

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 28, 2021

The Honorable Joseph Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, D.C., 20500

Dear President Biden:

As we work together to further essential investments in infrastructure, we write in support of a heightened focus on clean and reliable water and sanitation for tribal communities in the Build Back Better plan.

While the necessity of repairing existing water infrastructure is undeniable, for many rural tribal communities the investment in new water and sanitation connections is vital. We commend the inclusion of \$600 million for Indian Health Service (IHS) related construction, leasing, and improvement projects in the American Rescue Plan. We urge you to include additional direct investments in new water and wastewater service lines for tribal communities through the IHS Sanitation Facilities Construction (SFC) account or other related programs in your economic plan.

According to the IHS's 2019 Annual Report to Congress on Sanitation Deficiency Levels, 582,416 homes on tribal lands need sanitation facility improvements. On the Navajo Nation alone, roughly 30 percent of residents live without access to running water or adequate plumbing. The current backlog of feasible projects on the IHS Sanitation Deficiency Levels list is over \$1.2 billion. Total, the IHS estimates that a \$2.57 billion investment is necessary for all IHS and tribal sanitation sites to comply with all applicable water supply and control laws.^[1] The federal government has a trust responsibility to support access to clean and reliable water systems for tribal communities. The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has only emphasized the need for an increased federal investment in tribal public health infrastructure.

Tribal communities have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in part due to the inability to meet the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) sanitation and hygiene recommendations. CDC supported research displays that populations with a lower proportion of homes with water service present higher hospitalization rates for respiratory related infections and viruses.^[2] Recent studies regarding COVID-19 infections among tribal communities display that cases were upwards of 10 times more likely in homes without indoor

^[1] "Indian Health Service FY 2021 Justification of Estimates for Appropriations Committees." (2020). https://www.ihs.gov/sites/budgetformulation/themes/responsive2017/display_objects/documents/FY_2021_Final_CJ-IHS.pdf.

^[2] Ibid.

plumbing.^[3] Providing a robust investment in tribal water and sanitation infrastructure is necessary to protect these populations now and in the future. We encourage your administration to build on your commitment to investing in the health and safety of Tribal communities.

Focusing solely on repairing and replacing existing water lines fails to address the lack of any water and wastewater lines to homes in many tribal communities. We appreciate your attention to this request and hope that you will incorporate a much-needed infusion of federal assistance in new water and sanitation infrastructure for Tribal communities into your Build Back Better plan. We look forward to working with you to advance your plans for long-term economic growth.

Sincerely,

/s/ Martin Heinrich
MARTIN HEINRICH
United States Senator

/s/ Cory Booker
CORY BOOKER
United States Senator

/s/ Elizabeth Warren
ELIZABETH WARREN
United States Senator

/s/ Tina Smith
TINA SMITH
United States Senator

/s/ Richard Blumenthal
RICHARD BLUMENTHAL
United States Senator

/s/ Angus King
ANGUS KING
United States Senator

/s/ Michael F. Bennet
MICHAEL F. BENNET
United States Senator

/s/ Ben Ray Luján
BEN RAY LUJÁN
United States Senator

/s/ Dianne Feinstein
DIANNE FEINSTEIN
United States Senator

/s/ Ron Wyden
RON WYDEN
United States Senator

/s/ Jeff Merkley
JEFF MERKLEY
United States Senator

^[3] Desi Rodriguez-Lonebear, Nicolás E. Barceló, Randall Akee, Stephanie Russo Carroll. “American Indian Reservations and COVID-19: Correlates of Early Infection Rates in the Pandemic.” J Public Health Manag Pract. (2020). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7249493/>.