

**REMARKS OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS
RAINBOW PUSH COALITION AND CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION FUND
MEDIA AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS SYMPOSIUM
KEYNOTE ADDRESS
NOVEMBER 19, 2020**

Thank you to Reverend Jesse Jackson for inviting me to speak today at the Media and Telecommunications Symposium and thank you to the Rainbow PUSH Coalition and the Citizenship Education Fund for your continued advocacy for civil rights on behalf of our most marginalized communities. In this prominent year in the fight for racial and economic justice, it is imperative that we recognize that this movement would not have been possible without the tireless efforts of the work of our historic civil rights organizations. Organizations like yours have reminded us that the fight for justice is neither a fleeting moment nor a state of convenience. It is instead a consistent, ever-evolving movement built on the personal and professional sacrifices made by civil rights leaders who advocate for those who have been ignored or forgotten. In 2020, this movement requires us to fight diligently for innovative policies in technology and telecommunications that center our Black, Indigenous, Latinx, immigrant, LGBTQ+, and low-income communities. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that the stakes have never been higher.

Our failure to create inclusive policies that close the digital divide has done serious harm to the Americans who were already struggling to put food on their tables prior to the pandemic. The failures of our past, however, do not have to dictate the future. It is time—in fact, it is past time—for the tech and telecom sector to take account for issues of equity and fairness. These are not far off, distant concepts. These are principles that will anchor our shared, collective future. One of the last trips I took before the novel coronavirus began raging through our country was a Southern Tour throughout the southeastern United States. I made many stops, but none meant more than my opportunity to visit Selma, Alabama. As I entered that historic town, I crossed over the Edmund Pettus bridge, the site of Bloody Sunday, where the late Congressman John Lewis risked his life in the fight for civil rights. I was reminded of how much work still needs to be done to live up to the idea of freedom that our ancestors dreamed of. After all, it was Congressman Lewis, who once said: “Access to the internet...is the civil rights issue of the 21st century.” I was proud to amplify the Congressman’s legacy in an *Essence* op-ed alongside civil rights leaders, where we called for broadband to be considered a civil right for all, but in particular for us to redouble our efforts to better connect and empower communities of color across the nation.

We have seen this digital divide morph into a monstrous COVID-19 divide. Many of the advocates present here today have been discussing the effects of the digital divide for decades so I know you all can relate to both the exasperation and the frustration I felt when this global pandemic finally laid bare that access to broadband, the devices needed to have a full online experience, and the skills needed to safely navigate the internet, are essential to our daily lives. And it also took this moment for us to more properly expand the narrative about who remains on the wrong side of the digital divide. It’s not just those in rural areas who lack access to broadband. In fact, three times as many households in urban areas remain unconnected as in

rural areas. What's more is that a disproportionate number of people of color do not have a home broadband connection compared to their counterparts.

Here's what that means.

First, the digital divide and the economic opportunity divide run parallel to one another. Broadband is the vehicle that allows individuals to take control of their lives and empower themselves, their households, and their communities. Whether families are piling into their minivans to sit in parking lots in Mississippi or New York, we are negatively impacting the personal dignity of these Americans when they do not have access to broadband at home. Working family members should be able to set up their workstations from the safety of their actual homes instead of setting up a schedule and a map of locations to access free Wi-Fi. And it is important to acknowledge that those who are currently out of work due to this unprecedented public health crisis are disproportionately from communities of color. The recent Economic Policy Institute report shows that the unemployment rate for Black workers is higher than the peak of the overall unemployment rate during the Great Recession. This is an emergency. Broadband is important for these Americans to be able to file for unemployment claims online right now, but even more important is the future, where these workers will absolutely need home broadband to apply for jobs, access job training, or work remotely once the economy turns around.

We should also be aware of how this moment impacts Black-owned businesses that are on the wrong side of the technology divide. This pandemic has caused approximately 440,000 Black-owned businesses to shutter, which is a 41 percent plunge since the beginning of February. Research shows that many Black-owned businesses do not have the same resources to digitize their companies and respond to the moment so that consumers can access their services and products via online platforms. Black-owned businesses are cornerstones of our neighborhoods and they need access to updated technology so they can serve our communities. Rebooting our economy means ensuring that Black businesses get connected.

Second, there's no greater reminder of our intersecting fates during this pandemic than that of our dependency on essential workers, who are overwhelmingly Black and Latinx. Less than one in five Black workers and roughly one in six Latinx workers can work from home, which means their work outside of the home puts them at greater risk of exposure to the virus. Black, Indigenous, and Latinx Americans all have a death rate due to COVID-19 at nearly triple or more than their white counterparts. Access to telehealth services via affordable, reliable broadband can save lives during this pandemic because it will allow people to safely manage their health from home without in-person visits to emergency rooms or physicians' offices. Telehealth services will become increasingly important for workers who are unable to take time off to travel to and from doctor's appointments for routine check-ups related to diabetes, high blood pressure, and maternal healthcare. If we invest in broadband, we will lessen the health disparities across our most marginalized communities.

Third, during this time of increased social distancing, broadband access allows us to keep in touch with our loved ones, which helps maintain our mental health. This is incredibly important to our seniors who are most at risk of falling victim to this virus. This period of time

can be extremely isolating for this age group whether they are quarantining in their homes or assisted living facilities. Our seniors are the most disconnected because, for many of them, they believe: “I’ve been here for 85 years and I never needed the internet.” However, during these crucial times where fellowship with church members and hugs from grandkids are virtual, they need access to affordable broadband, especially because many of our elders are on fixed incomes. Additionally, this is the group that needs a helping hand with digital skills so they can send pictures of their secret mac and cheese recipes for Thanksgiving or navigate a phone app to safely order their prescriptions online for home delivery. We must do more to assist the generations that have given us so much.

Finally, we must prioritize our youngest learners and future leaders. As a father of a kindergarten student, I know that working and teaching from home has been extremely difficult for parents to manage. But I always remind myself that my hardships pale in comparison to those parents who do not have or cannot afford broadband access at home for their students to keep up with their studies. Research shows that Black students may fall 10.3 months behind and Latinx students are at risk of falling 9.2 months during the pandemic, which will have everlasting effects on this generation. The future is counting on us. I come back to my time in Selma, where I met with a mother of three who is a resident of the George Washington Carver homes. Her life was changed because of a connectivity program initiated by Selma Mayor Darrio Melton. This program brought free broadband and tablets to the community and it allowed for this mother to complete online assignments for her degree program as her children finished their homework without trips to the local library or restaurants. During that conversation, it was clear that the ability to get online at home is truly transformative and it serves as a reminder that the federal government must make access to affordable, reliable broadband a top priority.

I would be remiss not to briefly mention another FCC priority that I’m sure is top of mind for many watching from home today and that is media ownership diversity. I have long said that our broadcasters need to look like the diversity of America. At the Commission, we have a statutory mandate to promote media diversity and that includes everything from who owns the broadcast license to who sits in front of the camera. More specifically, the FCC must meet its obligation to promote ownership by women and people of color.

The Commission has an NPRM that will soon be released which holds the promise to do just that. GeoBroadcast Solutions, LLC has petitioned the Commission to revise the FM booster rule to allow, on a limited basis, geo-targeted content to originate from FM booster stations. This geo-targeted content will allow for stations to provide hyper-localized content including alternative language news, weather, emergency alerts, and advertising periodically during the broadcast day. It has the potential to provide a method for stations owned by socially disadvantaged groups to better serve their communities, create opportunities for small businesses to advertise in a more cost effective manner to a targeted audience, and for FM stations owned by people of color and women to increase advertising revenue. Economic opportunities for marginalized communities are a priority for me, and one that the Rainbow PUSH Coalition has long fought for in their advocacy for media diversity before the Commission. This is an effort that we must continue to push for in the future because broadcast media has the transformative ability to empower and inform.

And I leave you with this. During Reverend Jesse Jackson's address before the Democratic National Convention in 1984, he said: "No generation can choose the age or circumstance in which it is born, but through leadership it can choose to make the age in which it is born an age of enlightenment, an age of jobs, and peace, and justice." It is important that we all adhere to those words of wisdom because our fight for civil rights, particularly in the tech and telecommunication ecosystems, will continue to impact every aspect of our lives, not just now but for generations to come.

Thank you.