

**REMARKS OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS
CONNECTING BLACK COMMUNITIES: FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL
STRATEGIES FOR CLOSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE
FEBRUARY 22, 2022**

Good morning, everyone, and welcome to our discussion on Connecting Black Communities: Federal, State, and Local Strategies for Closing the Digital Divide. I am honored to be joined today by government officials and public leaders who are dedicated to the cause of expanding equal access and digital opportunity for all of our communities throughout the nation. We are gathered here today with a special purpose. Black History Month is a time to celebrate the achievements Black people have made in the fight for equality and to reflect on the efforts and sacrifices of those who have worked tirelessly to get us here. But it is not just about the past. It is also a time to look ahead, to prepare, and to take action that furthers our shared mission of equity and justice for all Americans.

Today, we focus on a topic where there remains much to do: closing the digital divide. The internet is an indispensable resource that touches nearly every aspect of daily living: education, business, better health and social connections. But far too many Black Americans, in particular, remain on the wrong side of the digital divide, unable to fully participate in the 21st century society and seize its opportunities. In fact, recent research finds that almost one-third of Black adults do not have a home broadband connection. That must change. We will never curb the digital divide unless we close the wide gap in connected Black households. 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.

Congress recognized the considerable, urgent need for affordable broadband in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. It set aside \$3.2 billion for us here at the FCC to create an Emergency Broadband Benefit program last year. More recently in the bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Congress included an additional \$14 billion for a long-term Affordable Connectivity Program. But that's not all. NTIA, housed within the Department of Commerce, received over \$42 billion for its Broadband Equity Access and Deployment Program. All told, this amounts to a historic amount of funding—approximately \$65 billion to address broadband access and digital inclusion efforts.

However, as I have said many times, setting up these programs is only half the battle. They must work, and work well, to meet disconnected Americans where they are. What excites me about today's event is that it explores what we have long known: only a whole-of-nation approach can drive the results we need. That must include engagement by federal, state, and local leaders; action by the public and private sectors; and of course execution guided by the needs of our vulnerable Americans.

As you will hear from our speakers today, those efforts will be wide-ranging and far-reaching. I want to highlight one of the places where I will focus my efforts. I am proud that my colleagues here at the FCC supported my proposal to seek comment on a Pilot Program to

expand participation by households that benefit from Federal Public Housing Assistance (FPHA). The over 5 million households benefiting from federal rental assistance programs, including public housing and the housing choice voucher program (Section 8), include many extremely low-income families with an especially acute need for the economic, health, and educational benefits broadband can offer. FPHA beneficiaries were eligible for the EBB program, but only a small share actually enrolled. Through our recently adopted order, the Commission concluded that innovative approaches are needed and sought comment on a proposed Pilot Program that would increase enrollment, including expanding awareness of ACP among FPHA beneficiaries and offering assistance with navigating the enrollment process. Comments are due March 16. I would encourage all of those watching today to submit their creative ideas and proven methods for connecting FPHA beneficiaries to broadband so that this Pilot Program can be a success for those most in need.

Let me close. All of that brings us to today and our discussion about the scope and scale of our efforts; what's working and what needs additional development; and the innovative methods of cooperation we need to close the digital divide. Thank you and, again, welcome.