

**Remarks of Gigi B. Sohn
Counselor to Chairman Tom Wheeler
Federal Communications Commission
“Connecting Anchor Institutions: A Broadband Action Plan”
2016 SHLB Annual Conference
Washington, DC
July 13, 2016**

Good afternoon. I’d like to thank SHLB, and especially John Windhausen, for inviting me to speak today. I’ve known John since he was senior counsel to the Senate Commerce Committee working for the legendary Senator Ernest Hollings of South Carolina. In that role, he helped to make the Telecommunications Act of 1996 – which created the E-Rate and Rural Health Care programs – a reality.

This has been a big week for anchor institutions. How many of you are familiar with PokemonGO? A lot of you know where this is going ... For the uninitiated, PokemonGO is a mobile game where you use your phone to find virtual creatures in the real world, and in one week the game already has as many active users as Twitter. In this game, libraries, schools and hospitals across America are what they call Pokestops, where you can collect items to play the game. Libraries across the country are using their Twitter accounts to tout their Pokestop status to attract patrons.

I thought I’d open with this anecdote, not just because it’s amusing, but because it’s a useful metaphor. In the game, as in real life, anchor institutions are the heart of the community, and their utility extends beyond their core mission. They have become far more than places to borrow books, study and receive medical treatment. They have become essential to building community and improving the quality of people’s lives.

The FCC understands the central and powerful role that each of you play in your communities and in the country as a whole. We agree with the statement in SHLB’s vision paper that “[t]o remain globally competitive, economically vibrant, educationally progressive, civically engaged, and culturally rich, the United States must ensure that all of our nation’s community anchor institutions are connected to high-capacity, high-quality broadband Internet networks.” That is why in our 2010 National Broadband Plan, we set a very ambitious goal – that all anchor institutions have at least one gigabit per second broadband connectivity by 2020.

Under Chairman Tom Wheeler’s leadership, the FCC is doing everything in its power to achieve that goal. One of the first proceedings we started after the Chairman took office was one to modernize our E-Rate program for the first time since it was established. In two major orders in 2014, we improved the program’s cost-effectiveness, set specific, ambitious targets for the broadband capacity delivered to schools and libraries, re-purposed funding for Wi-Fi and robust broadband connections capable of supporting cutting-edge, one-to-one digital learning and increased the program’s annual budget to \$3.9 billion.

While these were the most heralded achievements of our E-rate modernization, I’d like to point out three lesser known changes that we believe will have an enormous impact on getting faster broadband to schools and libraries. First, we expanded access to low-cost fiber by equalizing the treatment of lit and dark fiber. Second, we permit schools and libraries to build their own networks or portions of those networks if doing so is the most cost effective way to get connectivity. Third, we mandated that USAC make cost data available on its website, so E-rate applicants can comparison shop and ensure that they are getting the best price for equipment and services.

Anchor institutions are not just a key part of the solution to the broadband availability challenge, you are also key to the adoption challenge.

I was in Kansas City this May when I visited the Wayne Miner Courts public housing. Even though Google was providing Gigabit broadband connectivity for *free*, many residents wouldn't accept it. While there was a variety of reasons for this, they all had one thing in common: trust.

This is where community anchor institutions come in. Successful broadband adoption programs come from the bottom up, not the top down. You are trusted members of the community who know how best to serve residents most in need of the tools to get connected.

In March of this year, the FCC modernized the Lifeline program, which ensures that low-income Americans have access to affordable communications. For the first time, the FCC made its \$9.25 Lifeline subsidy available for broadband. That was big, but there's a lot more. We set minimum speeds to ensure that Lifeline is not a second class service. We streamlined the process for becoming a Lifeline provider to bring more competition in the program, which will drive down prices and lift up better service. And we allow for institutions like yours to aggregate demand for Lifeline service.

But those reforms won't make much of a difference if those who are Lifeline eligible don't adopt broadband.

We need you to help us educate Lifeline eligible residents about the new program and its benefits. We need you to provide digital education, training and programming for non-adopters. And we need you to educate us on what works for your communities.

To that end, the Lifeline order instructs the FCC's Consumer and Government Affairs Bureau to develop a comprehensive digital inclusion plan for the Commission to better understand the non-price barriers to broadband adoption and to propose how the Commission can facilitate efforts to address those obstacles. As part of this mandate, CGB will be engaging community anchor institutions, philanthropic organizations, city, local and tribal governments, industry and others to explore strategies for promoting increased broadband adoption through the Lifeline program as well as increased digital literacy. Your participation in this endeavor will be critical to its success.

Last, but certainly not least, this FCC has moved to improve access to broadband in rural areas. Through our Connect America Fund, we will spend \$9 billion dollars over 6 years to connect 7.3 million rural Americans. This March, we updated our universal service support for small "rate-of-return" carriers, which serve some of the most remote rural areas. This will mean faster, better broadband for the 4 million Americans who live in these areas. And requests for funding from our Rural Health Care program, which brings telecommunications services to rural health care providers, has exploded. This year we expect funding requests to total more than \$350 million dollars, up from just over \$250 million in recent years past.

I'm proud of how much the Wheeler FCC has accomplished to ensure that every American has affordable access to robust broadband connectivity. But I also know that the job is far from finished. I got an early peek at the Executive Summary of the Broadband Action Plan being released today and without a doubt, the task to connect community anchor institutions to Gigabit broadband is a daunting one. But regardless, it is one that we must take on together, for the benefit of our communities and our country. Thank you.