

**Remarks of Commissioner Mignon L. Clyburn**  
**Montana High Tech Jobs Summit**  
**Missoula, Montana**  
**October 9, 2017**

Thank you, Senator, not only for that kind introduction but for inviting me to participate in this wonderful event. Assembled is an impressive group of individuals with broad and deep levels of expertise, which is yet another reason I am pleased to experience first-hand, what is going on in the Montana High Tech world.

Broadband is a game-changer... for those who do *not* have it. Now you may be asking, did she just misspeak? Because on more than one occasion I have phrased it differently, but allow me to clearly say it again: Broadband is a game-changer, for those who do *not* have it, because in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, broadband is a necessity. It is a necessity for first responders attempting to reach an injured climber in Glacier National Park, it is a necessity for that doctor in Kalispell trying to remotely evaluate a patient over video chat, and it is a necessity for that student in Big Sky trying to complete their homework. Connectivity is a necessity for accomplishing each of these key tasks and so much more.

Now for most Americans, the challenge of connectivity is not even a blip on their personal radar screens, for it is an integral part of everyday life. But for those without—and the numbers are higher than we care to admit—it is at a minimum, a very real threat to your educational and economic well-being, and at worst it can be a very real threat to your life.

Now for those who may discount my message and attribute it to my folksy upbringing—you know you say that us Southerners are known embellishers—let me add a few words of caution and relevance: over 30% of Montanans have no access to broadband, and this is severely limiting their potential. This is why the FCC is hard at work reforming our universal service programs. We aim to directly support, with real dollars and cents, deployment of broadband-enabled telecommunications services to high-cost, low-density areas across this nation and here in your state. Over the past seven years, we have comprehensively overhauled much of our high-cost program. One key reform was to require measurable broadband build-out obligations, better ensuring that we are spending our universal service dollars. Just last year, we reformed the rate-of-return system and made a number of changes, in order to put the program on a smoother path towards supporting robust broadband deployment.

Then, earlier this year, we adopted a series of items, geared towards making companies compete for funding to serve areas that remain unserved. We will be reverse-auctioning billions of dollars, to build out fixed and mobile broadband, in the hardest to reach communities in the country. But from where I sit, that is just one part of the equation. Yes, we have and should, set aside additional monetary support to build broadband networks. Montana in fact, receives over a hundred million dollars per year to support networks in some of your highest-cost areas, and you may receive even more in the upcoming reverse auctions. And yes, we are and should be making structural changes to our rules—including getting rid of outdated regulations—to make it easier for companies to deploy broadband. I have been on board in supporting a number of rule changes this year, that hopefully will make it easier for carriers to deploy broadband.

But what is too often lost in our discussions, about bridging the digital divide, is that connecting a house to fiber is not the same as making that service available to those residents in that house. What we must also ask, is whether they can afford the monthly cost of service? What if they do not have a computer? And what if they do not understand the relevance of broadband to their lives?

This is why you hear me speak so much about digital literacy and affordability programs, because they are so vital to enabling digital opportunity. In some cases, the challenges are even more fundamental. For example, over 13,000 Montanans depend on the FCC's Lifeline program for affordable connectivity. These are families who are so economically strapped that they struggle to maintain a dial tone even for voice service. Then there are schools and libraries across the country, which are on the front lines of teaching people about the relevance of broadband. So those millions of E-Rate dollars directed to Montana's schools and libraries' efforts, are vital as we prepare the next generation of learners, and ensure that those who fall through the cracks have a place to go to stay connected.

I was reminded of this earlier this year, during a visit to Los Angeles' Skid Row, a neighborhood with one of the largest populations of unhoused individuals in the country. And let me confirm that every visual and olfactory presumption you may have ever had about this community is very real, painful, and moving. I was approached by a woman who calls herself "Frenchie." She told me that there was a point in her life when the only address she had was a digital address, or email address. But the upside is that she not only found stability through a personal email address, she was able to access, often through the local library, critical services and support that kept her going even when her personal life was in turmoil. Women like Frenchie keep me focused, and serve as reminders of why we must look at policies through the lens of the consumer, particularly those most vulnerable.

Another point often lost when we talk about the digital divide, is what happens when we actually bridge the divide. Too often, we declare mission accomplished when we've connected a home that has been forever without, but I challenge you to take a more nuanced view. We should only claim victory, when a consumer is meaningfully using their connectivity, to take advantage of the economic, educational, and health care opportunities, it affords.

We should never forget, that it is in these remote areas, particularly where universal service support is the only reason why there is a provider serving those communities in the first place, that there will always be a need for robust consumer protections.

One of our primary goals at the FCC, is to be good stewards of ratepayer dollars. That means moving away from the past practice of using our high-cost program to fund multiple networks in the same geographic area. We should not support a company that is serving an area where another provider is providing quality service without a subsidy. That is fundamentally inconsistent with protecting consumers and it does not enable the market to work as intended. Now I know one of the most disliked persons in any room is a regulator, but if you think consumers don't need a referee on the field, just look to a recent decision by a wireless broadband provider that said they will cut off service to rural Montanans because providing the service is more expensive than they thought it would be. What happens next?

Just, how do we address challenges like that so that these customers have service? I submit to you, that in this case and more, we need to think as big as the sky over Montana. We need to think holistically, as we confront these difficult challenges, because each of them is solvable, if we tackle them together.

So yes, you should challenge me and my colleagues, to address those regulatory barriers to broadband deployment, but I am going to challenge you, to address those economic, legislative, and local challenges or impediments, to broadband deployment as well. But it doesn't end there. While we must address the barriers to broadband deployment, we need to face head on, the barriers that keep consumers from adopting, and using broadband in an economically empowering way, like in education, healthcare, and civic engagement.

In short, we must fight against the perpetual and persistent issues, surrounding connectivity inequality. Do you think that those in rural America should be relegated to second-class broadband? I don't. Nor do I believe, that the urban poor should be digitally redlined.

We need affordable access to and for all of our citizens. For the internet, I continue to believe, is the most economically empowering platform of our time. What we can least afford, is for the least among us, to be left behind in a digital canyon. Our communications policy should be inclusive, because we all benefit when each of us is connected.

So, Senator and to you all, I look forward to meeting more of you, learning more from you, getting my marching orders from you and continuing to serve you. Thank you for having me here today.

Godspeed.