

**STATEMENT OF COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION**

**BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE AND TRANSPORTATION
UNITED STATES SENATE**

**“OVERSIGHT OF THE FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION”
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Chairman Wicker, Ranking Member Cantwell, and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to today’s hearing. It comes at a historic moment. So far, more than 2 million people in the United States have been infected with COVID-19 and over 119,000 have died. Unemployment has hit its highest levels since the Great Depression. Millions of children have missed months of in-classroom education. And Americans across the country have exercised their constitutional right to demonstrate for justice. Even as the Commission continues its regular work, this is no time for business as usual.

We must help combat the pandemic by connecting as many Americans as possible to high-quality, affordable broadband service, as quickly as possible. Even as many of us have taken our daily activities online, tens of millions of Americans have been unable to access or cannot afford the home broadband connections necessary to access telework, medical information, government resources, and distance learning.

Back in March, I called for a “connectivity stimulus” with roles for the federal government and the private sector. I called on Internet Service Providers to introduce or expand their low-income broadband programs and eliminate their data caps. In times of emergency, no American should go without a connection because of cost. I called for expansion of the Commission’s Lifeline program and for temporary waivers to put underutilized spectrum to work. I’ve been happy to see many of these proposals implemented, and I appreciate the hard work of the Chairman, Commission staff and industry to respond to this emergency. I also thank Congress and this Committee for funding essential COVID-19 telehealth services.

But much more needs to be done. The Lifeline program remains dramatically underutilized, and its benefits do not meet the needs of low-income consumers in this era of social distancing. The FCC must coordinate with agencies that administer services like SNAP or Medicaid that determine eligibility for Lifeline to ensure low-income communities learn about this critical program. Americans cannot afford for the government to work in silos, and I’m thankful for Senator Klobuchar’s leadership on the congressional push for interagency coordination to increase Lifeline enrollment. We should also increase Lifeline’s voice and data offerings to meet the connectivity needs of low-income subscribers during this public health crisis.

E-rate also needs a fresh look. Students across the country spent this spring in home “classrooms” away from school grounds. To respond to the ongoing need for distance learning,

we should permit schools to offer broadband connections, including hotspots, to their students. The outlook for school re-opening for the fall remains opaque, so this issue isn't going away.

We mustn't forget our seniors, who've been among the hardest hit by this pandemic but are among the least connected. According to the Pew Research Center, only 53% of Americans 65 and older own a smartphone, and nearly one-third of seniors never go online at all. I'll never forget my visit last year to Boston's Roxbury neighborhood, where I met Ms. Eleanor, a senior who participated in the library's "Tech Goes Home" program, which trains residents to use the internet and helps them purchase affordable laptops and home broadband service. Thanks to this program, Ms. Eleanor can enjoy her favorite new activity at home with her first laptop – learning to line dance by watching online videos. During the pandemic, the ability of our seniors to safely connect is much more serious. We owe it to our seniors to connect them to broadband and offer the training and tools necessary to make the most of those connections.

Finally, last week, alongside civil rights leaders — Reverend Al Sharpton, Marc Morial, Vanita Gupta, and Maurita Coley — I published an op-ed on broadband in America, with a particular focus on communities of color. Our historic failure to close the digital divide has had a devastating impact on American communities of color, both rural and urban, which the coming months and years will magnify exponentially without more urgent and successful intervention. In 2020, Black Americans and other people of color are still, by a wide margin, significantly less likely to have a home broadband connection than their counterparts. They have frequently worked around this by searching out libraries or restaurants offering free Wi-Fi. The pandemic has changed these fundamentals – shelter in place orders and closings have restricted or foreclosed completely the broadband access many of these public spaces provided, while classrooms and workplaces have moved to online virtual settings. Our long-standing digital divide has morphed into a monstrous COVID-19 divide.

Now more than ever, the FCC must stay focused on this work—as opposed to Section 230—as its top priority. The alarming current and predicted impacts of COVID-19 make clear that the people we all serve can no longer wait for connectivity. I'm making my own investments to respond to these issues. Earlier this month, I announced my Digital Opportunity Equity Recognition, or DOER, program. With the help of an Advisory Board of digital equity champions, I will recognize organizations, companies and individuals who have helped make quality affordable broadband service available to unserved or underserved communities, with a particular focus on responding to the challenges of COVID-19.

Thank you again inviting me today. I look forward to your questions.