

**REMARKS OF COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS
FCC NATIONAL BROADBAND PLAN FIELD HEARING
BROADBAND ACCESS FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES
GALLAUDET UNIVERSITY
WASHINGTON, D.C.
FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 6, 2009 9:30 a.m.**

Good morning and welcome, everyone to this official FCC Field Hearing on Broadband Access for People with Disabilities. Thank you, President Davila for your gracious opening remarks and the warm welcome to Gallaudet University. It is always a tremendous pleasure to come visit this wonderful campus. And what a great place it is—what an appropriate place it is—to hold this field hearing on how we can really turn the corner on access for people with disabilities. In this truly state-of-the-art auditorium, I think we have what we need to conduct a sound and inclusive hearing. I am impressed with the space, I am thrilled with the attendance, and I am looking forward to hearing from our distinguished panelists. But—despite all of the positive attributes of today’s hearing—let’s take a step back and realize the limitations. We can’t accommodate everyone interested in this topic in this room. Not everyone could be here. Not everyone can be connected to our webcast. I can’t help but imagine the potential if everyone interested, everyone affected, had accessible broadband.

I have been talking about this issue for a long time. Some of you in the audience may remember the first speech that I gave as an FCC Commissioner. It was in 2001 at the 14th Biennial International Conference held at Telecommunications for the Deaf in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. As a newly-minted FCC Commissioner, I was learning about what access to advanced communications and information services could mean for the people I met out there. I learned right then and there, and said at the time, that “the digital tools of the Information Age are the keys to unlocking the doors of opportunity.”

So, here we are, eight years later. Some positive changes have been made when it comes to telecommunications services for people with disabilities, including expanded access to telecommunications relay services and video relay services, as well as improved closed captioning. As for broadband, well, now is the time. For the past eight years, I have been saying that broadband can be the great enabler that restores America’s economic well-being and opens doors of opportunity for all Americans to pass through, no matter who they are, where they live, or the particular circumstances of their individual lives. Every American has to have access to this technology and all the many services its spins out. Because this is technology that intersects with just about every great challenge confronting our nation—whether it’s jobs, education, energy, climate change and the environment, international competitiveness, health care, equal opportunity or overcoming disabilities. There’s no solution for *any* of these challenges that does not have a broadband component to it—that’s how important this stuff is.

Today’s hearing is about creating opportunities for our brothers and sisters living with disabilities—and it is all the more timely now because of the terrible and disproportionate toll the current economic downturn is inflicting on them. As a group, Americans with disabilities are, in some areas, experiencing—suffering is a better word—unemployment at rates in excess of 70

percent! And, during this economic downturn, 17 percent of Americans with disabilities have lost their jobs. People with so much talent, so many skills, such dedication, wanting nothing more than a chance to be productive members of society. It is all of our responsibilities to provide the tools to fix this problem. And it's not just something nice for us to do—it's their right—I think it's pretty much a civil right—to have this kind of access, because access denied is opportunity denied.

Eight years ago I told many of the folks gathered here this morning that I was an optimist, and I still am. And maybe now, we're within reach. At long last, your government and mine is making a real, honest-to-goodness commitment to broadband; a deep and abiding commitment to get this transformative technology to all of our people. The Administration and Congress have made it plain that they want broadband brought to the four corners of our country. That means, again, everyone. I just don't believe that in this Twenty-first century—and we've only begun to see the communications wonders this century will produce—anyone can be a fully productive citizen, able to open the doors of economic and social opportunity to themselves and their families, without high-speed, value-laden, affordable broadband.

Apart from the new commitment to broadband that I talked about, it was great news to me when Congress and the President designated the Federal Communications Commission to develop that plan. And they want the plan by February 17, 2010—just a little more than three months from today. It's a monumental challenge. And it's why we are here today. FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski's mission has been to get this job done in the most open, transparent and data-driven manner that we've ever seen at the Commission. I am happy to see Blair Levin here, who is coordinating a stellar professional team for this massive undertaking, with real outreach, conducting two and three workshops a week at the FCC, and running our new broadband.gov website. And I am so grateful that the broadband team has been focusing so intently on broadband access for people with disabilities. In fact, we have already held two in-depth workshops at the Commission building up to today's hearing.

We have great panels assembled here today—and a great audience, part of it assembled here at Gallaudet and part of it out there on the web. Your participation in this process is welcome. It's also, as they say, “merely essential.” Just as telecommunications providers shouldn't be designing equipment for people with disabilities without including people with disabilities in their planning and development, neither should the FCC be writing a broadband plan for people with disabilities without including people with disabilities from start to finish. Remember that old saying: “decisions without you are usually decisions against you.” I've been around this town a long time, and I can't tell you how many times I've seen how true it is. I think you folks, just as much or more than any in the country, are fully aware of that and that's why you're here now. I'm doing everything I can—and Blair and his team are, too—to ensure that we are working together to address your concerns about access and to make sure they are integrated into the National Broadband Plan.

And I want you to know how much I appreciate the advocacy work so many of you in this auditorium have done to keep these issues alive at the FCC and to make sure we live up to the requirements of the law and the requirement to serve the public interest for *all* our people. I

know this kind of advocacy presents many challenges, hardships and inconveniences, but we are all the better for it and I thank you for what you do.

In addition to the discussion in this room, I want to encourage all of you to visit the excellent technology demonstrations in the lobby. Exhibitors include AOL, AT&T, the D.C. Public Library, Microsoft, RIM/Blackberry and REIC on Telecom Access. Take a few moments to see some of these opportunity-creating new tools and technologies.

Before we move on, I do have a few logistical matters I need to raise. We will conduct two sessions of discussions with our illustrious panelists today. There are certainly many more people who could have made excellent additions to today's panels, and perhaps provided us with additional perspectives, but we just couldn't include everyone, although we've heard from others in our workshops and will continue to solicit their input as we move ahead. For them, I want to encourage ongoing engagement in the Commission's open and inclusive broadband examination—whether online through our broadband.gov website, in written comments to the Commission or, as I said, in our subsequent broadband workshops.

I am a big believer in open discussion, and I want to be able to address as many questions from the public as we can today. After the panelist presentations, I will open it to questions from the audience to the panelists. To facilitate the process and to get to as many questions as possible and to avoid duplication, it has been recommended that we take the questions in written form. So, we have cards available for you to write down your questions or concerns, and FCC staff is available throughout the room to assist you.

I want to extend a special welcome to those watching us via the Internet. The FCC makes a practice of live streaming with captioning for all of our broadband proceedings. In addition to taking questions from the audience here, we will also entertain questions from online viewers via Twitter and our live video stream on broadband.gov/live.

You know, next year will mark the 20th anniversary of the American with Disabilities Act. We still have a lot of work ahead to make its aspirations a reality. But the hard work and spirit that gave us that act and make a difference once again if we do our work right in the weeks and months just ahead. It's in that spirit that we come together today. Together we draw inspiration from what has been accomplished and energize ourselves for what remains to be done.

I am so pleased that some of my colleagues have joined this hearing today. Let me welcome them and ask each if they would like to make a statement for the record.