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TRIBAL BROADBAND

Additional Assistance to Recipients Would Better Support Implementation of $3 Billion in Federal Grants

Why GAO Did This Study

NTIA was appropriated $3 billion for TBCP. NTIA completed the first of two rounds of funding in September 2023. Tribal stakeholders described TBCP as a once-in-a-generation opportunity for Tribes to close the digital divide, which previous efforts have not done.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, includes a provision for GAO to review TBCP grants. This report examines topics related to TBCP including: (1) grants that reached Tribes that had not received previous federal broadband support; (2) the extent to which NTIA provided support to recipients on financial sustainability; and (3) the extent to which NTIA provided recipients with technical assistance in the environmental review process.

GAO compared NTIA efforts to leading practices and analyzed data from TBCP and other key federal broadband programs. GAO visited TBCP recipients in Alaska and Oklahoma and interviewed a non-generalizable sample of 16 TBCP recipients. GAO also interviewed officials from NTIA and other federal officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations to NTIA, that it (1) provide technical assistance to recipients that are unable to implement their financial sustainability plans, (2) report to Congress on the projects' financial sustainability needs, and (3) consolidate technical assistance resources for the TBCP environmental review process in a single location. NTIA agreed with these recommendations.

View GAO-24-106541. For more information, contact Andrew Von Ah at (202) 512-2834 or vonaha@gao.gov.
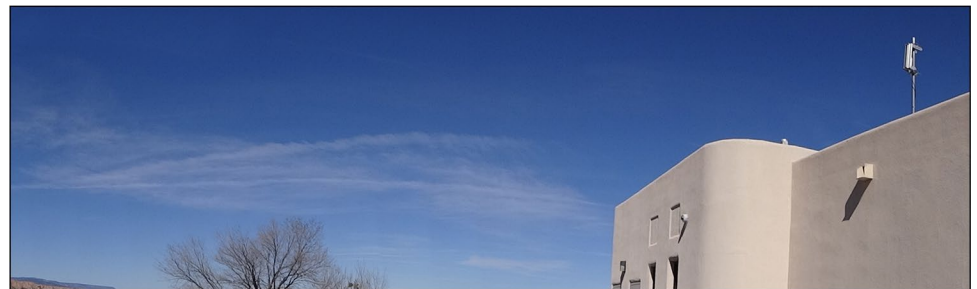
What GAO Found

Broadband is critical for modern life, but access on tribal lands has lagged behind the rest of the country. Recent Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program (TBCP) grant awards reached 31 tribal recipients that had not recently participated in—or received service from providers with funding from—eight other key federal broadband programs. Tribal entities have historically been at a disadvantage in competing for federal broadband funding. For example, most broadband programs are not exclusively for tribal entities, so they must compete with other eligible entities with more resources and experience in applying for funding, including well-established telecommunications providers.

Tribal organizations and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA)—which selects and oversees TBCP recipients—have told GAO that it will be difficult to financially sustain networks built under TBCP. These networks will serve areas that have not attracted private-sector investment due to their location, density, and income levels. However, NTIA's plans for providing technical assistance throughout the funding period do not include support for recipients that are unable to implement their financial sustainability plans. In addition, over half of TBCP recipients with infrastructure projects planned to use other federal funding to support their ongoing financial sustainability. But those sources have proven difficult for Tribes to obtain or have ended. Providing technical assistance to recipients and reporting to Congress on the financial sustainability needs of the projects would help NTIA achieve its purpose of improving quality of life through expanding broadband service in historically underserved Native American communities.

A Wireless Broadband Connection on a Tribal Home in the Pueblo of Pojoaque, New Mexico

Source: GAO (photo). | GAO-24-106541

NTIA did not include most of its technical assistance resources regarding the TBCP environmental review process in its one-stop hub for technical assistance resources. Instead, NTIA provided most of these resources at a one-time meeting or in a separate archived location on its website. NTIA is required to consider the environmental impacts of TBCP projects, a process that some Tribes said they have found particularly challenging. NTIA officials said it would be beneficial to gather all such resources in one place but have not taken steps to do so. Including information about the environmental review process—such as expected time frames and other information that could affect TBCP recipients' planning—in a single location on NTIA's website could help recipients better plan their projects.

_____ **United States Government Accountability Office**