



December 31, 2020

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden Jr.
President-Elect of the United States
1401 Constitution Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20320

Re: Civil Rights Support of Geoffrey Starks as FCC Chair

President-Elect Biden:

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that closing the digital divide by providing access to affordable, reliable broadband is an essential step on the path to equity, opportunity, and “building back better.” This year our country has experienced extraordinary challenges that have left our most marginalized communities—particularly Black communities—with overwhelming healthcare challenges, economic and educational uncertainty, and social instability. **That is why, as leaders of national civil rights organizations, we urge you to appoint Commissioner Geoffrey Starks as Chair of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).**

We represent communities that are often overlooked and underserved. Commissioner Starks has our confidence and unwavering support because he speaks to the unique concerns of the communities we serve. The hallmark of his leadership has been his consistent advocacy for policies that center on the connectivity needs of communities of color, low-income communities, and urban and rural communities.

During an unprecedented public health crisis and the continued fight for racial justice, Commissioner Starks has demonstrated exemplary leadership. He has continuously elevated the fact that Black, Latino, and Indigenous Americans across urban and rural corridors are disproportionately affected by the digital divide, and he has pushed for concrete solutions. For example, Commissioner Starks partnered with civil rights leaders to publish an op-ed in *Essence* magazine where he called access to affordable, reliable broadband a civil rights issue. He was the first Commissioner to advocate for an emergency broadband benefit to address the affordability gap. In March, Commissioner Starks called for the expansion of the FCC’s Lifeline program to help the most vulnerable Americans gain access to vital voice and broadband services. He also called for the expansion of the Commission’s E-rate program so our young students can have the access they need to learn from home. Most importantly, throughout his term on the FCC he has remained engaged with adversely affected communities to elevate both challenges and solutions.

Within the FCC, Commissioner Starks has put forth the most detailed connectivity vision for Black and Latino communities particularly focused on the economy, public health, and education. He believes that

broadband access, adoption, and economic recovery are inextricably linked, and continues to focus on the needs of Black and Latino workers and business owners who have disproportionately lost jobs, wages, and revenues due to the pandemic. He has also advocated for expansive telehealth services in marginalized communities that are the most likely to have pre-existing health conditions and be exposed to the virus, as many are essential workers. Commissioner Starks has centered his policy focus on the connectivity needs of Black and Latino students who are most at risk of falling almost a year behind in school because of this public health crisis.

One of the greatest abilities Commissioners have is the power to convene, and Commissioner Starks has used his leadership to bring diverse groups to the table to fix problems and create solutions. This year, the Commissioner hosted an HBCU Presidents' Roundtable with eight leaders from schools across the country to call attention to the connectivity challenges that students, faculty, and staff have experienced during this time of distance learning. Additionally, Commissioner Starks hosted a Black mental health event with a cross-section of leaders because he believes that broadband can be used to help Black communities better acquire affordable, convenient, and accessible mental health services.

We stand behind Commissioner Starks because he is not only dedicated to creating inclusive communication policies, but he is also dedicated to creating an inclusive workplace at the FCC. This year, the Commissioner created the Early Career Staff Diversity Initiative, which provides paid internships to underrepresented students as well as increased recruitment from HBCUs and other Minority Serving Institutions. This program will help diversify the telecommunications policy space and it will have a long-lasting impact in developing the next generation of tech policy leaders.

Additionally, we understand that a Chair designation of a currently seated FCC Commissioner does not require a Senate confirmation. This means that Commissioner Starks is singularly and uniquely situated to be designated Chair of the FCC through 2024 without a Senate confirmation battle.

As leaders of civil rights organizations, we understand that while the fight for justice is long, the best opportunities to most effectively address past and contemporary inequality require solving structural challenges like the digital divide that will shape the future. The next FCC Chair will have a significant and long-lasting impact on our nation, especially on communities of color and low-income communities. We know that Commissioner Geoffrey Starks is the right person to be named Chair of the FCC during your Administration, and we urge you to appoint him.

Sincerely,

Derrick Johnson
President & CEO
NAACP

Rev. Al Sharpton
President and Founder
National Action Network

Oleta Fitzgerald
Regional Administrator
Southern Rural Black Women's Initiative

David J. Johns
Executive Director
National Black Justice Coalition

Spencer Overton
President
Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies

Alejandro Roark
Executive Director
Hispanic Technology & Telecommunications Partnership

Dr. Charles Steele, Jr.
President/CEO
Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)

Stephanie Mash Sykes
Founding Executive Director and General Counsel
African American Mayors Association