

Written by gallupsun
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WASHINGTON — U.S. Senators Martin Heinrich, D-N.M., John Hoeven, R-N.D., Ben Ray Luján, D-N.M., and Markwayne Mullin, R-Okla., introduced the bipartisan Tribal Connect Act to make it easier for tribes to secure high-speed internet access at Tribal Essential Community-Serving Institutions through the Federal Communications Commission's Universal Service Fund Schools and Libraries Program, or E-rate program. Rep. Teresa Leger Fernández introduced the companion legislation in the House.

The FCC established the E-rate program in 1996 with the goal to equip schools and libraries with broadband support, so that every child in the U.S. has access to internet through their local schools and libraries. However, many tribal communities do not have a library or, if they do, it does not meet the FCC's definition. Thus, tribes have historically missed out on being eligible for this critical federal program. The TribalConnect Act improves the E-rate program by creating an avenue for Tribes without libraries to designate a Tribal Essential Community-Serving Institution, such as a community or all-purpose center or Chapter house, as eligible for the E-rate program.

"Access to reliable, high-speed internet is a necessity for students working on their homework assignments, families who need access to telehealth services, and the responsibilities of everyday life. But right now, many Tribes in New Mexico lack access to this essential service," Heinrich said. "That's why I am proud to reintroduce the bipartisan TribalConnect Act to steer much-needed federal broadband funding to Tribal libraries, Chapter houses, and community centers in Indian Country to close the digital divide. Every child, no matter where they live or go to school, should have the tools they need to succeed in the 21st century."

Luján, Chair of the Subcommittee on Communications, Media, and Broadband, also stressed the importance of high-speed internet.

"A reliable internet connection in today's age is non-negotiable and for too long, the digital divide has limited opportunities on tribal lands. I'm proud to join my colleagues in reintroducing this bipartisan legislation that delivers critical funding and technical assistance to help connect libraries and anchor institutions on tribal lands," Luján said. "As our work to close the digital divide continues, this legislation will help move New Mexico closer to 100% connectivity by increasing high-speed internet in Tribal communities."

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Specifically, the TribalConnect Act of 2023 would:

- Establish a Tribal Essential Community-Serving Institution Pilot Program to ensure tribes without libraries can designate a Native-owned public institution, such as a community or all-purpose center, as eligible to apply for USF support from a \$300 million fund over three years to provide high-speed internet access to students, teachers and the community within the facility.
- Provide technical assistance to tribes to help ensure that Native schools, libraries, and qualifying essential community-serving institutions can fully participate in universal service programs and E-rate. This includes targeted outreach, specific training programs, and direct federal grants. The bill authorizes \$50 million in appropriations for these purposes.
- Require the FCC to develop performance goals and measures to track progress on achieving the strategic objective of the Commission of ensuring that all tribes have affordable high-speed internet access and telecommunications services.
- Increase resources for technical assistance by appointing a tribal representative to the USF board of directors and expanding USF offices that provide application support.

According to a 2021 National Tribal Broadband Strategy report by the U.S. Department of Interior, while over 99% of the population in urban areas has access to broadband service meeting a high-speed threshold, only approximately 65% of the population on rural tribal lands had the same access as of the end of 2019.

In July 2023, the FCC finalized its rule to update the definition of "library" in the Commission's rules to include tribal libraries, and increased participation of underrepresented Tribal libraries in the E-Rate Program. This update mirrored provisions in previous versions of the TribalConnect Act. This legislation continues to build off of this momentum.

The bipartisan Tribal Connect Act has received the support of the American Libraries Association, All Pueblo Council of Governors, Great Plains Tribal Chairmen's Association, National Indian Education Association, Navajo Nation, Public Knowledge, NDN Collective, National Congress of American Indians, and Alaska Native Federation of Natives.



Heinrich, Luján Introduce legislation to increase access to high-speed internet for tribal communities

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