

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS**

Re: *Promoting Telehealth in Rural America*, Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, WC Docket No. 17-310, (February 18, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of telehealth for millions of Americans. For people across the country, telehealth allows for remote diagnoses and treatment when patients can't travel to meet their doctors in person. This health care alternative is critically important to communities across the country, and especially in rural America, which continues to see limited medical resources stretched even further. For doctors to stay connected to their patients, rural health care providers must have high-quality broadband services.

The Commission's Rural Health Care Program helps rural health care providers obtain the same level of connectivity as their urban counterparts, at comparable rates. I'm glad we're taking another look at this important program. When the Commission last considered changes to the Rural Health Care program back in 2019, I expressed concern about how those changes would affect health care providers and the telecom providers that serve them. As I'd done in other proceedings, I called for the Commission to collect and utilize the best available data and raised specific questions about how we would compare rates between urban and rural communities. Then-Commissioner Rosenworcel shared my concerns, and we both urged that the Commission conduct additional notice and comment. Unfortunately, our concerns were not taken up, and as we feared, implementation of the new rules revealed serious problems with the data used to calculate support.

I appreciate that Chairwoman Rosenworcel is taking steps to address these issues and consider how we can make this important program even better. Today's order seeks input on critical questions like how to classify different areas based on rurality; how to differentiate similar services; how to improve data quality for rural health care providers; and whether we should adopt a transition period as we implement new rules. We also take steps to reduce fraud and make the program more effective and efficient. I look forward to the comments and moving forward to improve the Rural Health Care program.

Thank you to the staff at the Wireline Competition Bureau for their hard work on this proceeding.