

**REMARKS OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS
AT STATE OF THE NET 2021**

JANUARY 26, 2021

Thank you to the Internet Education Foundation for inviting me to speak with you at the close of the first day of this year's State of the Net. We're gathering at an exciting moment at the beginning of a new administration and a new Congress. To those of you who have taken on new roles in the last few weeks, I extend my sincerest welcome. I share your excitement, energy, and hope. To address the unprecedented challenges we face, we're going to need all that energy and more. Today, I want to focus on one critical aspect of moving our country through and forward from this difficult time: bringing high-quality, affordable broadband into every American home.

Early in the pandemic, many of us quickly recognized how critical home broadband access would be to our coronavirus response. Months of staying home has meant taking our daily activities—work, school, medical care, and connecting with loved ones—online. But not for everyone. Even before the pandemic and the economic devastation it has caused, tens of millions of Americans did not have an adequate home broadband connection. Our long-standing digital divide has morphed into a monstrous COVID-19 divide.

But let us speak plainly. In 2021, Black Americans and other people of color are still, by a wide margin, significantly less likely to have a home broadband connection than their counterparts. This cannot stand. We can no longer defer the hard work on digital equity and believe that a future group and time will solve this issue. This is the time, and now is the moment. When we focus on broadband in America, we must focus on the smoldering front that communities of color constitute in our battle against internet inequality. As we look to our shared future—an unprecedented crisis and an unparalleled opportunity—leaving households disconnected will hurt our ability to rebuild the economy and our workforce; diminish our ability to keep Americans and our healthcare system safe by advancing telemedicine; and dim the educational horizon of young learners everywhere who fall further and further behind.

With widespread vaccination on the horizon, we are all beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel. We also know, as the President and his medical advisors have emphasized this week, that we have many difficult, challenging months ahead. That is why my top priority for the coming weeks is getting emergency broadband access to as many Americans as possible. Late last year, Congress passed omnibus appropriations and emergency coronavirus relief legislation, which provides \$7 billion for broadband internet access.

That funding will cover, among several important priorities, a new \$3.2 billion Emergency Broadband Benefit for low-income families. The goal is to connect low-income households, especially households with school-aged children, to broadband networks at affordable rates. Broadband providers will be reimbursed up to \$50 each month per low-income household they serve. If the household is on Tribal land, the reimbursement is up to \$75. The providers can also be reimbursed up to \$100 for providing the household with a connected

device like a computer or tablet if the household also contributes towards the device. Congress also created several eligibility criteria to ensure the program reaches those most in need during this coronavirus crisis. The Emergency Broadband Benefit supports people who are eligible for the FCC's existing Lifeline program (generally households at or below 135 percent of the Federal Poverty Guidelines) or the free or reduced-price school lunch or breakfast programs, people who have received a Federal Pell Grant, and those who have experienced a COVID-related loss of income.

I have great expectations for this program. If we're successful, the Emergency Broadband Benefit will reach more disconnected low-income people and households of color than any previous FCC effort to close the digital divide. But Congress has—quite reasonably under the circumstances—given us just 60 days to set up the program. There are lots of details to work out, and I am focusing, most immediately, on two issues: First, how will we get the word out? As many of you know, and I have long been exasperated about the poor job the FCC has done in recent years to get the word out about the Lifeline program. Only about 20 percent of Lifeline eligible households actually subscribe. For the Emergency Broadband Benefit to succeed, we're going to need to do much better. That means a broad, collaborative outreach effort that must coordinate across the federal government and also include state and local governments, broadband providers, non-profits, philanthropy, educators, and direct service providers. I've heard from many organizations that are planning to get involved, and I'm eager to support and amplify their efforts.

The second issue is encouraging broadband providers to participate voluntarily. Last year, I was heartened by the large number of providers that participated in the Keep America Connected pledge, so we know many providers want to help their communities get through this difficult time. In the coming weeks, I will be working to make sure the rules for the Emergency Broadband Benefit are as clear and simple as possible and that providers get their questions answered quickly. I have also started outreach to providers and their associations—something all of us can do. If you care about getting emergency relief to every eligible American, reach out to your broadband provider and the companies that serve your constituents, and let them know that their participation is important.

Making the Emergency Broadband Benefit work well will make a huge difference to many families, but I am mindful that this is a temporary solution to long-term problem. Internet inequality held millions of Americans back from their full potential long before COVID-19. In recent years, the FCC has focused almost exclusively on rural deployment. Now I'm from Kansas, and that's an important part of addressing internet inequality. But Census Bureau surveys show that three times as many households in urban areas remain unconnected as in rural areas. For example, in Detroit, Michigan, close to half of the population lacks broadband access. In the city alone, approximately 29,000 students lack access to adequate broadband services, a startling figure which demonstrates the urgent need for connectivity.

Many communities are working tirelessly to close the digital divide, and they should know that help is on the way. Before the pandemic, I visited Montgomery and Selma, Alabama. I had the chance to sit down with Selma Mayor Darrio Melton to discuss what his historic treasure of a city needs to continue developing and rebounding. We had a great dialogue and,

most importantly, met with members of the Selma Public Housing Authority, who have a special project to get people living in low-income housing free broadband and a tablet. I'll never forget when I met with a single mother of three children who lived in the George Washington Carver homes and benefitted from the program. She was a living example of the power of broadband to transform lives. She told me with great pride how at-home broadband access enabled her to complete assignments for her online degree program while her children finished their homework—all without requiring her to make trips to the local library or restaurants to find an adequate connection.

We need to bring that transformative experience to millions more households, and beyond the Emergency Broadband Benefit, there are additional concrete steps the Commission should take. First, Lifeline needs an update. As I noted earlier, only about twenty percent of eligible households take advantage of the benefit. I have proposed that the Commission enter memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with other federal agencies that administer programs with similar eligibility criteria. Ideally, if someone is enrolled in a qualifying program like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), they should learn about Lifeline. We also need to better understand what works and what doesn't. The Commission has never completed its planned study of the program. We need to do this so Lifeline can be updated to reflect today's needs.

Second, we need to make sure that the FCC's investments in infrastructure lead to service that American families can actually afford. Our controlling statute is explicit: "Quality services should be available at just, reasonable, and affordable rates." If we use our finite funds to build out broadband infrastructure without any regard given to whether people can afford the service once it arrives, we have not done the job assigned us by Congress. That is why I was first on the Commission to call for consideration of requiring USF recipients to provide an affordable option as a condition of receiving high-cost support. I am eager to work with stakeholders around the country to incorporate the lessons of this year's affordability challenges into a long-term commitment to affordability into our Universal Service Fund high-cost program.

Third, we need to update our E-Rate program with badly needed flexibility. For too long, our ability to respond to the educational challenges posed by COVID-19 has been hamstrung by the previous administration's crabbed interpretation of the E-Rate statute. We should quickly move to make E-Rate meet this moment, including giving schools flexibility to spend the funds to support students who are required to learn at home. This is an important step for the current school year, during which many students will continue distance learning. Making this change will also make the program ready for future extenuating circumstances—different health crises, natural disasters, and more. It's taken far too long to make E-Rate meet this moment, and we need to be better prepared in the future.

Finally, I'm eager to work with congressional leaders to expand the Commission's ability to respond to the affordability challenge. Congress should build on the bipartisan support for the Emergency Broadband Benefit and accelerate efforts to make broadband affordable. The Accessible, Affordable Internet for All Act, led by Whip Clyburn and Senator Klobuchar, includes many great ideas and an infusion of funding. That legislation would codify my proposal to require providers that receive USF high-cost funding to provide consumers with an affordable

option. It would also require a study on the extent to which affordability contributes to the lack of broadband adoption and on ways to improve federal subsidies to households to make broadband affordable.

It was, of course, the late Congressman John Lewis who said: “Access to the internet ... is the civil rights issue of the 21st century.” This challenging year across our country has brought internet inequality to the forefront of our technology and telecommunications policy discussion. Let’s keep it there. No family should have to decide between keeping the lights on or getting the household connected, and no family should miss out on the benefits of broadband because of cost. I look forward to working with all of you to make universal, high-quality, affordable broadband a reality.