

**REMARKS OF  
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS  
THE FUTURE OF WORK:  
BLACK-OWNED BUSINESSES AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE  
FEBRUARY 11, 2021**

Good afternoon and thank you for joining me for today's event. We have an incredible group of participants here today, and I am honored that you all are able to join me.

Around this time last year, I was on a Southern Tour across Georgia and Alabama. I visited Montgomery and later Selma, where the late Congressman John Lewis risked his life in the fight for civil rights. During my visit, I had the opportunity to sit down with Selma Mayor Darrio Melton to discuss what this historic treasure of a city needs to continue developing and rebounding and one of those needs included connectivity. I was later introduced to leaders of the Selma Public Housing Authority, who have prioritized getting the residents in low-income housing access to free broadband and tablets. I met with a single mother of three children who lived in the George Washington Carver homes and benefitted from the program. 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. She was a living example of the power of broadband to transform lives and communities.

One month later, we were in the midst of a global pandemic and the country collectively took notice of what the people of Selma already knew – the digital divide and the economic opportunity divide run parallel to one another. These divides impact businesses, households, and entire communities. More specifically, we have learned that small businesses owned by Black people have been hit hardest by the pandemic. One study shows Black business ownership in the U.S. plummeted 41% as the novel coronavirus shut down the economy and restructured the way we go about our daily lives. Research also shows that many Black-owned businesses lack the resources needed to digitize their companies and respond to the moment so that consumers can access their services and products via online platforms. We must remember that rebuilding our economy means ensuring that Black businesses get connected.

In order to boost our economy, we must also connect Black workers to affordable broadband. Although broadband access has taken up a lot of oxygen in recent policy debates, this pandemic has made it clear that we must couple that discussion with broadband adoption, especially because nearly three times the people who live in urban areas remain unconnected as those in rural areas. Additionally, Pew Research data shows us that, 34% of Black people in America do not have a home broadband connection, a disproportionately higher percentage than our white counterparts.

And this matters because people can't work remotely, start or sustain their own business, or upskill and reskill themselves using online training programs if their barrier to adopting broadband is affordability. Rebuilding our economy depends on us empowering our most vulnerable communities. 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 no matter their race, income level, or address.

We need to help people across America keep pace with this changing world. That is why I am excited about the \$3.2 billion Emergency Broadband Benefit program, which will make broadband services more affordable for struggling families during the COVID-19 pandemic. And it is my hope that this program will be the start of our efforts to ensure communities of color and low-income communities have meaningful connectivity.

This moment in history has brought us an unparalleled opportunity to focus our efforts on the fundamental value of equity as we rebuild our workforce, businesses, and economy. I look forward to hearing from these thought leaders and advocates as we work collaboratively to achieve a more equitable future.