Tribal Connect

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, 80 percent of people living on rural Tribal lands in New Mexico 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, lack of awareness, and application complexities 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 libraries and connect some of our nation's most vulnerable student populations to high-speed internet, U.S. Senator Martin Heinrich will be introducing the Tribal Connect Act of 2017 that:

- **Establishes a Tribal E-rate pilot program** to allow Tribal communities without libraries to designate an "anchor institution," such as a chapter house, as eligible for E-rate support to provide internet access to students.

- **Provides training and technical assistance to Indian tribes** to help Tribes implement the E-rate program. Lack of awareness, application complexities, and current statutory eligibility requirements significantly hinder E-rate participation on Tribal lands.

- **Promotes broadband access for students and Tribal community members** by directing the FCC to consult with Indian tribes to develop attainable E-rate eligibility requirements for Tribal libraries while ensuring all other program requirements remain. 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.

- **Requires 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.