

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS**

Re: *The Uniendo a Puerto Rico Fund and the Connect USVI Fund*, WC Docket No. 18-143, Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (October 27, 2022).

Between 2017 and 2020, two hurricanes and a number of earthquakes tore through Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, bringing with them a level of destruction that devastated the territories. In their wake, the hurricanes left significant loss of life, devastation to property, and the need to rebuild much of the damaged infrastructure. Communications networks specifically were nearly decimated in the wake of the storm during a time when communication with loved ones, emergency services, and information from authorities was more important than ever. I heard this and more firsthand when I hosted an FCC field hearing in Puerto Rico in 2020 on resilient communications networks. I learned from people like Elba Aponte Santos, the President of the Asociación de Maestros de Puerto Rico and Darrick Kouns, the Operations Chief, Puerto Rico, Information Technology Disaster Resource Center, just how important it was that we ensure that communications networks are always available, particularly to meet public safety needs.

Here at the Commission, we jumped into action to help the islands rebuild by creating the Uniendo a Puerto Rico Fund and the Connect USVI Fund. Critically, support from these funds have been used to rebuild, harden, and strengthen the networks across the islands to ensure that communications networks are more resilient against the next storms – a task that was recently tested by Hurricane Fiona. Fiona was a devastating storm that knocked out nearly 30% of cell sites, and left nearly 800,000 customers without telephone, television, and/or Internet.¹ To that end, I strongly believe that we must continue to ensure that we are supporting the citizens of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

So, I'm glad to support this item, which will ensure that transitional support for network resiliency does not lapse before the communications network buildout benchmarks required by the Uniendo a Puerto Rico Fund and Connect USVI Fund are met. The alternative is unfathomable. And, I appreciate the Chairwoman accepting my request to seek comment on extending transitional support for longer if the communications needs on the islands require additional time before the transitional support phases out. Leaving communications networks unsupported on these islands for multiple years risks throwing away the improvements achieved over the past few years, while at the same time leaving those most vulnerable behind.

We must empower providers to increase the resiliency of these important communications networks before the next natural disaster strikes. I expect that the providers with buildout deadlines forthcoming do everything they can to meet and exceed those deadlines so that we can achieve a permanent solution. I applaud those hard at work in re-building their networks in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Thank you to the hard working Commission staff for their work on this item. I approve.

¹ Hurricane Fiona Communications Status Report, Sept. 20, 2022, *available at* <https://www.fcc.gov/document/hurricane-fiona-communications-status-report-september-20-2022>.