

Wireline Competition Bureau, the Office of Workplace Diversity, the Office of Communications Business Opportunities and the Connect2Health Chair/Office of General Counsel Presentation to Commissioners

January 2025 Open Meeting

Panel 2: Making Communications More Just for More People in More Places

Presented by:

- **Trent Harkrader**, Chief, Wireline Competition Bureau
- **Jeffrey Tignor**, Acting Chief, Office of Communications Business Opportunities
- **Karen Onyeije**, Deputy General Counsel / Connect2Health Chief of Staff, and
- **D’wana Terry**, Special Advisor to Chairwoman Rosenworcel, Director, Office of Workplace Diversity, and head of the Task Force to Prevent Digital Discrimination

Slide 11: Making Communications More Just for More People in More Places

Introduction (Trent Harkrader, Wireline Competition Bureau Chief)

Before I begin my presentation, I’d like to thank my colleagues at the table for their collaboration:

- Jeffrey Tignor, Acting OCBO Director
- Karen Onyeije, Deputy General Counsel/Connect2Health Chief of Staff, and
- D’wana Terry, Special Advisor to Chairwoman Rosenworcel, Director, Office of Workplace Diversity, and head of the Task Force to Prevent Digital Discrimination

When we reflect back on the last four years, it’s hard not to think about the power of connection. And not just a broadband or voice connection but also the meaningful connections that power everyday American lives – school, family, support networks, religious institutions, even places of work. In the Wireline Bureau, we’ve worked hard to ensure that everyone, including our most vulnerable populations, can stay connected. We’ve instituted important changes and launched programs that, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, helped overcome debilitating isolation, offered new pathways for people to seek help, and pushed broadband technologies to meet people where they are. What our efforts have shown is that connection can be lifesaving and is essential to participate meaningfully in modern society. Our proceedings use broadband and voice connections to ensure that the connections we need most – those to family, to education, to healthcare, to mental health services – remain intact. Some examples:

- Twenty years in the making and thanks to a grandmother’s love for her grandson, we implemented the Martha Wright Reed Act to ensure that the incarcerated population could call home and hear the voice or see the face of loved ones, even when separated by state lines. For too long, the families of incarcerated individuals were forced to pay exorbitant and unreasonable rates to keep connected with their incarcerated loved ones. In 2023, the President signed into law the Martha Wright Reed Act and gave the Commission new authority to establish meaningful and reasonable limits on the costs of phone and video calls for incarcerated persons. In July, we adopted rules that, among other things, significantly lower existing per-minute rate caps, based on providers’ reported costs, for out-of-state and international audio calls from any type of correctional facility, and apply those rate caps to in-state audio calls. For the first time ever, the

rules set interim per_minute rate caps for video communications, including video visitation. The rules also lower the overall prices consumers pay by eliminating the ability to impose separate ancillary service charges.

- We expanded the power of the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, which is a vital resource for people experiencing a mental health crisis. The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline is a national network of more than 200 crisis centers, supported by state and local resources, as well as our partners at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), that helps thousands of people overcome crisis situations every day. When someone calls or texts 988, they are connected to a mental health professional, who can provide meaningful, immediate assistance. Recognizing that millions of Americans are more likely to text than call when in crisis, in July 2022 we expanded the Lifeline to ensure that people could text the Lifeline and be connected to specialized counselors, such as an LGBTIQ+ affirming counselor or a Spanish speaking counselor.
- We've taken a number of measures to ensure this resource reaches its full potential. We started with connecting people to crisis centers via phone calls. Then we expanded the service to accommodate texts from individuals to reflect how a majority of people communicate these days. Then we mandated georouting to ensure that people in need are connected to local crisis centers, which may be different than the crisis center associated with the caller's area code. All of these actions ensure that anyone in crisis can reach the support they need in the moment it matters most.
- We also took steps to ensure that survivors of domestic violence could seek help and leave an abuser safely. Survivors of domestic violence may not have control over their mobile phone plan, which may be managed by their abuser. It is critically important that survivors be able to access an independent phone connection and be able to communicate and access other available services without fear of their communications, location, or other private information being revealed to their abusers. To help this cause, in November 2023, we implemented the Safe Connections Act of 2022 and took three important measures. First, we require mobile phone providers to separate lines upon request to eliminate the ability of the abuser to access a survivor's communications, location, or other private information and retaliate against them. Second, we are protecting the survivor's privacy by requiring providers to omit from consumer-facing logs all calls and text messages to domestic violence hotlines. Finally, through the universal service Lifeline program, survivors are eligible for a subsidized voice and broadband service.
- In the fall of 2024, just ahead of the 30th anniversary of the Violence Against Women Act, the Commission announced that the rules implementing the Safe Connections Act are in effect, and that survivors experiencing financial hardship are now eligible to receive up to six months of emergency Lifeline support.
- We also worked to close the Homework Gap by supporting schools and libraries who are on the front lines, often devoting their own resources to making broadband more readily available for students and teachers and library patrons. For example, the Universal Service E-rate program now supports schools with the cost of broadband on school buses. Some students commute hours to and from school and may not have a broadband connection at home. With more and more schoolwork going online, this means those students are left on the wrong side of the digital divide. Their bus ride may be the best opportunity to complete schoolwork.

- And following the success of the Emergency Connectivity Fund, we now permit E-Rate funding to be used by schools and libraries for Wi-Fi hotspot lending programs. These lending programs will help close the digital divide by providing students, teachers and library patrons access to an affordable, robust broadband connection at home.
- As mentioned in the previous panel, we also focused on targeting the E-Rate Program to Tribal areas, understanding that tribal areas face constraints such as limited infrastructure, geographic isolation, financial hardship, and low population density, which make it difficult to secure support for broadband connections. The Tribal Library Pilot Program provided support to Tribal libraries that were either new to E-Rate or had trouble in applying to E-Rate in the past by assigning them a Tribal Library Advocate who guided the library through each step of the E-Rate program application and reimbursement process. This ensures that E-Rate support goes to communities that require reliable, affordable connection.
- The Pilot Program provided support to 34 Tribal libraries. 10 Tribal libraries, in Alaska, California, New Mexico, New York, and Utah, completed the full E-Rate program application process and received over \$230,000 in funding commitments. (Although these numbers may seem small, they are significant to E-Rate program participation where just under 200 Tribal libraries participate in the E-Rate program.)
- Building on the Pilot Program, the Tribal Library E-Rate Advocacy Program provides ongoing, permanent support to Tribal libraries through one-on-one assistance and specialized Tribal-focused trainings.
- During the pandemic, we stood up several Congressionally mandated programs aimed at helping Americans.
- By funding telehealth equipment and systems for hospitals, especially in rural, tribal, and low-income areas, through the COVID-19 Telehealth Program, we helped the most vulnerable receive crucial medical attention while also protecting the patients and health care providers from unnecessary exposure to the virus. The Program offered \$456.4 million in funding commitments to 985 health care providers in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, American Samoa, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The program provided funding for telemedicine infrastructure, allowing these providers to deliver critical healthcare services via telemedicine to people who may have otherwise been unable to access care due to geographic or financial barriers.
- The Emergency Connectivity Program supported remote student learning, and helped bridge the gap for students and teachers in rural, tribal, and economically disadvantaged areas who did not have reliable access to broadband at home. When the pandemic forced schools to close their doors, this fund provided funding to schools and libraries to purchase the necessary devices – laptops, tablets, and Wi-Fi hotspots – to support remote learning. By prioritizing the needs of low-income families, the fund helped ensure that students could continue their education even if they didn't have access to internet at home. The Commission announced over \$7.09 billion in funding commitments, providing support to approximately 18 million students, 11,500 schools, 1,070 libraries, and 128 consortia; and funding nearly 13 million connected devices and over 8 million broadband connections. To date, over \$4.87 billion in funding has been disbursed.
- The Emergency Broadband Benefit Program, which later became the Affordable Connectivity Program, supported a home broadband connection for millions of low-income households. These

programs ultimately helped over 23 million households get connected and were especially critical in helping vulnerable populations with the cost of broadband.

- While the next panel will discuss national security concerns, I do want to take this opportunity to also highlight our work overseeing two important programs aimed at securing our nation's networks; the Secure and Trusted Communications Networks Reimbursement Program, which Congress recently fully funded, and the Cybersecurity Pilot Program. Through these two programs, we recognize the need for secure and trustworthy communications networks.
- What we've seen clearly over the last four years is that more and more of our daily lives are online. We're consuming more data than ever before. So, we launched a proceeding to explore the impacts of broadband data caps on American consumers. In an era when connection is more important than ever, we want to ensure that those connections remain affordable and accessible.

At the heart of all our work is the belief that connection is lifechanging. Whether it's ensuring incarcerated individuals can call home, expanding the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline to reach more people in need, or helping close the Homework Gap by supporting broadband access for students, staying connected is essential. As we continue our efforts, we remain focused on making sure that everyone, especially those in vulnerable communities, can stay connected and thrive in an increasingly digital world. I am especially grateful to the Wireline Competition Bureau for their dedication and tireless work in making all of this possible. Their commitment to ensuring no one is left behind is truly inspiring.

And now I will turn the microphone over to my colleagues. Next up is Jeff Tignor . . .

Slide 12: Office of Communications Business Opportunities (Jeffrey Tignor)

The Office of Communications Businesses Opportunities (OCBO) works with the Commission's Bureaus and Offices to develop policy that takes into consideration the competitive concerns of small entities, thereby expanding opportunities for small businesses and promoting a diverse and inclusive economy that brings the benefits of communications technology to everyone. I appreciate the opportunity to share just some of what the office accomplished in FY2024.

As part of its responsibility to advise the Commission on small business matters, OCBO attorneys reviewed over 140 draft items for compliance with the Regulatory Flexibility Act, a law signed into effect by the late President Jimmy Carter, which requires the Commission to analyze the economic impact of its proposals and consider alternatives that mitigate disproportionate impacts on small businesses.

OCBO also coordinated meetings with FCC staff and small business stakeholders to increase small business engagement on important policy issues, and increased its outreach and public engagement efforts by updating its website, publishing a monthly news digest for small businesses with updates and reminders about FCC proceedings and comment deadlines, and published monthly features highlighting conversations with small business leaders in the telecommunications and technology industries.

To stay informed about the communications and tech policy issues that matter most to innovators and entrepreneurs, OCBO attended and exhibited at industry events, including last week's Consumer Electronics Show, and quarterly U.S. Small Business Administration tech and telecom roundtables.

Finally, to provide technical assistance to small entities, OCBO staff fielded small business inquiries and coordinated the publication of 26 Small Entity Compliance Guides for Commission rules that became effective in 2024.

OCBO is looking forward to continuing this important work on behalf of the Commission in 2025.

Slide 13: Maternal Health Mapping (Karen Onveije, Office of General Counsel)

Good morning, Madam Chairwoman and Commissioners.

Over the last decade, the vision of the Connect2Health Task Force has been and remains a simple one: “Everyone Connected . . . to the people, services and information that they need to get well and stay healthy.” Grounded by this imperative, the Task Force (chaired by General Counsel Michele Ellison) has led a series of sustained efforts to understand the intersection of broadband, advanced technology, and health and to make recommendations to the Commission on actions it can take to ensure that the benefits of these innovative technologies and services are available to all Americans, including those in rural and underserved communities.

Our work in recent years recognizes a fundamental reality: that broadband is increasingly the currency of healthcare—not just in terms of cutting-edge treatments, but also in terms of overall cost-savings and efficiencies, tackling preventable maternal deaths, meeting the needs of our veterans, seniors and people with disabilities, addressing persistent physician and specialty care shortages in rural and underserved communities, helping to solve public health crises like opioid addiction and overdose, and enabling national prevention and wellness initiatives to succeed at scale.

So, we are pleased to briefly highlight three of the Task Force accomplishments over the last few years.

First is the Commission’s broadband and maternal health initiative, including our work to implement the *Data Mapping to Save Moms’ Lives Act*. Congress sought to “reduce the prevalence of poor maternal health outcomes” by generating maps that provide insight on the intersection of broadband and maternal health “where maternal mortality rates are especially high and . . . where critical telehealth resources need to be deployed.” This was a novel effort and required significant innovation. In fact, recognizing that the United States is the only developed country experiencing rising rates of maternal mortality and severe maternal morbidity and that more than 80% of maternal deaths are preventable, the FCC hosted a national Broadband and Maternal Health Roundtable, in partnership with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, to accelerate a cross-disciplinary dialogue on the connected future of maternity care.

Slide 14: Mapping Broadband Health in America Platform

Second is the *Mapping Broadband Health in America* platform, a one-of-a-kind visualization tool for promoting data-driven decision making at the intersection of broadband and health. The platform was recently expanded twice, first in June 2023 to meet the congressional directive to incorporate maternal health data, and later in December 2024 a major overhaul that includes expanded broadband connectivity and health data. These latest updates incorporate over 60 new broadband, maternal health, chronic disease, opioids, cancer, and demographic data sets, as well as innovative features and functionalities that will allow policymakers and other users to visualize patterns and better target areas where broadband connectivity could have the greatest impact in health.

The final initiative of significant note is the Task Force’s groundbreaking work on broadband as a social determinant of health – a critical framework that could inform both broadband and public health policies.

Slide 15: Broadband and SDOH analytic framework

Our research shows there is a strong relationship between increasing broadband adoption at the community level and improved maternal health and other population health outcomes, even after controlling for other factors like education and income – which underscores the value of programs like the Rural Health Care Program and Connected Care Pilot Program.

We thank the Commission for its support and vision and salute the many stakeholders at the Commission, our sister agencies, and outside government who have contributed to and informed these important initiatives. Working together, we can fully realize the power and potential of broadband in health.

Slide 16: Office of Workplace Diversity and FCC Task Force to Prevent Digital Discrimination (D'wana Terry)

Good morning, Madam Chairwoman and Commissioners.

As Director of the FCC's Office of Workplace Diversity, I am honored to lead an interdisciplinary team of FCC staff supporting the FCC's mission by ensuring equal employment opportunities for all. In February 2022, I was given the privilege of leading the FCC Task Force to Prevent Digital Discrimination in collaboration with my distinguished colleagues, Sanford Williams and Alejandro Roark. The work of the Task Force, an anchor of the FCC's Combatting Digital Discrimination Initiative, embodies the principle of making communications more just for more people in more places. The Task Force focused on creating rules and policies to combat digital discrimination and to promote equal access to broadband. Much of the policy work flowing from the Task Force's cross-agency efforts is reflected in the *Prevention and Elimination of Digital Discrimination* proceeding, GN Docket No. 22-69. In this proceeding, pursuant to the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, the FCC implemented several directives to combat digital discrimination, including rules to facilitate equal access to broadband, model policies and best practices states and local governments can leverage to prevent digital discrimination, and revisions to our public complaint process to seek feedback more prominently from consumers who may be facing digital discrimination in their communities. What poignantly speaks to the focus of this panel is the underlying goal of the Task Force's efforts and how it accomplished its work.

The underlying goal: to promote equal access to broadband throughout the Nation, with the availability of digital opportunity being the lived reality for every person. The Task Force met, collaborated, and engaged with a host of stakeholders. We also hosted a series of public listening sessions to gain additional information and understanding from affected communities. Further, the Task Force provided opportunities for consumers and consumer advocates to share their experiences and stories through meetings with Task Force leadership and members, the Broadband Access Experience Form, and the FCC's informal complaint process. Through our work, the Task Force gained first-hand knowledge about consumers' unique experiences and challenges in obtaining broadband as well as the perspectives of other interested stakeholders. As anticipated, the work touched almost every part of the agency. In sum, the totality of these efforts provided the Commission with a record for charting a course to prevent digital discrimination and for making communications more just for more people in more places.

Thank you, Chairwoman Rosenworcel and Commissioners.