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“Building Resiliency into U.S. Networks”
FCC Virtual Field Hearing – October 26, 2021

Thank you to the Federal Communications Commission for inviting me to this virtual field hearing on “Building Resiliency into U.S. Networks” and recovery of communications networks during disasters. I would like to thank Acting Chairwoman Jessica Rosenworcel for choosing to hold this hearing during the Commission’s October Open Meeting. As a civil rights and urban advocacy organization, the National Urban League is dedicated to economic empowerment, equity and social justice for African Americans and others in underserved communities. We have 91 affiliates in 37 states including the District of Columbia and provide direct services to over 2 million people annually. Equity in disaster recovery is an important part of our mission as recent events show that natural disasters effect urban communities throughout the United States. Also, the National Urban League President and CEO Marc Morial and I are native Louisianians making today’s hearing a topic near to our hearts.

For many Louisianians, Hurricane Ida stirred up strong emotions and memories. Ida hit exactly 16 years to the day after Hurricane Katrina. Ida slammed coastal areas and noncoastal areas, crippled the power grid, and caused widespread destruction and misery. In its immediate aftermath, supermarkets were closed, gas shortages developed, and temperatures soared into the 90s with no climate control available.

Even today, thousands of homes remain uninhabitable, industrial sites are shut down, businesses are shuttered, and as of last week at least 46,000 homes and businesses remain without electrical power. According to the Urban League of

Louisiana, the long-term impact for African American families and businesses may be even more pronounced and disproportionate.

Immediately following the storm, the National Urban League urged state and local elected officials in areas battered by Hurricane Ida to ground their recovery efforts in equity and racial justice and to avoid the missteps and discrimination that debased the recovery after Katrina. The Louisiana Road Home program disbursed \$10 billion in HUD grants to homeowners based on pre-storm value, not the actual cost of rebuilding, resulting in many African American homeowners receiving smaller grants than white homeowners, even though the cost to rebuild was the same. Further, a recent FEMA Advisory Committee Report, based on a Rice University study, found that federal recovery funding after a disaster disproportionately benefits white entrepreneurs. When major disasters strike and significant federal resources are invested, there is an increase in white net worth and a corresponding decrease in net worth for African Americans. The recovery today does not need to repeat the sins of the past. We have called on leaders to distribute available funding on a more equitable basis. African American and underserved communities deserve better.

Pertinent to today's hearing, the aftereffects of Ida and other hurricanes as well as wildfire seasons, earthquakes in Puerto Rico, and severe winter storms in Texas demonstrate that America's communications infrastructure remains susceptible to disruption during disasters. When considering the resiliency of our communications networks – we are particularly mindful of the impact on networks in African American and underserved communities. In the aftermath of Hurricane Ida, Acting Chairwoman Rosenworcel and Commissioner Carr visited my beloved home state of Louisiana,

driving from Baton Rouge to New Orleans to witness first-hand the devastation wrought by the storm. As noted in the Commission's Resiliency NPRM¹, Hurricane Ida had significant physical impacts on both power and communications infrastructure, which in turn affected interdependent public safety communications infrastructure and Louisiana's land mobile radio public safety communications network.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of modern communications networks for communities of color. African American and Hispanic households are more likely to rely on wireless as their primary broadband connection – and this means during an emergency, relying on wireless to check in with loved ones, to call emergency services, and to receive emergency alerts. Currently, disaster recovery efforts in the wireless industry are supported by the Wireless Network Resiliency Cooperative Framework (Framework). During Hurricane Ida, there were encouraging signs due to the investment of wireless providers and their recovery efforts. For instance, the vast majority of wireless cell sites were up and running long before electrical power was restored to residents. This demonstrates progress, improved procedures, and real investment in these communities.

However, improving the Framework should remain a focus of the Commission and the voluntary members of the Framework. It plays a central role in how wireless providers prepare for and respond to emergencies. We very much share the long-standing concerns of Acting Chairwoman Rosenworcel and the other Commissioners on the need for better collaboration, more outreach, and greater investment in recovery

¹ Notice of Proposed Rulemaking - PS Docket Nos. 21-346 and 15-80; ET Docket No. 04-35 (9/9/21)).

efforts across stakeholders. The Commission's efforts have brought much-needed focus on enhancing network resiliency efforts, particularly in communities of color. Along with the Commission, the National Urban League suggests that providers take a multifaceted approach to disaster readiness and response, with the aim of improving the public's safety during natural disasters and continue to address gaps in the Framework's coverage and implementation. Working with the FCC, wireless providers and power companies must take steps to reduce the number of outages and speed up recovery efforts.

As climate change progresses, these problems will only worsen in the coming years. Resilient communications networks are critical to economic growth, national security, emergency response, and nearly every facet of modern life. Steps should be taken in advance to support reinforcing and hardening infrastructure. The burdens of at-risk networks are not equally shared, and it is important to recognize that vulnerable communities are often impacted more severely when disaster strikes. Government and stakeholders should also come together to assess what worked and what didn't work in the aftermath of any event. Finger pointing is not productive. Solutions for impacted communities should be the objective.

Equitable investment aimed at enhancing critical power and communications infrastructure is the best way to ensure against these events. We cannot wait until disaster strikes. Our communities need funds to help prepare for future extreme weather events now, so that they can be ready for the worst. This includes funds to upgrade infrastructure to add sensors enabling smart grid technology, support the deployment of microgrids that can disconnect from the traditional grid to operate

autonomously during natural disasters, and fix, replace, and harden critical infrastructure inputs like utility poles and conduits.

Congress has indicated a commitment to investing in these type of physical infrastructure enhancements across the nation, and the National Urban League fully supports that effort. I hope the Commission takes note of the need for such investment in its resiliency proceeding.

I again thank the Commission for including me in today's virtual field hearing. The National Urban League truly appreciates the Acting Chairwoman's commitment to advancing public safety and strengthening the resiliency of our nation's communications networks.