REMARKS OF
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Good afternoon. It's a treat to join you today at the Congressional City Conference. What a line-up you have! From Senator Cory Booker to Secretary Alexander Acosta, you have some dynamos joining you for what I'm sure will be vigorous discussion. And what an audience this is! You run the gamut from big town mayors to small town aldermen to city commissioners—and you come from every corner of the country. So from one Commissioner to a whole bunch of others and to everyone else, let me extend a warm welcome to Washington.

I'm glad that you have made your way to the nation's capital. Because when it comes to innovation and public leadership, we are at a moment when cities and towns are leading the way. Solutions to some of our most vexing problems are rising up from the local level. You are a force for optimism—and I want to harness your energies this morning to help solve what I call the Homework Gap. After I talk about that, I'll follow up with a few thoughts about other matters of interest before the Federal Communications Commission.

Let me start by stating one thing I believe above all else—and that is that the future belongs to the connected. No matter who you are or where you live, you need modern communications to have a fair shot at 21st century success.

That is true for all of us—but especially the next generation. I say that professionally but also personally, as the mother of two young children. No child can be left offline. To succeed, kids today need internet access at school—and at home.

That's because seven in ten teachers now assign homework that requires access to broadband. But FCC data show that as many as one in three households do not subscribe to broadband service. Where these numbers overlap is what I call the Homework Gap. It didn't exist when I was growing up. All I needed for homework was a pencil, some paper, and my brother leaving me alone. But gone are the days.

According to the Senate Joint Economic Committee, the Homework Gap is real. By their count, it affects 12 million school-aged kids across the country. For students in households without broadband, just getting homework done is hard. Applying for a scholarship is challenging. And while low-income families are adopting smartphones with internet access at high rates, let me submit to you that a phone is just not how you want to research and type a paper, apply for jobs, or further your education.

The Pew Research Center studied the Homework Gap. It found that more than half of teachers in low-income communities say that their students' lack of access to online resources at home presents a major challenge to integrating technology into their teaching. So not only are students who lack access at home struggling to keep up, the lack of access is holding our

educational system back. It means too many young people will go through school without developing the skills they need for the digital age.

That's a problem. Already more than half of all jobs now require some level of digital skills. By the end of the decade, that number will be 77 percent. School-aged kids without broadband access at home are not only unable to complete their homework, they enter the job market with a serious handicap. And that loss is more than individual. It's a loss to our collective human capital and shared economic future that we need to address.

But of course, numbers don't tell the whole story. So let me give you a sense of what the Homework Gap looks like across the country.

Let's start at the heart of it all—in Silicon Valley itself. Just a few miles down the road from where our biggest technology companies make their corporate home lies San Jose. This may be hard to believe, but in San Jose over a quarter of the population does not have internet access at home. In low-income households, the number is even higher—more than 40 percent. Luiz Mendoza is one of them. She is raising four children on her salary as a child care worker. Her finances are tight. The room she rents is small. The family shares two mobile phones. Her daughter Annette uses one of them to do her schoolwork at home. The screen is small, and doing basic research is not easy on a limited data plan. Annette often skips lunch at school and tries to rush through her nightly homework in the school computer lab. But she admits there are too many times when she just can't do it at all.

Drive east from Lexington, Kentucky and you will arrive in Clark County. It's where students like Reece Elder do their homework with a fizzy drink and a side of fries. For years, she sat for long stretches in a booth at a fast food restaurant because it had the Wi-Fi she needed to do her homework. For too long, this was the only way she could consistently get online in rural Charlestown, a town in Clark County that is too small for most maps.

Hatch, New Mexico is a rural community known for the chiles that are grown in its dusty soil. Not long ago I had the privilege of visiting with Senator Tom Udall. While in Hatch, we spoke with Jonah Madrid. He plays for the high-school football team. But being an athlete in a rural community is not easy. The teams you play are far away. When the school day ends, he piles on a bus with his teammates and often travels an hour and a half just to play a game. Then after the game is over and the equipment is packed up, the team gets back on the bus and travels home to Hatch. After making it home, Jonah would sit in the school parking lot, lingering in the pitch-black dark, a computer in his lap, doing his homework late at night in the only place he has Wi-Fi access.

These kids in California, Kentucky, New Mexico have grit. They are cobbling together the connectivity they need to do their nightly schoolwork. But it shouldn't be this hard. We should do something about it.

I have some ideas—and that's where you come in.

First, let's do something simple. Let's gather local data and raise awareness. After all, we will never manage problems we do not measure. The good news is that some cities, school districts, and non-profits are already getting this work underway.

In North Carolina, for instance, the state Department of Information Technology Broadband Infrastructure Office has joined forces with the Friday Institute at North Carolina State University to size and report on the problem in the Tar Heel state. In Hartford, Connecticut—my hometown—city leaders have come together to assess the Homework Gap and develop solutions. In San Jose, the city has published a digital inclusion strategy—which makes a nod to the Homework Gap and the need to address it.

Congress has also gotten in on this effort. In 2016, the House of Representatives passed a resolution by a vote of 414-1 that recognized the Homework Gap is an issue of national importance. As the resolution noted: "all students should have access to the digital tools necessary to further their education and compete in the 21st century economy." Amen to that. I think every city and town can look at these efforts and use them to build their own local assessments to solve the Homework Gap.

Second, we need to take note of the innovative things that are happening across the country to help address this problem—and then no shame, copy them.

In towns big and small we have libraries doing new and extraordinary things to help bridge the Homework Gap. Libraries have always played a role opening their doors to all for information and access. But now technology allows them to take that effort a step further with hotspots. Libraries from Maine to Missouri are loaning out wireless hotspots to students—letting them borrow puck-sized mobile devices that will give them the connectivity they need at home for basic schoolwork. That loan is important. It can mean the difference between a student being able to keep up in class—or not.

Other communities are taking a cue from what started a few years ago in Coachella Valley, California. When I say Coachella, you might think of the fabled music festival. But I'm not talking about that. I'm referring to the community itself, which is built on agriculture. The dry fields of Coachella Valley produce everything from dates to citrus fruit. Migrant farm workers—many of whom do not speak English—labor in these fields and send their children to the local schools. But when the school superintendent came up with a program to give every child a tablet for use at school and home he found that instead of offering his students a gateway to digital possibilities he had a problem. Because they sat outside in the hall by his office long after the final bell had rung, tapping on their devices, in the only place they could get a reliable signal for homework. They had no internet access in the trailer homes where they lived adjacent to the fields where their parents worked.

These students were falling into the Homework Gap. The superintendent came up with an innovative way to get them out. He installed Wi-Fi routers on the district school buses. After all, in this rural area, students typically rode the bus an hour to get to school and an hour to get home at night. He turned ride time into connected time for homework.

I've been on these buses. It's transformative. And what happened in Coachella Valley is happening in places across the country. Connected school buses now hit the road in everywhere from Huntsville, Alabama to Marengo, Illinois to Watkins Glen, New York and many more places in between. It's a smart idea that deserves attention and support.

Finally, there are a wide range of cities and towns doing something distinctly low-tech to increase high-tech access. They're making maps.

Cities as diverse as Kent, Washington; Clute, Texas; and Perris, California are developing maps for school students that show very clearly where they can get free Wi-Fi and do their homework in town. In some places, the maps are totally predictable—they will show that the library and city hall are open for schoolwork. But some are not. You see, the act of making these maps can make everyone from small shops to hotel lobbies and insurance offices want to pitch in and offer help. In Winterset, Iowa and Athens, Georgia they have gone one step further and have offered local businesses a decal to put in the window to indicate they are a safe space for kids to do their homework. Just imagine these decals multiplying around town and the signal it sends to students—we care about you, we want you to succeed, and we will work as a community to help you do so.

This map-making is low-cost but yields big results. So how about we have the National League of Cities lead the charge. With the diverse group in this room, you could start a nationwide effort to have big cities and small towns build their own Homework Gap maps. If you did, I think you'd bring attention to the problem, stimulate community action, and drive real change. I realize that you have so many municipal problems to solve, resources that are constrained, and real difficulties navigating the digital age. So start small. Start with a map. Watch how memorializing this problem, giving it a name, and challenging communities to come up with ways to help its students can foster solutions. You can be an essential part of bridging the Homework Gap and closing the digital divide.

Finally, as promised, I want to offer a brief update on a few matters that affect you and are under discussion at the FCC.

I'll start with the Lifeline program at the FCC. If you're not familiar with it, the Lifeline program got its start back in 1985. That was when President Reagan was in the White House and nearly all communications involved a cord. It cut the cost of basic telephone service for low-income households, so they could build their lives, seek jobs, and provide for their families.

It was a good idea back then—and is still a good idea now. But basic telephone service is last generation's connectivity challenge. Dial tone in the digital age is broadband. So in the year before last the FCC modernized Lifeline by making it possible for the program to support either voice or data service. This was thoughtful reform and it could make a meaningful difference reducing the Homework Gap. But last year, the FCC backtracked and proposed to slash this program from front to back. I think this is a mistake. And I'm not alone. Everyone from civil rights groups to the American Enterprise Institute have raised concerns about the change proposed by FCC leadership. The agency's docket on this issue is still open. I hope you can lend your voice because if you care about closing the Homework Gap and making sure low-

income households stay connected, this program needs your fresh ideas and support. It's time to modernize and mend it, not end it.

Next, let me thank you for your efforts to help preserve an open internet. Our digital economy is the envy of the world because it was built on a foundation of openness—and net neutrality is the heart of that. But last year, FCC leadership decided to roll back its net neutrality policies. The agency did it over my objection, over the objection of the National League of Cities, the US Conference of Mayors, and 83 percent of the American public. It saddens me when so many people say those in Washington are not listening to them—and with the net neutrality vote you can add the FCC to the list. With this decision, the FCC put itself on the wrong side of history, the wrong side of the law, and the wrong side of the American people.

Now for the good news. This misguided decision awoke a sleeping giant, because the American public is demanding action. As a result, we are seeing states, cities, and towns with new laws, initiatives, and executive orders trying to make right what the FCC got wrong. We are seeing litigation. We are seeing legislation. There are a lot of efforts to overturn the mess the agency made. This one's not over. So I'm not giving up—and neither should you. Stay tuned.

Finally, many of you are aware that the FCC is investigating how to speed the deployment of broadband infrastructure across the country. This is a worthwhile effort. To this end, the agency has several proceedings to identify ways to streamline the deployment of wired and wireless services. So far, so good.

It also has put together a Broadband Deployment Advisory Committee. And with this we have a process problem. There are very few state and local officials on this advisory committee. You deserve better. You deserve real representation rather than token seats at the table. This structural failure has consequences—too little of our discussion is about the possibilities of partnership. That's not right—and know that I will critically view the work of this committee because I think it lacks the voice it needs to succeed. And that voice is yours—the local officials in this room.

Let me close here and thank you for your time today. Thank you for your efforts to address the Homework Gap—and the maps I hope you'll build to do so. Thank you for your willingness to serve and thank you for the creative work you do to give every community a fair shot at digital age success.