Remarks of FCC Commissioner Mignon L. Clyburn (as prepared)
The New School's Digital Equity Laboratory
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Thank you for that wonderful introduction. Good morning, everyone. It is an honor to be here with so many people, who are dedicated to bridging digital divides and advancing digital inclusion. Because in order for us to realize success, and nothing short of success will do, we need multiple stakeholders committed to closing those existing, and too often persistent gaps. It is uplifting to see an interdisciplinary audience of community leaders, organizers, policymakers, public servants, and concerned citizens assembled, because represented in this room, are those with the tools, means, and perspectives to create smart policies and effective initiatives to meaningfully commit to digital equity work.

Events like this, remind me of those other unsung, who like you are out there working and blazing the paths for a brighter future. You realize that digital equity is just over on the horizon and there is much left for us to do, in order to get there.

To say that the past year at the FCC has been busy, would be an understatement. While the rollback of Net Neutrality has dominated the headlines, there is much more on our agenda. For the sake of time, however, I will narrowly focus on digital redlining, the Lifeline program, my concerns for consumer privacy, and yes—net neutrality.

With technology constantly evolving, and innovation occurring at break-neck speeds, so must our definitions of digital inclusion and digital equity. Accordingly, our standards must evolve, which is why agencies like the Federal Communications Commission matter. In an ideal world, the FCC would be acting in a manner that encourages innovation and investment in communities that need it most, because digital equity can only occur, when there is full digital inclusion. We will only get there, through targeted investments, and the elimination of historic, systemic, and structural barriers.

Over 24 million people in the U.S., are without affordable, high-speed internet. And according to the Pew Research Center, only 54% of African Americans and 50% of Latinos, subscribe to a home broadband service, compared to 72% of White Americans. When I look at these numbers, I can't help but wonder if what we are seeing is in fact, another form of redlining: digital redlining.

As we have seen from data from the National Digital Inclusion Alliance, big internet providers have been intentional about focusing their investments on deploying broadband technologies, in high-income urban, suburban and middle-income neighborhoods. And as you already know, there is a glaring correlation between areas of high poverty, and places where companies have not invested in new technologies, such as fiber. The impact here is severe. Those being left out, not only are less able to get ahead, but they are more likely to be left behind.

This reminds me of the story of Curtis Brown Jr. in Goochland County, Virginia, who had a burgeoning national business customizing action figurines. When he moved to a place where his broadband connection was lackluster, however, not only did his business suffer, his livelihood suffered as well. His poor broadband connection limited him to about $400 per month in profit. Yes, his wife works, but even when you include her salary, Brown and his three stepchildren have to rely on help from relatives and food stamps to make ends meet. They would move if they could, but houses with faster connections, are in areas where the monthly rent is too expensive.

There are thousands of Curtis Brown, Jr.'s in this city which is why we must collectively hold companies accountable and put policies in place to ensure that every American who wants to be connected, is connected. I am inspired by community organizations and nonprofits that collect data and demand answers as they witness and give voice to how broadband deployment benefits are not being shared inequitably. Their work in shining a light on the problem, brings us one step closer to digital equity.

But when we talk about digital divides, we must make sure that we are looking at both the infrastructure, and affordability sides of the equation. When our own data pegs the cost for basic broadband at over $75 a month, it is easy to understand why many families forego service, particularly if they make less than $20,000 a year.

This is why I am a defender of the FCC's Lifeline program, which provides low-income households, with a monthly discount on voice, voice-data, and broadband services. Lifeline is critical in ensuring that millions of low-income Americans on tight budgets, do not have to choose between their next meal or voice and/or internet service. It helps everyone from low-income veterans to the homeless, to the full-time minimum-wage worker just struggling to get buy. And we must ensure that the Lifeline program remains robust for generations to come.

Each day, more and more people realize just how much broadband internet access is an essential service for most Americans. Education, employment, government, and healthcare opportunities are all migrating online. When it comes to employment, home internet is crucial to searching for and obtaining jobs, because over 80% of Fortune 500 companies, use an online-only application process. Students without broadband access at home, are having a tough time completing homework assignments and too often, are falling behind their peers. There are also implications for civic engagement, since access to broadband provides opportunity to obtain information and apply for most government public assistance programs.

That is why I am concerned about what the FCC majority is doing to Lifeline: this essential program that enables connectivity for individuals with lower incomes. In February of 2017, the Chairman flushed the hopes of several previously approved Lifeline providers and their prospective customers, down the drain through an unprecedented action. He revoked the providers' authorizations to provide service without notice.

Now this would not be an as much of an issue if there were serious wrongdoing involving these entities, but there was *no* wrongdoing and as a result, the FCC majority that always boasts about free markets, managed to hamper competition and deep-six consumer choice.

It cost providers millions of dollars and, in one case, left thousands of customers the provider was already onboarding, out in the cold.

And if that were not bad enough, in November, the FCC majority approved a new proposal, that would make it more difficult for households to benefit from Lifeline's services. If bought to fruition, they would establish punitive caps on the Lifeline program, and effectively remove mobile wireless options from the program by banning wireless resellers from participating in Lifeline. This would take away the most popular option for the Lifeline broadband for most of the current customers are mobile-only.

To destroy or weaken a program, that so many Americans rely on as their only means to dial 9-1-1, do their homework, or find a job, is not putting #ConsumersFirst, is heartless and I am hopeful that by giving voice to such a regulatory wrong, will derail this wrong-headed effort. By mobilizing communities and making your voices heard so the FCC majority can hear you loud and clear, *we stand a better chance to build bridges to empowerment, connectivity and independence—not tear them down for our most vulnerable.*

And of course, taking up most of the oxygen is Net Neutrality.

I fought hard in 2015, to create the net neutrality rules that now, as many of you know, the majority of the FCC voted to repeal on December 14, 2017. The majority abdicated its responsibility to protect the nation's broadband consumers. The majority voted to hand the keys of the internet, to a handful of multi-billion-dollar corporations who can use this regulatory-free zone of opportunity, to disadvantage those without deep pockets, including consumers and small businesses.

Now these are the very same providers, that consistently get dismal ratings, when it comes to customer satisfaction. Complaints about constant price increases; slow internet speeds; and poor customer service abound. Now all of a sudden, we are told to believe, that these same companies' practices will be different from when the net neutrality rules, which were put in place to prevent harms, are repealed?

Taken together, the repeal of Net Neutrality, combined with the Majority's ill-advised actions on the Lifeline program, will actually widen digital and opportunities divides.
And if ever there were a time to mobilize communities and fight for digital inclusion, it is now. The same powerful voices that ensured strong net neutrality rules in 2015, are still around today. Those voices can turn the tide. Maybe not by the time the repeal of the Net Neutrality rules are in effect but those voices can turn the tide and the arc, my friend, is bent in the right direction.

I applaud states, for stepping in where the federal government has retreated, and while the jury is still out on how effective those actions will be, I admire their courage. Why? In that same order, the FCC made it very clear, that it planned to preempt state authority when it adopted what I not so affectionately call, the *Destroying Internet Freedom Order.* That means that any state attempt to protect net neutrality principles for its own citizens, will likely be challenged by broadband providers which ultimately means, that consumers in states that are not putting in place net neutrality protections, remain perpetually unprotected. That is why I think actions like

the Congressional Review Act resolution introduced earlier this month by Senator Markey, is a positive step forward. And what is clear is that a substantial majority of the country supports strong net neutrality protections.

The repeal of net neutrality also has a devastating effect on consumer privacy. The *Order* relieved the FCC of any responsibility for broadband privacy and without broadband privacy rules for the FCC to enforce, consumers are left without robust protections when it comes to their privacy with broadband providers. Super cookies, subsversive data collection, and other practices are a-ok, now that the FCC's privacy protections are no more.

Why do I underscore what is going on at the policy level? Because promoting online privacy and safety is critical in digital inclusion efforts. After all, full digital equity calls not just for access and adoption, but the ability to meaningfully use the internet. According to a study published by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration or NTIA, privacy concerns were greatest among households with the most intensive internet use.

However, it is privacy concerns particularly that impact those who are not the most robust users of the internet, those pushed to the margins of society, those who often rely on public hotspots or accessing the internet at public computing centers. Security researchers repeatedly warn us, about the risks of using public Wi-Fi, and marginalized communities who depend on it for their daily internet access, are often unwittingly exposed to multiple privacy risks which they likely cannot avoid.

So digital inclusion efforts, must also include privacy and safety awareness initiatives. Absent FCC action, this would at least ensure privacy concerns are addressed, in a meaningful way. One great starting point, would be the offering of Online Financial Safety classes, to educate users about how identity thieves operate, and how to know if your identity is stolen. Digital inclusion initiatives should also include best practices for working on public computers.

In this same vein, we should look at basic literacy education as a companion to digital literacy efforts. If not addressed, we risk having an entire generation of people left offline. A study by the Department of Education from 2016 estimates, that 17% of American adults have limited reading comprehension skills. This reveals why digital inclusion efforts should reinforce literacy concepts, and why literacy courses should incorporate digital literacy as well. The link between basic literacy and digital literacy also highlights the central role of public libraries in promoting digital inclusion. Libraries provide free access to books, computing, adult learning, and digital literacy training—all under one roof. Most importantly, libraries are where communities gather and where other people with similar interests and needs meet.

There is also more room to think creatively about digital literacy programs and spaces where digital inclusion efforts must take place. For example, a nonprofit in Kansas City, Missouri called Literacy KC, combines digital literacy training with basic literacy tutoring for adults and families. Through Literacy KC's program, multiple generations of a family visit the organization each week to read, learn and grow together.

For millions of us, the internet is a place where we can express ourselves, share our hopes and dreams for our family, and connect with the resources we need to build a sustainable future. The Internet is a platform where people of all different backgrounds, incomes, and ethnicities can interact and learn from each other – on equal footing. It is increasingly part of our DNA, which is why we must ensure that all Americans are able to enjoy the benefits of a digitally connected society.

But the fight for digital equity is layered. Deployment is just one part of the broadband equation. Infrastructure may be lacking in some areas, but particularly in low-income areas where "build it and they will come" is not a viable proposition. Too many Americans still cite cost as a reason why they do not subscribe to broadband. Too many people fill out job applications on a smart phone. Too many people cannot read the news because they went over their usage allowance. And too many individuals cannot fully participate in an increasingly digital society if they do not have the economic means to do so.

The goal is and should be equal and affordable access. We should continue to come up with fresh ways to increase digital literacy, increase the availability and increase the affordability of devices and services necessary to realize digital inclusion. Community organizations can and must play a role in being advocates for change, and teaching those unfamiliar with technology how to use it. Libraries can and will continue to play a central role in bringing our communities closer together. States and cities can and should continue to encourage broadband providers to engage on a local level.

And as you consider these issues and more as you advance the fight for digital equity, know that you have a friend in Washington by way of South Carolina, who is passionate about digital inclusion and equity. And as you continue to develop policy proposals, or develop ideas for new laws or concepts, know that there is at least one door, always open.

Thank you.