REMARKS OF
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"YOUR HOME – YOUR INTERNET": EXPANDING ACP ENROLLMENT AMONG FEDERAL PUBLIC HOUSING ASSISTANCE HOUSEHOLDS

Thank you, Vivian, for that warm introduction. And thank you to the Council of Large Public Housing Authorities for hosting me today. Some of you may be asking yourselves right now why member of the Federal Communications Commission is addressing a gathering of public housing authority leaders. That's a good question! I am pleased to be here today because I see tremendous opportunities for us to work side-by-side to give your residents access to all the benefits of broadband.

In my role at the FCC, I am laser-focused on closing the digital divide. Even before the pandemic, we knew that the internet is an indispensable resource that touches nearly every aspect of daily life. And when the pandemic hit, I published an op-ed in the New York Times in March of 2020 foretelling that "the coming weeks" would "lay bare the already-cruel reality of the digital divide: tens of millions of Americans cannot access or cannot afford the home broadband connections they need to telework, access medical information and help young people learn when school is closed." Looking back, I am reminded how hard it was in those early days with COVID-19 to imagine how our world would transform over the next two years. Millions of families suffered in concrete ways from digital inequality—from missed online learning to inaccessible telehealth to social and mental health affects we are only beginning to understand. Today, I don't encounter many people who really need convincing that every American needs high-quality, affordable broadband at home.

There is still hard work to do before we reach that goal. Congress has given us a big push with broadband affordability funding at a previously-unheard-of scale. It set aside $3.2 billion for the FCC to create an Emergency Broadband Benefit program last year. More recently, in the bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, included an additional $14 billion for a long-term Affordable Connectivity Program. For eligible households, ACP can reduce internet costs by up to $30 each month (and up to $75 each month in Tribal lands). As the White House announced last week, many ISPs now offer high-speed plans that are free with ACP eligibility. That's critical, because we know for many low-income families even a small broadband expense it too much.

Ensuring that ACP benefits the people who need it most requires careful stewardship and deep engagement. As President Biden noted in his remarks about the program last week, more than 11.8 million households have already signed up, but many millions more are eligible. We have to get the word out to the estimated 36 million more households who qualify but have yet to enroll. That includes everyone who is at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level or participating in certain programs like SNAP, Medicaid, WIC, SSI, certain veterans and Tribal

benefits, and—this is where you come in—Federal Public Housing Assistance. The Department of Housing and Urban Development provides rental assistance to approximately 4.8 million households through a variety of programs. The FCC has funding to get those folks online, but so far, we have only signed up a small share of them. When I look at the data where we can reach more vulnerable households and make up ground, I consistently come back to housing. I see a clear synergy between housing and connectivity; if we are helping a family secure housing we should be able to help them secure an internet connection as well.

To help close the enrollment gap, I am working on a Pilot Program to expand ACP participation among households receiving Federal Public Housing Assistance through public housing, vouchers, and other programs. *Your Home – Your Internet.* The proposed Pilot Program that would look to increase enrollment, including expanding awareness of ACP among housing beneficiaries and offering assistance with navigating the enrollment process.

To choose the right approaches, and to succeed in the follow-through, we need your help. You and your colleagues who have dedicated their careers to providing safe and high-quality housing to millions of Americans have expertise to share. About 100 public housing authorities—including many represented in this room—have participated in HUD's path-breaking ConnectHome program over the years. And many more have partnered with local organizations and devoted their own resources to tackling the digital divide in other ways. Those are experiences we can build on together.

As the Commission has been developing this new Pilot Program over the last few months, I have met with housing authority leaders and their many partners who are already hard at work getting residents connected. For example, earlier this month, I traveled across California to get the ground-level feel for some of those efforts. Let me tell you about a few of the highlights from that trip: In Los Angeles, more than 1000 units make up Nickerson Gardens in Watts, the largest public housing community west of the Mississippi River. It's a big place, and a substantial share of the 6,879 public housing units managed by the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles. HACLA, community partners, residents, and the ISP Starry have worked together to get 78 percent of those units online. That's huge, and they're not done. The day I visited, staff were back outside the community spaces offering information and assistance to those have not signed up yet. And I got to sit down with Ms. Chica, President of the Resident Advisory Council there at Nickerson Gardens, who is at the center of it all, leading the way in getting her neighbors connected..

In San Francisco, I spent Cinco de Mayo in the Mission celebrating the opening of Casa Adelante—143 beautiful affordable homes that have free fiber through San Francisco's Fiber to Housing program. As of the City's 2021 report to the Board of Supervisors, Fiber to Housing had connected 7,378 units—an enormous accomplishment. New and renovated buildings offer a great opportunity to provide internet access that is baked in, not bolted on. But the San Francisco team also emphasized their commitment to connecting even older parts of the city's in-demand affordable and public housing stock. As you all know, many older buildings still providing public and affordable housing today were constructed long before the internet age.

Wiring that kind of construction is expensive, disruptive, and often technologically challenging. San Francisco is developing and deploying innovative solutions to overcome those obstacles.

And in Oakland, alongside a celebration for the terrific Oakland Undivided program, I spent time with Patricia Wells, the executive director of the Oakland Housing Authority. I want to thank her by name for her crash course in how a range of programs—public housing, vouchers, project-based section 8, and other efforts—come together to serve different parts of a large, diverse community like Oakland. OHA owns or provides rental assistance to more than 17,000 units, including 1,454 public housing units in 13 sites. During the pandemic, OHA recognized the particular needs of their residents with children and provided laptops to facilitate remote learning using funding from the CARES Act. Resident service coordinators continue to work hard to identify referrals and partnerships for low-cost broadband, but OHA's intake assessments and surveys indicate a significant number of residents still need a reliable internet connection they can afford. These are exactly the households I think the FCC should be working hard to connect with ACP.

I plan to keep having these conversations. I am guided by three essential themes: Awareness, Trust, and Enrollment. I particularly want to make sure I connect with housing leaders in a variety of different communities—Tribal, urban and rural, big and small. Your experiences from around the country form an essential input into the FCC's thinking. We have collected formal comments and reply comments on the proposed Pilot Program, and FCC staff are now working hard to develop a plan to be implemented in the coming months. Now is precisely the right time for your input.

In the meantime, I want to give you a sense of the promising ideas I am considering. First, we can make the ACP application easier to understand and complete. I don't need to tell you all that filling out forms can be a real barrier for families struggling to meet their basic needs. We cannot eliminate all the effort involved in demonstrating eligibility and signing up, but we can make it easier. Here is one example: the application says you are eligible for ACP if you receive Federal Public Housing Assistance. Over the last few weeks, multiple people have told me they were not sure whether a particular program like Housing Choice Vouchers fell into that category. We need to get this right, and it starts by being thoughtful about the language our audience would use and recognize.

Second, we can make it easier for public housing authorities and their allies in state and local government to help their residents sign up. For residents who are new to the internet, online applications can be tough. We have a paper alternative, but that presents its own challenges, like gathering hard copies of supporting documents. Getting people approved automatically online will often be easier, and we can make offering assistance easier. The Commission is also actively working with HUD staff to share more kinds of data so that more HUD households will be automatically approved when applying for ACP online, reducing the need to file supplemental documents.

And, finally, we can invest in local efforts to build digital skills—an essential part of digital equity. Around the country, neighbors are helping neighbors gain confidence online.

Last week, EveryoneOn—an organization with a long relationship with HUD and many of you—released new research findings on digital skills, which they called "an important pillar of digital inclusion." EveryoneOn finds, consistent with other research, that 36 percent of lower-income adults have low digital skills. They need training to see how they would use the service ACP makes possible. The good news is that many dedicated people are already doing the work. One of the great perks of this job is talking with young interns and fellows—they go by "digital navigators," "community tech assistants," and many other names—who have helped neighbors experience for the first time the joy of emailing a far-away friend or the relief of getting telemedicine without leaving home. These person-to-person efforts work, and many more people can benefit from them.

So from ensuring enrollment is a smooth process for applicants, to data matching with HUD, to expanding the availability of digital navigators, these are preliminary ideas, and I am eager to hear your reactions and alternatives. I look forward to working with you; there are so many needed collaborations at every level. I want to support the digital equity work in your community and be a resource as you make new strides toward digital inclusion. Thank you again for allowing me to join you today, and please be in touch.