

**REMARKS OF COMMISSIONER MIGNON CLYBURN**  
**NATIONAL ACTION NETWORK—LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY CONFERENCE**  
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Good afternoon and thank you Ms. Ingram, for that kind introduction. I am grateful to the National Action Network, for once again inviting me to take part in their Legislative and Policy Conference. Janaye Ingram, Faith Blackburne and Ebonie Riley, for all that you do, we thank you and Reverend Al Sharpton, for being consistent leaders when it comes to key issues in our community. In addition, those of us in public life, whether we admit to it or not, look forward to any opportunity to gather tips from Reverend Sharpton on how to give a truly rousing speech.

But I must warn you, that I am still working on that last one...

Seriously, this afternoon I wish to highlight what I think is a significant, yet too rarely discussed issue, in the fight for equality and opportunity: ensuring that everyone has access to the Internet. For those of us who are connected, not only is this a no-brainer, but for years, we have realized its countless advantages — in finding jobs, accessing health care and critical information, educational enhancement and more.

But just as with every issue where equality and justice are at stake, connectivity has not – and will not – happen for all of our citizens, without a concerted effort.

No doubt, everyone here appreciates the many advantages technology has to offer. Some may be on Twitter now, by the way, you can follow me: @MClyburnFCC (yes, a selfish plug), and for African Americans, this is most significant. Just last week, Pew released a report showing that African Americans have increased our use of the Internet, more than any other group over the past 15 years. Even with that, critical divides remain, and it is costing these communities dearly. Access to the Internet today is essential and never allow anyone to try and convince you otherwise. Employers are not only posting most of their vacancies online, they prefer employees who are digitally literate and, for many of those higher-paying jobs, they are looking for people who can read and write code.

In short, digital literacy and broadband access are essential, if we ever hope to close those chronic divides that have consistently plagued our communities. Just how wide of a gap are we speaking?

Over 90% of households making \$75,000 a year have access to the Internet, but for families making under \$30,000 a year, only HALF can access the Web at home. If left unchecked, this lack of access, in addition to long-standing, inherent challenges that stifle our communities, could seal the fate of the disconnected and relegate them into a perpetual state of digital darkness and foreclosed opportunities.

But there is hope, I came to confirm today. And there are those of us in the trenches and in government, willing to take risks. There are those of us not fearful of challenging ourselves and are not intimidated by outside forces, when it comes to exploring ways to break this multi-generational cycle of hopelessness and despair. We will not stand idle while divides grow wider and we believe that with forward-looking policies and creative thinking, we not only can, but must, use our positions and influence to make a difference.

The FCC is responsible for a program known as Lifeline, which was created during the Reagan Administration to aid low-income Americans when it comes to their communications needs. But over the past 30 years, Lifeline has been stuck in a time warp, virtually ignored for decades. Today it still funds voice-only access, which as we all know, is not sufficient in 2015.

But what we do have now is the ability to design an entirely new program that I propose to be known as *iBridge Now*, which could help close those persistent digital divides and opportunity gaps by supporting 21<sup>st</sup> century advanced communications services.

But let me warn you, any proposed transition will not come easy, for there are those who publicly proclaim that Internet access is “not a necessity”!

Not a necessity... during a time when the majority of Fortune 500 companies post new job listings strictly on websites? And where if you are fortunate enough to secure a position, your new boss expects you to have an e-mail address?

Not a necessity... where, in a growing number of states, those who are income-eligible can only apply for benefits or aid online?

Not a necessity... when most colleges and universities post and accept student admissions electronically?

Not a necessity... as the evidence grows daily, on how technology is bridging long-standing gaps when it comes to the delivery, quality of service, and cost efficiencies for access to health care and wellness?

And when you make that face-to-face appointment or conduct business in person, when was the last time you bought or referred to a folded map when you traveled to that destination?

Those who cannot afford broadband can just go to the library, some often say. Now, I am proud of the work the FCC has done through our E-rate program to help ensure that our schools and libraries have robust broadband and Wi-Fi. But we should not be satisfied if the library is the sole means by which an entire community can get broadband, particularly when there are no options for connectivity once the library closes for the day. And when was the last time you tried to access a computer in a library? How long did you wait? Did you know that 60% of children living in New York Public Housing may not have access to the internet at home, and the fact that most can go to the LIBRARY may be well and good, but most students are only allowed a half-hour per station? Is that enough time to log on, research and write their papers?

What if your child needs help with their math homework. Maybe it has been 20 years since you took that geometry course and if you are truly being honest, this was not your best subject in school. What does this mean: You both need help! But remember, some are saying that Internet access is not a necessity.

Or imagine it is Election Day and you missed the notice saying your polling station or times changed. How do you find out where to VOTE before the polls close? Mmm... But some say Internet access is not a necessity.

Well I say they are wrong, and I trust you agree.

This invention is one of the greatest equalizers of our time, and what the Internet makes possible is opportunities – for employment, education, healthcare, voting – and these are neither trivial nor are they luxuries. So it is up to us to stand up for those who do not always have a voice, but deserve access to opportunities and hope that the Internet brings, and as our Chair often says, what the Internet enables.

Not only is the Internet a necessity today, but Congress actually directed the FCC to ensure that everyone, regardless of income, has access to advanced communications services. Congress also directed that such access should be affordable.

So not only can we, but we are mandated to, CLOSE the digital divide. Collectively, we can make this happen.

So I ask that you accept the FCC's challenge, and participate in our public comment period on modernizing the Lifeline program.

As I make way for the panel discussion, allow me to pause and again pay tribute to the late Reverend Clementa Pinckney, one of the faithful souls we now know as the Emanuel Nine. In life, he said: "Faith is not just getting you to heaven. We are CHARGED with making the world a better place than we found it."

That quote, and this unspeakable tragedy that brought his words and deeds to our attention, further motivate me to fight for those whose hopes may seem currently dashed, for they have as much right to be connected, as those of us who are economically able. We have the capacity and the means to provide them with affordable connectivity which in turn could be the key to lifting them higher than their current conditions allow. And make no mistake my friends, this MOVEMENT, the one for digital equality, is a cause worth fighting for.

Thank you.