

**REMARKS OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS
JOINT WEBINAR WITH NTIA'S MINORITY BROADBAND INITIATIVE:
WOMEN OF COLOR AND THE TECHNOLOGICAL FRONTIER
MARCH 23, 2021**

Good afternoon. Thank you for joining us here today in celebration of Women's History Month. Over the last year, we have seen women, and particularly women of color continuously make sacrifices to keep both our economy and our families afloat. However, women's leadership throughout our nation is not acknowledged nor celebrated nearly enough and that is why I am thrilled to be in the virtual presence of women who are working tirelessly to close the digital divide through both their research and advocacy.

As people who live at the intersections of diverse identities, the leaders here today know the importance of advancing inclusive, thoughtful solutions that center our most marginalized communities. However, as I'm sure will be discussed today, inclusive solutions are only effective if we properly define the problem. We need research, both quantitative and qualitative, that assists us in better understanding the scope and depth of the digital divide as well as the community-centered policies that are needed to best address this persisting inequity.

The digital divide morphed into a monstrous COVID-19 divide and left families across this nation in distress as they searched for affordable solutions to access education, work, healthcare, and government services that shifted to an online format. And more than one year into the pandemic, millions remain offline in tribal, rural, and urban communities and are forced to plan their days around trips to the top of a hill or a library parking lot to access the Internet. It is clear that we must act with a sense of urgency to implement solutions that ensure people can access affordable, reliable broadband from their homes both during this pandemic and after we make it through these unprecedented times.

The FCC is working hard on a few solutions, one of which is the Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB), which we can expect to roll out to consumers by the end of April. This benefit will provide a discount of up to \$50 per month towards broadband service for eligible households and up to \$75 per month for households on Tribal lands. These households can also receive a one-time discount of up to \$100 to purchase a connected device such as a laptop or tablet. If we are successful—and we must be—the Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) will reach more disconnected low-income households and people of color than any previous FCC effort to close the digital divide. Additionally, I will soon vote to implement \$250 million in round two funding for the Commission's COVID-19 Telehealth Program. As I have previously stated, many are coping with mental health issues that have been exacerbated by this ongoing pandemic, particularly in communities of color. Through this funding, healthcare providers have the opportunity to assist people gain access to life-saving mental healthcare.

However, these solutions are not permanent, and we know that issues of inequality will remain here after we put this pandemic behind us. But I am hopeful because we have an unparalleled opportunity to boldly address issues of equity and inclusion in this nation. I want to

be able to look back at this moment and know that we made real the promise of accessible and affordable broadband for all.

But as things currently stand, there is too much at stake and there is a lot of continued uncertainty, especially for women of color looking to rebound from the economic fallout caused by this public health crisis. Prior to the pandemic, Black women and Latina women became an economic force as they overcame barriers to create thriving businesses. As small businesses are struggling to stay afloat, we have learned that entrepreneurs' ability to digitize access to their goods and services alongside consumers' ability to navigate these online services will impact these businesses' economic recovery. Our failure to close the digital divide will mean that we're erasing years of progress and it's time that we recognize that when our most marginalized communities are thriving, the rest of the nation benefits.

Although the future is uncertain, I do know that the panelists here today are going to continue working diligently to make the closing of the digital divide a reality in this nation. And I truly look forward to the dialogue and I want to thank each and every one of you for your continued leadership in this space.

Before we dive into the conversation moderated by Dr. Francine Alkisswani from the NTIA's Minority Broadband Initiative, I want to turn things over to Evelyn Remaley who is the Acting Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Communications and Information for remarks.

Thank you so much for joining us here today.