

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS**

Re: *Affordable Connectivity Program*, WC Docket No. 21-450, Third Report and Order (August 5, 2022).

The Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) has successfully supported over 13 million American households get affordable or zero-cost broadband access. Through the ACP, we have made great strides in decreasing the digital divide and ensuring that, as NAACP President Derrick Johnson and I wrote last year in a joint CNN article, “[n]o family should have to decide between putting groceries on the table or getting their household connected.”¹

But while we have done much, there is much more to do. At a recent White House event, President Biden announced that approximately 48 million households are eligible for ACP.² Of that 48 million, nearly 5 million households are eligible because they receive federal housing assistance in the United States. This includes programs such as public housing, the housing choice voucher program (also known as Section 8 vouchers), Indian Housing Block Grant Program, Indian Community Development Block Grant Program, Title VI, Tribal HUD VASH program, and project-based rental assistance, that benefit millions of Americans, including extremely low-income families. However, of these nearly 5 million households, only approximately 500,000 have signed up for ACP support. We can and must do better. There is a particular nexus between housing and connectivity: if we can help a family secure housing, we should be able to help them secure an internet connection as well.

We identified this issue when we adopted the ACP rules in January, and I’m thankful for all of the comments and feedback the Commission received in crafting solutions that can help solve this challenge.

Today, I’m proud that we adopt a Third Report and Order creating the *Your Home, Your Internet Pilot Program*. Through federal housing assistance, millions of Americans have access to a home. It’s time to help them take advantage of ACP to access affordable Internet as well. The Pilot Program is guided by three steps: first, increasing awareness; second, gaining trust; and third, executing on enrollment.

Awareness. Trust. Enrollment. That’s the path forward.

What will the *Your Home, Your Internet Pilot Program* do? It is a one-year pilot program with the goal of increasing enrollment, expanding awareness of ACP among federal housing assistance recipients through targeted outreach, and offering assistance with navigating the enrollment process. We will achieve these goals in a few different ways.

First, I have met with advocates and housing participants around the country, both in-person and virtually, and have been collecting feedback on what we can do to improve ACP and the enrollment process.³ I’ve met with housing authority leaders and their many partners who have been tirelessly

¹ Derrick Johnson & Geoffrey Starks, CNN, We Have to Close the Digital Divide. That Means Internet Access for Everyone, (Mar. 9, 2021), <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/09/perspectives/broadband-access-fcc-naACP/index.html>.

² The White House, Fact Sheet: President Biden and Vice President Harris Reduce High-Speed Internet Costs for Millions of Americans (May 9, 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statementsreleases/2022/05/09/fact-sheet-president-biden-and-vice-president-harris-reduce-high-speed-internet-costs-formillions-of-americans>.

³ Government officials and housing authority experts including those from the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles, the Denver Housing Authority, Boston Housing Authority, Jersey City Housing Authority, the Los

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working to connect eligible households. For example, earlier this year I traveled across California and met with many advocates that helped to inform the Pilot Program. 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 providers have worked together to get 78 percent of those units online. That's huge, and they're not done. 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. The day I visited, folks were back outside the community spaces offering information and assistance to those who have not signed up yet.

I heard many things that day, but in terms of what we can do better, many advocates indicated that eligible applicants decline to apply likely because they don't believe their housing assistance falls under the terminology on the ACP's website. That is a mismatch between housing participants and their understanding of whether they were ACP eligible. I've heard the same concern in meetings across the nation, from Colorado to New Jersey to Massachusetts to New York. As a result, we consulted and coordinated with HUD Secretary Fudge, HUD Deputy Secretary Adrienne Toman, and the HUD team to ensure that ACP and the *Your Home, Your Internet Pilot Program* are properly structured to be most beneficial to eligible households.

In response, the Pilot Program now includes changes to the ACP enrollment materials to facilitate a smoother enrollment process. For example, it clarifies to interested households what federal housing assistance programs are eligible to participate. This includes modifying the language used on our applications to more clearly state what federal housing assistance is, and what programs are covered. Such as, in the past, we used a term, "Federal Public Housing Assistance." But that isn't a term that any other agencies use. We will now change that language to "federal housing assistance," which is a term HUD proposed.

We will be making program-wide changes that will benefit federal housing assistance, including our continued coordination with the Department of Housing and Urban Development, to finalize a data sharing and computer matching agreement.

For households receiving federal housing assistance who require a manual review of their application, the *Your Home, Your Internet Pilot Program* will include a requirement for USAC to create a template that federal housing assistance recipients may use to ensure that they are submitting the proper information for manual review. Consistency and clarity will undoubtedly help here—in the past, inconsistent guidance has hampered enrollment.

Additionally, to help ensure more eligible households have their application accepted through the National Verifier, *Your Home, Your Internet Pilot Participants* requires USAC to designate a direct point of contact for organizations that will provide support for assisting consumers through the application process.

Second, we will be selecting up to 20 pilot participants, diverse in geography and size, to help increase ACP participation during the one-year pilot. Participants will represent urban, rural, and Tribal communities, and may be federal government agency partners, non-federal government agencies (local housing authorities) and third-party organizations serving federal housing assistance recipients across the country. The fact is that by empowering local organizations, those that have built relationships in the community and are trusted by eligible households, we are likely to see results.

These applicants will no doubt propose a variety of activities to increase enrollment, including the use of site-based outreach and digital navigators, new promotional materials, and hands-on application

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Angeles Office of the Mayor and the New York City Office of the Mayor's Chief Technology Officer have shared their insights and expertise as we developed the Pilot Program.

assistance. We know that these activities can make a real difference. A recent study by Boston Consulting Group found that in a study of 1,500 people nationwide who were supported by a digital navigator, over 65% of them obtained internet access or computer or tablet at their home.⁴ If we can replicate those results throughout the Pilot Program, imagine the number of households that will be connected.

Of course, these Pilot Program participants need capital to fully test their innovations and achieve our goals. To support these efforts, we will be offering up to \$5 million in grant funding for Pilot Program participants. These grants will enable participants to experiment with innovative and creative ideas to achieve the goals of the *Your Home, Your Internet Pilot Program*.

I'm glad that, at the same time we are adopting the *Your Home, Your Internet Pilot Program* we are also adopting the ACP Grant Program. We must move quickly to get the Pilot Program ready to accept applications, and by adopting both items together, it will ensure that grant funding is ready to go as we announce the 20 participating entities in the *Your Home, Your Internet Pilot Program*.

These applicants will also, as part of the Pilot Program, be given direct access to the National Verifier to better assist customers in applying for ACP benefits. This model has helped eligible households overcome enrollment challenges in the Lifeline program, and a similar approach is warranted here.

Third, I'm proud to say that we will be supporting the 20 *Your Home, Your Internet Pilot Program* participants here at the FCC by allocating an additional \$5 million for FCC outreach activities alongside the \$5 million in grant funding allocated to Pilot Program participants. This funding can be used to collaborate with federal and other agency partners that work with federal housing assistance recipients, or to support the Pilot Program and ACP outreach in other ways. The \$10 million total that will be allocated to support *Your Home, Your Internet Pilot Program* is a fantastic deposit toward reaching those eligible households that receive federal housing assistance, but remain un-enrolled.

Real challenges require creative thinking and solutions. I'm very excited to see this Affordable Connectivity Program Pilot Program come to fruition. I look forward to closely following the *Your Home, Your Internet Pilot Program* participants to see what trends develop, and lessons we should learn. Take note – I also expect that the lessons learned here, of course, will be applicable in helping ACP enrollment more broadly. Here's the point: with broadband, we will not be truly successful unless every person has the same opportunity to participate in our connected future.

I'm thankful for the support and partnership of Chairwoman Rosenworcel. I also want to thank my fellow Commissioners for the *Your Home, Your Internet Pilot Program*. I especially thank the FCC staff who worked diligently to prepare this item. From the Wireline Competition Bureau, Allison Baker, Cheryl Callahan, Jessica Campbell, Joel Graham, Jodie Griffin, Trent Harkrader, Diane Holland, Jamile Kadre, Sherry Ross, Zachary Ross, Hayley Steffen, Kesha Woodward, and Eric Wu; from the Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau, Eduard Bartholme, Zac Champ, Keyla Hernandez-Ulloa, Miriam Montgomery, Alejandro Roark, Mika Savir, and Joy Sears; from the Office of Economics and Analytics, Mark Azic, Joanna Fister, Giulia McHenry, Eugene Kiselev, John Pedersen, and Maciej Wachala; from the Office of General Counsel, Susan Aaron, Larry Atlas, Malena Barzilai, William Dever, Michele Elison, Andrea Kearney, Andrea Kelly, Rick Mallen, Brendan McTaggart, Linda Oliver, Bill Richardson, Jeffrey Steinberg, Elliot Tarloff, and Chin Yoo; from the Office of Communications Business Opportunities, Cara Grayer, Maura McGowan, and Joy Ragsdale; and from the Office of Inspector General, Hillary Burchuk, Sharon Diskin, David Hunt, and Eric Phelps.

⁴ *A Human Approach to Closing the Digital Divide*, Boston Consulting Group, June 13, 2022, <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2022/how-to-close-digital-divide-with-human-approach>.