

**REMARKS OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS
DISABILITY ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING
WASHINGTON, DC
February 24, 2022**

Good afternoon and welcome, members of the Disability Advisory Committee and members of the public. Thank you so much for inviting me today; I am especially pleased to be here for this first convening under the leadership of the Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau's new Chief, Alejandro Roark. Alejandro, it is great to have you on board, and I am certain the Bureau and the Disability Rights Office will continue to do great work under your capable leadership.

It is an honor to again address this Committee and express my deep gratitude for the invaluable work that you do. This body represents a cross-section of key stakeholders: technology innovators such as app makers, service providers such as broadband companies, and media producers. More importantly this Committee also counts among its members representatives and persons from the disability community, and we all know that inclusiveness is a fundamental principle of sound policy-making and key decisions. "Nothing about us without us" is not just a slogan; it should guide every deliberation and action we take as we work to create and sustain a more equitable and just world for everyone.

When I was last before you this past September, I spoke about how all of us were affected by the COVID pandemic, but especially how some people with disabilities face unique challenges, including higher death rates for those with developmental and intellectual challenges, limited access to care and amenities due to social distancing requirements, and barriers to communication due in part to mask mandates that prevent lip reading. That same "divide" shows up in many forms and across many sectors, making it harder for some to experience the world in the same way that many of us can and do. This Advisory Committee and the FCC must continue working together to ensure that persons with disabilities have access to the full spectrum of communications devices, networks, and content available to those without disabilities.

That is especially the case with respect to the media landscape, where ensuring accessibility, inclusion, and equity for all is baked-in to our statutory duties. For example, the Twenty-First Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act of 2010 (CVAA) seeks to "ensure that individuals with disabilities are able to fully utilize communications services and equipment and better access video programming." Additionally, through our Equal Employment Opportunity reporting requirements, we seek to achieve a more inclusive environment for diversified media ownership, programming, and content.

You have heard me talk about diversity as one of the key pillars of our media and broadcast policy. Why is diversity so important? Because what we see and hear, and who we see and hear it from, impacts the way we view our world, our society, and ourselves. I have certainly talked about this issue in terms of racial and ethnic diversity, but I also believe there is

a need to seek diversity in terms of ensuring proper representation of persons with disabilities in the media.

Despite their significant numbers throughout the world, persons with disabilities are seldom featured in the media. For example, according to CDC research, in the U.S. today nearly 25 percent of the population live with a disability, while research indicates that only [3.1 percent](#) of characters on-screen are represented as disabled. Children's television truly stands out here with on-screen representation at less than 1 percent.

We all know that images and stories in the media can deeply influence public opinion and establish societal norms. Fortunately, some are stepping up to the challenge of improving representation of disabled persons. The philanthropic community has created a [Disability Inclusion Pledge](#), designed to help make disability more visible. This includes recognizing that the systemic stigma and discrimination against people with disabilities is a core barrier to equity and inclusion. To overcome this stigma, the pledge commits philanthropic foundations to advance systemic change and serve as models for disability inclusion.

Similarly, the Ford Foundation has launched its first-ever program focused on advancing the rights of people with disabilities in the U.S. The foundation's [U.S. Disability Rights program](#) is focused on removing barriers to economic empowerment while providing leadership development for people with disabilities. 500 CEOs and their companies have also followed suit, joining together to form the [Valuable 500](#), in which they make commitments to take actions for disability inclusion.

These initiatives could bring significant benefits to individuals, the economy, and society. For individuals, a physical disability can negatively impact self-esteem, limit participation in recreational and social activities, create the potential for isolation, and increase the chances of having both physical and mental health issues. Further, of Americans in the U.S. with a disability, [half get no aerobic exercise](#) and there is a [38 percent higher](#) rate of obesity in children with disabilities. This problem was articulated by the CDC when it reported that a lack of physical activity among disabled persons costs the U.S. [\\$117 billion](#) annually for related healthcare.

Understanding that we all do better when *we all do better*, what can we as an agency do to improve diversity and inclusion in the media, which can be a vital instrument in raising awareness, countering stigma, and challenging misinformation? How can we direct or encourage those who own and control media outlets and content to ensure that the media is used as a powerful force to change societal misconceptions about persons with disabilities, and to present them as individuals that are a part of our collective humanity?

Some efforts for diversity and inclusion have focused on sports, so perhaps we could start there too. There is considerable evidence that sports for those in the disability community, known as *Adaptive Sports*, have the power to transform lives, both in changing how persons with disabilities look at themselves and how society treats them.

The two biggest barriers to adaptive sports becoming more widespread are: (1) prohibitively expensive sports equipment; and (2) a lack of awareness that local and national adaptive sport programs exist. Both are solvable and there is a positive feedback loop between the two. The better job society does in overcoming one, the easier it will be to overcome the other. And that is likely to happen if adaptive sports gain more media attention.

The Paralympics is the [third most viewed](#) sports event globally, following only the Olympics and the World Cup. This is backed by data showing that ticket sales for the Paralympics and TV viewership have both been [increasing exponentially](#), showing an increased demand for access to adaptive sports. Just like we have heard over the last weeks during these [Winter Olympics](#) about gold medalist figure skater Nathan Chen and gold medalist Erin Jackson, the first Black woman to win any medal in Olympic speedskating, we should also know about our Winter [Paralympian heroes like](#) Oksana Masters and Aaron Pike.

Here too, others are stepping up. For example, a new initiative called Adaptive Sports Movement is holding multi-stakeholder Roundtables to address these issues and is working with media companies to design strategies to raise awareness and tell more inclusive stories.

But more can be done. Given the plethora of outlets, there is ample opportunity to better showcase adaptive sports and tell the stories of these athletes. In short, although the addressable market is there, the current media environment still needs a nudge to tell bigger and more inclusive stories.

I am not here offering a detailed agenda. I am here to ask questions, start a conversation, and start working towards solutions that will make a difference in the lives of persons experiencing life with a disability. As your Charter explains, this Committee is intended to provide an effective means for interested stakeholders to exchange ideas, which will in turn enhance the Commission's ability to effectively address disability access issues.

With that in mind, I encourage you to continue to help us look out over the horizon on how to best address the interests and needs of persons with disabilities. What should we at the FCC be doing? What data should we begin collecting? Who are the stakeholders we need to convene? How can we use the voice and authority of the FCC to improve lives and communities? I look forward to your advice. Thank you all, have a productive meeting, be well and stay safe.