





A BROADBAND IMPERATIVE

Equitable Opportunity for Tribal Communities through Libraries

ne in every 4 rural Americans is unable to connect at home. Even starker, nearly 7 in every 10 residents on rural tribal lands remain without access to fixed high-capacity broadband and are cut off from educational and economic opportunities. Broadband is essential for learning, working, and daily life overall. Correcting poor broadband across Indian Country is a national imperative.

The bipartisan and bicameral Tribal Connect Act addresses some long-standing challenges thwarting the pace of broadband deployment in Indian Country by ensuring tribal libraries and their communities can leverage the federal E-rate program. E-rate enables robust and affordable internet access for public libraries and K-12 schools. The E-rate program helps libraries equip

students and broader communities with the skills to use internet-enabled technologies effectively, narrowing the digital divide, especially for those without home access.

Tribal communities and their libraries have shamefully poor broadband access—by far, the worst for any group of Americans

Poor broadband in tribal communities inhibits their educational and economic opportunity and ability to preserve and promote their culture

Only 15% of tribal libraries receive E-rate funding

The Tribal Connect Act addresses critical broadband challenges—it needs to be enacted ASAP



Ak-Chin Indian Community Library, AZ

Tribal libraries must not have inferior opportunity to benefit from the E-rate program as other public libraries in America.

Members of Congress are urged to move this legislation forward to expand eligibility to the E-rate program to all tribal communities. Meanwhile, the White House, Federal Communications Commission (FCC), Departments of Commerce, Interior, and Agriculture, and other stakeholders are urged to prioritize broadband access and deployment in Indian Country. Federal agencies must account for government-to government consultation obligations.

Tribal Libraries: Unique Public Libraries

Tribal libraries are cultural stewards for their native communities preserving native languages, ways of life, and sacred materials. While some tribal libraries are stand-alone entities, others are within schools, colleges or universities or serve multiple functions as community centers, museums, or archives. As a result, they often serve geographically large areas and perform diverse

"The Tribal Connect Act aims to increase access to broadband in tribal areas by removing barriers to the E-rate program and providing tribal schools and libraries a better opportunity to obtain more affordable, more reliable internet."

> -CONGRESSMAN MARKWAYNE MULLIN (OK-2)

At the same time. tribal libraries share

functions.

many commonalities with public libraries. And like public libraries, tribal libraries have a vital role in providing internet access. Robust broadband access to libraries provides a targeted

broadband deployment challenges on tribal lands due to low density, rugged terrain and rights of way complexities that have left tribal communities consistently and egregiously underserved. Tribal libraries also effectively address broadband adoption challenges associated with high rates of poverty and unemployment as well as skills gaps that also limit effective broadband use.

Although tribal libraries often provide the only no-fee internet

access in their communities, many fall short of 25 Mbps upload and 3 Mbps download speeds, the FCC benchmark for residential broadband. A study by the Association of Tribal Archives. Libraries, and

"We urgently need to provide the necessary resources, the infrastructure, to close the digital divide in Indian Country so that all of our kids—no matter where they live, no matter where they go to school—can learn the skills they need to succeed in the 21st century."

-SENATOR MARTIN HEINRICH (NM)

Museums (ATALM), found that two-thirds of tribal libraries offer broadband speeds well below the threshold. Despite the obvious need, eighty-five percent of tribal libraries do not receive E-rate funding according to ATALM.

When tribal libraries are eligible for E-rate funding, comprehensive and efficient investments in broadband are possible.

E-Rate Brings Connectivity to New Mexico

Driven by the desire to offer distance language learning to students in native languages, tribal libraries in northcentral New Mexico joined together to address broadband connectivity challenges in their respective communities. Forming the Middle Rio Grande Pueblo Tribal Consortium, composed of four tribal libraries in the Pueblos of Santa Ana, San Felipe, Santo Domingo, and Cochiti, the Consortium aggregated demand for broadband, increasing purchasing power and efficiencies in the network. It also benefited from recent rule changes to the E-rate program and qualified for construction of a fiber-optic network that proved to be the most cost-effective option.

The first tribal project of its kind resulted in a selfprovisioned, tribally-owned and -operated, 60-mile fiber optic network. The network increased capacity from 3 Mbps to 100 Mbps, decreasing cost from \$106/Mbps to \$7/Mbps. Through a 90 percent E-rate discount, the cost will be just \$0.70/Mbps.

solution to overcome







Laguna Public Library, Laguna Pueblo, NM

Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, SD

Ysleta del Sur Pueblo Tribal Empowerment Library, TX

The fiber optic network is an enduring investment that will offer near limitless capacity for future needs and

access to next-generation educational networks. From tribal lands in the north, the network extends due south via a connection to leased dark fiber in the Santa Ana Pueblo, to eventually reach a major interconnection point in Albuquerque—the Consortium network will enable access to

advanced networks, such as Internet2 at the University of New Mexico.

"Connecting the library is the conduit to meeting the digital needs of the community."

-CYNTHIA AGUILAR, LIBRARIAN, SANTO DOMINGO PUEBLO LIBRARY

general lack of awareness about the program. At least half of tribal libraries have never heard of the program,

> and nearly a third are uncertain if they are eligible for E-rate support. Disseminating information about E-rate to the tribal library community is essential along with associated technical training to address the complicated application process. The Tribal Connect Act recognizes this as essential for the full participation of tribal libraries in

the E-rate program and includes a provision requiring annual reporting by the FCC on outreach and support activities.

Tribal Connect Act: E-rate for All Tribal Libraries

U.S. Senators Martin Heinrich (D-NM) and Dean Heller (R-NV) and Congressmen Ben Ray Luján (D-NM) and Markwayne Mullin (R-OK) introduced the Tribal Connect Act to expand tribal access to the E-rate program in several key ways. It amends current eligibility requirements that prevent some tribal libraries from participating in the program, establishes a pilot program to permit tribes without libraries to designate an alternative tribally-owned facility open to the public and used for educational purposes as eligible for E-rate support, and increases training and awareness about the E-rate program in tribal communities. The bills also require performance measures and improved tracking of tribal libraries against those measures to improve the reliability of E-rate data collected.

Outreach and Training to Increase Tribal Library Participation in the E-rate Program

The lack of participation among currently eligible tribal libraries in the E-rate program also is related to the

TAKEAWAYS for decision makers ▶▶▶

- Tribal communities in the U.S. have, by far, the lowest broadband deployment and adoption rates of any group of Americans—a shameful state of affairs.
- Robust, affordable broadband is essential for tribal libraries to ensure equitable educational and economic opportunity for their communities and to preserve native languages, cultural values, and ways of life.
- Only about 15% of tribal libraries receive E-rate funding because of ineligibility, lack of awareness of the program, or program complexities.
- The Tribal Connect Act addresses these broadband challenges in Indian Country and should be passed.
- The Middle Rio Grande Consortium is a success story that is a model for investment in other communities.
- Broadband policies and initiatives must prioritize tribal communities and leverage the E-rate program.
- Government-to-government consultation must be included in broadband policies.

ABOUT AMERICA'S LIBRARIES

he 120,000 libraries across the United States are a powerful force in addressing public policy priorities. Libraries advance Education, Employment, Entrepreneurship, Empowerment, and Engagement for Everyone, Everywhere—The E's of Libraries®.

Libraries serve America's cities, towns, counties, and states; on school and college campuses; on military bases; in hospitals, government agencies, corporations, and other institutions. Library professionals provide diverse programs, services and resources tailored to community needs.

The American Library Association (ALA) is the foremost national organization providing resources to inspire library and information professionals to transform their communities through essential programs and services, with more than 57,000 members. The ALA Annual Conference, held in June, typically attracts over 20,000 participants. ALA maintains a Washington Office to engage federal and national decision makers and influencers.

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