

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS**

Re: *Broadband Connectivity and Maternal Health — Implementation of the Data Mapping to Save Moms' Lives Act*, GN Docket No. 23-309, Notice of Inquiry (October 19, 2023)

This item is a bit different for us. At first glance, you might ask: what does the FCC have to do with maternal health? A more probing dive is required.

For the past two decades, the number of pregnancy-related deaths worldwide has been in steady decline. Consistent advancements at the intersection of healthcare and technology have boosted maternal health globally. The United States, however, stands alone as the only industrialized nation outside of this trend. In stark contrast to our fellow nations, maternal mortality rates in the United States continue to *increase*. I'd be remiss if I didn't point out that evidence shows that this crisis has disproportionately put Black and brown mothers at even greater risk – two to three times more susceptible to pregnancy-related death. But this is not to be segmented as an issue for people of a certain race, or socio-economic status. Let me be clear – our nation's women deserve better.

So where is the FCC's role here? The Center for Disease Control has found that many pregnancy-related deaths are preventable through a number of means including access to broadband-enabled technologies. More than 2.2 million women, across 36 percent of U.S. counties, have zero access to maternity care. No obstetric hospitals, birth centers, or obstetric providers. The data shows that virtual care, like telehealth, can help. And that's where the FCC comes in – our *Mapping Broadband Health in America* platform has been drawing the intersection between broadband access and health outcomes since its creation in 2016. Congress smartly passed legislation signed by President Biden to “Save Moms' Lives” – including directing us here at the FCC to enhance this platform by incorporating data on maternal mortality and severe maternal morbidity. The platform is now a clear guide as to where maternal health deserts and communities lacking broadband overlap. And it underlines a point that I consistently hammer home: we cannot leave any community unserved. The consequences for doing so are much too high.

This publicly available platform provides a treasure trove of data. But how can we refine it, expand it, and leverage it to help those most in need? Those are the questions we ask today. I look forward to hearing from experts on the ways in which we can not only improve the user experience of our health mapping platform, but on how to use this data here at the FCC to reach unconnected communities where they are and provide them with the resources that they need. This data has the power to maximize our outreach efforts for programs like the Affordable Connectivity Program, and continue to target communities that have little to no broadband access. In our endeavors to develop the health mapping platform and provide more precise information, we have the opportunity to expand our reach across the nation and move closer to our ultimate goal of closing the digital divide.

Coming from a family of doctors, I've also focused on the benefits of telehealth, and how broadband facilitates the technology that has the potential to improve health outcomes. I also applaud my colleagues at the Commission for their work implementing the Act, and on this important item. It truly shows how access to broadband impacts the most essential parts of our lives. I would like to thank Senators Rosen, Young, Fischer, Schatz, Congressman Bilirakis, and Congresswoman Blunt Rochester on their bipartisan effort in passing the Data Mapping to Save Moms' Lives Act. I also have to note the hard work of my dear friend former Congressman G.K. Butterfield here as well; this legislation has been a long time coming. It has my full support.