

**STATEMENT OF  
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS**

Re: *Promoting Telehealth in Rural America*, Order on Reconsideration, Second Report and Order, Order, and Second Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, WC Docket No. 17-310 (January 26, 2023).

We are currently in the midst of a winter season that has seen many, including children, battling what some public health experts have termed a “tripledemic”—COVID, RSV, and a resurgent flu. I can’t think of a better time, then, for the Commission to update, and improve, our Rural Health Care Program. Telehealth continues to save and improve lives for those in rural America relying on broadband for their next doctor’s appointment. Growing up in a family of doctors, who serve many patients that live in rural America, I’ve seen and heard how important it is to ensure that rural health care providers have the same connectivity as their urban counterparts. This Program is doing that hard work.

This item has its roots in an *Order* the Commission adopted in 2019. At that time, I joined then-Commissioner Rosenworcel in dissenting from the majority’s plan to adopt a new method to determine support for the Telecommunications Program, often called the “Rates Database.”<sup>1</sup> I was worried that the Rates Database could negatively impact program participants and that further study was needed before we should take action.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, almost immediately, my fears were realized and the Commission began issuing waivers due to significant anomalies that arose in the initial median urban and rural rate calculations in the Rates Database.

The item we adopt today will provide Rural Health Care Program participants with much-needed clarity and certainty going forward. We return the Telecom Program to the rate determination rules that existed prior to the 2019 *Order*. We eliminate the need to rely on waivers and make additional changes to improve the Rural Health Care Program rules to increase efficiency and reduce delay.

At the same time, we take this opportunity to improve, in a thoughtful manner, the rate determination rules. Importantly, in proposing to update the rules going forward in today’s Further Notice, we propose and seek comment on two new methods to determining rural rates. We propose rational methods that should make the process simpler while also protecting the Universal Service Fund from waste, fraud, and abuse. These proposals should make it easier for eligible health care providers to receive support as soon as they become eligible. But, in proposing these changes in the Further Notice, we give those who serve some of the most remote health care providers an opportunity to weigh in and help inform our rulemaking. I hope they do so.

Last, in 2019, and 2022, I repeatedly called for the Commission to collect and use the best data available to analyze proposals as we consider changes to our rules and programs. I’m glad that in this item we seek comment on how to revise FCC Form 466 to improve the data we collect. As we consider additional changes to the Rural Health Care Program, we must ensure that our efforts mitigate and eliminate unintended consequences. To that end, I’m glad that commenters have already favorably weighed in to support collecting more detailed data. Only through a methodical and deliberative process with roots in accurate data can we ensure that the spirit and goals of the Rural Health Care Program are achieved.

I thank the Chairwoman for her leadership and strongly support this item. My thanks to the dedicated FCC staff for their fantastic work.

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<sup>1</sup> *Promoting Telehealth in Rural America*, WC Docket No. 17-310, Report and Order, 34 FCC Rcd 7335, Statement of Commissioner Geoffrey Starks Approving in Part, Dissenting in Part (2019).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*