

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 12, 2018

Hon. John Hoeven  
Chairman  
Committee on Indian Affairs  
United States Senate  
838 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Hon. Tom Udall  
Vice Chairman  
Committee on Indian Affairs  
United States Senate  
838 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Hoeven and Vice Chairman Udall:

We write today to respectfully request a hearing in the Committee on Indian Affairs on S. 2205, the Tribal Connect Act of 2017.

The Tribal Connect Act aims to improve broadband connectivity and close the digital divide for students and children living in Indian Country. Broadband access is vital for local economies and small businesses and is a cornerstone to improving education, tele-health services, and job-training opportunities. Yet, approximately 60 percent of people who live in rural tribal communities do not have access to fixed high-speed broadband.<sup>[1]</sup>

The Tribal Connect Act would increase access to the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) schools and libraries universal service support program, known as E-rate, that provides discounts to assist public schools and libraries obtain high-speed internet access and telecommunications at affordable rates.

In Indian Country, a library can often be the only point of access for broadband connectivity in the community. While most of the nation's public libraries have received E-rate support, only an estimated 15 percent of tribal libraries have received critical E-rate funds.<sup>[2]</sup> The Tribal Connect Act would increase access to E-Rate by opening eligibility to tribal libraries that do not receive assistance from a state library, as currently required by law. Additionally, the Tribal Connect Act would establish an 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 for E-Rate support to provide internet access to students. The bill would also require the

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<sup>[1]</sup> Federal Communications Commission. (2018). *2018 Broadband Deployment Report*. Washington, DC.

<sup>[2]</sup> Miriam Jorgensen, Traci Morris, and Susan Feller. (2014). *Digital Inclusion in Native Communities: The Role of Tribal Libraries*. Oklahoma City, OK: Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums.

FCC to develop performance goals and measures to track progress on ensuring affordable internet access and telecommunications services to tribes and would improve training and technical assistance to Indian tribes to help them implement the E-Rate program.

The Tribal Connect Act is supported by the American Library Association, National Congress of American Indians, National Indian Education Association, AMERIND Risk, and the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums.

Connecting more tribes to the E-rate program will ensure that all of our students and children can compete on an even playing field and learn the skills they need to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Martin Heinrich", written over a horizontal line.

Martin Heinrich  
United States Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Dean Heller", written over a horizontal line.

Dean Heller  
United States Senator