

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS**

Re: *Affordable Connectivity Program, Emergency Broadband Benefit Program*; WC Docket No. 21-450, 20-44, Report and Order and Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (January 14, 2022).

“No family should have to decide between putting groceries on the table or getting their household connected,” NAACP President Derrick Johnson and I wrote in a joint CNN article.¹ But we know that they do. Nearly 47 million Americans have yet to adopt broadband simply because they can’t afford it, and millions more have made difficult sacrifices to keep their broadband on. This is a turning point. Recognizing the considerable economic and social benefits of affordable broadband, Congress converted the Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) into the long-term Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP). With more than \$14 billion in additional funding, this more permanent program should give providers and eligible households increased confidence that ACP will work well for them—and not just for the short term. Today’s Order creates a framework that will put the ACP on solid footing for years to come.

When we adopted the rules for the Emergency Broadband Benefit program at the beginning of last year, I emphasized that EBB was an essential, but ultimately temporary, solution to a long-term problem. After all, broadband affordability was a nationwide challenge long before COVID-19. We made significant progress in reaching those households during the pandemic, but much remains to be done.

I am immensely proud that more than 9 million households benefited from EBB. At the same time, we know that there are tens of millions of eligible households that we have yet to reach. Increasing participation in any government program is a complex problem, and improving awareness of ACP is—assuredly—an essential first step. There is evidence in the record that most of the people who were eligible for EBB never learned about the program. Responding to this challenge, Congress gave the Commission specific tools to promote ACP, including engaging in paid media campaigns, providing grants to outreach partners, and conducting consumer outreach and focus groups. Today, we dedicate up to \$100 million to these activities. That is a big investment, but it is commensurate with the challenge in front of us.

Importantly, the Order repeatedly affirms our decision to spend that money in ways that advance our digital equity goals. I am proud that my colleagues adopted my recommendation to commit to deploying the new tools Congress gave us with “particular emphasis on reaching people of color, persons with disabilities, persons who live in rural or Tribal areas, and others who are or have been historically unserved, marginalized, or adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality.” I intend to make sure we follow through on that commitment. We know that, for too long, communities of color in particular have disproportionately found themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide. Today, Americans of color remain, by a wide margin, less likely to have a home broadband connection than their counterparts. In all of the promotional activities we undertake, we must proceed with these diverse communities in mind. When we make grants, we should identify organizations with expertise and experience working with low-income people and communities of color. When we contract with experts to conduct focus groups and develop advertising campaigns, we should ensure they have particular expertise with diverse communities. When we buy advertisements, we should make sure that spending flows to companies with diverse ownership and workforces, consistent with our longstanding mission to promote media diversity—and we should insist that our messages be crafted and targeted to reach low-income people and communities of color where they are.

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>.

Beyond the methods specifically outlined by Congress, I have encouraged the Commission to identify new approaches to outreach and enrollment. There are two aspects of today's order that I would like to highlight. First, we have decided to give partners in state, local, and Tribal governments access to the National Verifier as part of a Pilot program. This model has helped eligible households overcome enrollment challenges in the Lifeline program, and a similar approach is warranted here. Governmental organizations like schools, libraries, and housing authorities often have long-term, trusted relationships with residents who could benefit from ACP. I have long said that we must have better coordination to ensure that vulnerable families understand the digital benefits available to them,² and in a recent Executive Order titled *Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government*, President Biden called for a “no-wrong door” approach to service delivery where interacting with one government program can help Americans get connected to other benefits. Through this Pilot program, we will arm state, local, and Tribal partners who are already assisting households in other ways with tools to help eligible ACP beneficiaries move through an enrollment process that we know can be challenging. I look forward to working with the Bureau to ensure we have robust participation so that the Pilot generates lessons we can apply to the broader ACP program.

Second, I thank the Chairwoman and my colleagues for agreeing to add a new section to today's Order seeking comment on an additional Pilot Program to expand participation by households that benefit from Federal Public Housing Assistance (FPHA). FPHA beneficiaries, including residents in public housing and participants in the housing choice voucher program (Section 8), include many extremely low-income families with an especially acute need for the economic, health, and educational benefits broadband can offer. Congress clearly made FPHA beneficiaries eligible for EBB, but only a small share actually enrolled. In this Order, the Commission concludes that innovative approaches are needed and seeks comment on a proposed Pilot Program that would increase enrollment, including expanding awareness of ACP among FPHA beneficiaries and offering assistance with navigating the enrollment process.

Just before the pandemic, I visited Montgomery and Selma, Alabama—sacred American places, where landmark events in our civil rights movement unfolded. On that trip, I met with members of the Selma Public Housing Authority, who have a special project to get people living in low-income housing free broadband and a tablet. I'll never forget when I met with a single mother of three children who lived in the George Washington Carver homes and benefitted from the program. She told me with great pride how at-home broadband access enabled her to complete assignments for her online degree program while her children finished their homework—all without requiring her to make trips to the local library or restaurants to find an adequate connection. She was a living example of the power of broadband to transform lives. We can bring that transformative experience to many more Americans who need housing support. I look forward to robust comments on how we can use this Pilot to better serve these Americans who stand to gain so much from ACP.

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The hard work of Commission's staff made developing this historic program possible. Their unwavering dedication to connecting every American to broadband is evident on every page of this document. They have my heartfelt thanks for preparing this Order and for the hard work yet to come.

² See, e.g., Press Release, Geoffrey Starks, Commissioner Starks on Congressional Letter Seeking Interagency Coordination of Lifeline Program (Apr. 27, 2020), <https://www.fcc.gov/document/starks-congressional-call-interagency-lifeline-coordination>.