guide Black STEM professionals over the course of their careers. We must ensure our community is seen and respected as truly essential to our workforce.

In many ways, Black communities are both hyper-visible and invisible; over-included and excluded. We are more likely to be targeted with misinformation or voter suppression tactics, but less likely to be able to fill out the 2020 Census online or register to vote or request a mail-in ballot. Wrongly accused of a crime because a facial recognition algorithm riddled with inaccuracies and bias misidentifies our faces, yet hospitals using health care algorithms to allocate resources have been found less likely refer Black patients to programs that assist in managing medical needs. This is a significant push and pull in the digital space that demands our shared attention and advocacy. We need engineers, policy advocates, and investors from Black communities in decision-making positions in the technology sector because the understanding of inequities and the willingness to eradicate them is essential to the betterment of our society.

That is why I very recently created the Early Career Staff Diversity Initiative at the FCC, which will seek to diversify the talent among Commission staff at the earliest stages of their careers and ultimately increase diversity in the communications sector overall. The technology space in this country must better reflect the diversity of our nation. When we continue to push for seats at the table in what is arguably the most powerful sector in our society, we have the opportunity to change the social and economic fabric of Black communities across America and the world.

I leave you with words of guidance by two black visionaries. Mary Church Terrell advised us to be sure we are "lifting as we climb." And as Shirley Chisholm famously said, "If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair." Let's make sure we encourage each other to reach higher, and, as always with our community, continue to find a way if necessary.

Again, thank you for your time and I look forward to engaging with you all on these pressing issues.