

**REMARKS OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS
EMERGENCY BROADBAND BENEFIT ROUNDTABLE
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
WASHINGTON, DC
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Good morning and thank you to all of the panelists joining us today. When I look down the list of today's participants, I see leaders who have spent much of the last year working tirelessly to make broadband an impactful part of our response to COVID-19—building on years of experience fighting to close the digital divide.

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.

Which brings us squarely to today. Many of us have spoken together about EBB over the last few weeks, and I am deeply pleased that we are gathered here today to have the robust discussion and cross-collaboration that it will take to make the Emergency Broadband Benefit a success.

There are lots of details to work out, but the two biggest issues we face in setting up the Benefit are both on the agenda today: First, how will we get the word out? As many of you know, 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. It also means making the sign-up process as straightforward and simple as possible. Today's discussion includes many of the leading thinkers and doers in the world of digital inclusion, and I am eager to learn from their experiences.

The second issue is maximizing the number of broadband providers who participate. We will only succeed in reaching every eligible community if a wide variety of providers—big and small—join the effort. My conversations with broadband providers over the last year give me confidence we can meet that goal. Many of them responded to the pandemic with programs to support their communities. The Emergency Broadband Benefit should expand, extend, and amplify those efforts—and bring new providers to the table. I look forward to hearing from today’s panelists on how we remove any unnecessary hurdles to provider participation and ample consumer choice.

The late Congressman John Lewis made the urgency of this work clear when he said: “Access to the internet ... is the civil rights issue of the 21st century.” 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 the Emergency Broadband Benefit is an important part of that effort. 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. Help is on the way. I look forward to working with all of the experts joining us today to make the Emergency Broadband Benefit a success and to make universal, high-quality, affordable broadband a reality.