



A BROADBAND IMPERATIVE

Equitable Opportunity for Tribal Communities through Libraries

One 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 functions.

“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 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 solution to overcome

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 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 north-central 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 self-provisioned, 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.

“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)

ABOUT AMERICA'S LIBRARIES



The 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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