Tribal Connect Act

Improving Broadband Connectivity in Indian Country

Broadband connectivity is a critical component of the nation's infrastructure and economy. High-speed internet service provides a number of social and economic benefits including essential service for ecommerce, telemedicine, online learning, and other educational tools. However, according to the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) 2016 Broadband Progress Report, 68 percent of people living on rural Tribal lands lack access to high-speed internet.

The FCC Schools and Libraries Program, known as E-rate, provides discounts to assist most schools and libraries obtain high-speed internet access and telecommunications at affordable rates. The Institute of Museum and Library Services reported that over 90 percent of public libraries have received E-rate support while the National Congress of American Indians estimates that only 15 percent of Tribal libraries receive E-rate funds. This gap is largely attributed to FCC eligibility rules and the application process that further exacerbate the digital divide in Indian Country and undermine the intent of the E-rate program to help connect all students to the internet.

To ensure the FCC's commitment to assist rural Tribal libraries and connect some of our nation's most vulnerable student populations and underserved communities to high-speed internet, the Tribal Connect Act of 2017 would:

- **Promote broadband access for students and Tribal community members** by amending current E-rate eligibility requirements to allow more Tribal libraries to apply for the program. Tribal libraries from Alaskan Native Villages to New Mexican pueblos provide their communities with many of the same library services we all enjoy and should be eligible for E-rate support.

- **Establish a Tribal E-rate pilot program** to allow Tribal communities without libraries to designate a Tribally owned "anchor institution," such as a chapter house or community center, as eligible to apply for E-rate support from a $100 million fund over five years to provide internet access to students, teachers and the community.

- **Improve FCC training and program guidance to Indian tribes** to help Tribes apply to the E-rate program.

- **Require the FCC to develop performance goals and measures** to track progress on achieving the strategic objective of the Commission of ensuring that Tribal libraries have affordable internet access and telecommunications services.