

**REMARKS OF
ACTING FCC CHAIRWOMAN JESSICA ROSENWORCEL
24TH BIENNIEL TDI CONFERENCE
JULY 26, 2021**

It is an honor to be back at TDI's biennial conference. Obviously, this year's virtual conference is a lot different than 2019 when I joined you on the campus of Gallaudet. But no matter the format, it's always great to be with TDI. That's because no voice is more trusted when it comes to making communications technology more accessible for the millions of Americans living with disabilities.

During that 2019 event, I opened my remarks by acknowledging the recent retirement of Claude Stout—TDI's legendary long-time leader. I talked about how TDI famously submitted over 1,200 filings with the Commission during under his leadership. I am pleased to report that I am not Claude Stout's only admirer at the FCC.

As many of you know, each year, the Commission gives out something we call Chairman's Awards for Advancement in Accessibility. Typically, we present these awards to people who have developed new accessible technologies. Considering 2020 marked the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the 10th anniversary of the 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act, we thought it would be appropriate to use these awards to recognize some giants in the field of promoting accessibility. One to the three honorees that evening was Claude Stout. The FCC was proud to honor him that night, and I'm pleased to see his tradition of excellence in advocacy lives on.

I was appointed Acting Chairwoman of the FCC on January 21st. Just hours before my swearing-in, TDI submitted comments on the Commission's COVID-19 Telehealth program. Not only that, Eric Kaika recruited more than a dozen additional groups as co-signers. So while the leadership at our respective organizations may have changed, it is already clear that TDI continues to foster collaboration and offer expert advice to make FCC policy better and smarter.

I have a deep appreciation for TDI, not just because of your expertise, but because I have a long history of working with you on the issues you care about.

You see before I came to the Commission, I served as legal counsel to the Senate Commerce Committee. I worked on a range of technology and communications issues. And I'm particularly proud to say that one of the highlights of my tenure is that I worked on the 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act.

I was on the team that helped draft the bill and helped shepherd its passage in Congress. Then I had the privilege of watching the President sign it into law. And, pre-pandemic, when we were all working in the office, a signed copy of the 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act was on the wall right outside the entry to my office. I wanted people to see it, because I wanted to remind people that we can in fact do big things.

This law took the concept of functional equivalency from the Americans with Disabilities Act and updated it for communications in the digital age. Now functional equivalency may sound like the kind of regulatory lingo that only a lawyer could love. But for millions of Americans with hearing and speech impairments, this means they have the right and ability to pick up the phone, reach out, connect, and participate more fully in the world.

This law is terrific. But I also know we can't rest on our laurels. Because accessibility and functional equivalency cannot be after thoughts. We need to continue to give meaning to those principles in the law in everything we do.

And that includes, of course, the work of the agency—especially as we reach towards what will hopefully be the end of this pandemic. That's because the events of the past year and a half have changed our relationship to technology. Broadband is no longer nice-to-have. It's need-to-have for everyone everywhere.

To help all Americans get connected and stay connected during the pandemic, the Federal Communications Commission has launched the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program.

Eligible households can receive discounts of up to \$50 a month for broadband service, and up to \$75 a month on Tribal lands. Participants can also receive a one-time discount of up to \$100 on a computer or tablet.

If your family qualifies for Medicaid, SNAP, free-and-reduced school lunches, or other aid programs you are eligible to participate. Households that lost significant income in 2020 may also qualify.

The response to this program has been phenomenal. More than 1 million Americans enrolled in the first week. Altogether, over 3 million households have signed up since this program went live in May.

To sign up or learn more, check with your local broadband providers to see if they are participating, or you can go to fcc.gov/broadbandbenefit to find a participating broadband provider near you.

We've also set up the Emergency Connectivity Fund to help schools and libraries get people connected where they live. Through this program, we are in the process of investing \$7.17 billion to help get laptops and tablets into the hands of people who lack them and then connect these individuals to fixed or mobile broadband service at home. In drafting our rules for this program, the Commission said that if people with disabilities require certain devices to connect to the Internet, schools and libraries are expected to accommodate those needs. We also included a provision that says applicants with disabilities may request a waiver of the support limits for laptops and tablets—so they can get the services and devices under the program that work for them.

The Commission is also in the process of investing \$250 million to help more healthcare providers deliver more connected care. The value of telehealth has become clear in this

pandemic. We want to make sure that this technology makes healthcare access more equitable, rather than worsening health disparities. That is why we have made applicants and participants of all the Commission's telehealth programs aware of their responsibilities under accessibility laws. The FCC's Disability Advisory Committee has also been exploring issues relating to accessibility gaps that have become apparent during the pandemic, and accessible telehealth has been mentioned as an important issue that may warrant further discussion.

We're not only working to make sure people have internet access as we try to get beyond the pandemic, we're also working to ensure the availability of telecommunications relay services or TRS. TRS, of course, is the communications service that allows people with hearing or speech disabilities to place and receive basic phone calls. As you know, there are a lot of different kinds of TRS available in the marketplace.

During the pandemic, the Commission took note that it was not always easy for TRS providers to fully staff their in-person call centers. So last year, the agency granted TRS providers emergency waivers of certain staffing rules. And in February of this year, I directed the agency to extend these waivers. We are going to keep on monitoring the situation to ensure that these waivers will continue to be available as long as they are necessary to keep the service available and functionally equivalent. So the users of these services are always front of mind.

The Commission also continues to work on a number of issues and challenges that preceded the pandemic.

This February, the Commission updated our wireless hearing aid compatibility requirements to ensure that our rules reflect the latest technical developments and standards and recommitted to making 100 percent of wireless handsets hearing aid-compatible.

This April, the Commission sought comment on whether updates are needed to our rules for captioning on television in light of so much more watching in so many more ways during the pandemic. The comment period just closed on July 6, and we are reviewing submissions and weighing next steps.

We've also been looking at our rules specifically for IP captioned telephone service, or IP CTS, which lets you simultaneously listen to another party and read the captions of what that party in a telephone conversation is saying. We are currently reviewing comments on the FCC's proposal to adopt measurable standards and metrics for captioning delay and accuracy for IP CTS. It's a matter that I consider really important and I know that you do too.

The Commission is also thinking about accessibility issues in proceedings where it may not be obvious. This May, the Commission updated our rules for inmate calling services. As part of these reforms, the FCC must coordinate with the Department of Justice to ensure that incarcerated people with disabilities at federal prisons have functionally equivalent access to telecommunications. That makes a big difference for their families who want to keep in touch. But it makes a big difference for all of us because we know that contact with kin reduces recidivism. And we are going to keep this effort going because we are seeking comment more

broadly on the provision of communications services to incarcerated people with hearing and speech disabilities in order to identify further improvements we can make.

We want to engage with TDI on all of these issues. And if you believe there are other areas under our authority that are of concern I encourage you to let us know. Of course, knowing TDI, I know that won't be a problem. You know how to make your opinion heard. I'm glad you do. Because when we improve access to communications for millions of individuals with disabilities, we strengthen our economy, our civic life, and our nation.

So let's get to work—and do it together.

Thank you, and have a great conference!