



American  
Indian Policy  
Institute

Arizona State  
University

# POLICY BRIEF

## Tribal Digital Divide Policy Brief and Recommendations

### Talking Points on the Tribal Digital Divide

In 2019, the American Indian Policy Institute published the “Tribal Technology Assessment: The State of Internet Service on Tribal Lands”. The TTA surveyed residents of tribal reservation residents and found that:

- **18 percent** of tribal reservation residents have **no internet access** at home, wireless or land-based.
- **33 percent** rely on internet service from a **smartphone** at home. However, the reliability of smartphone internet connections is questionable.
- **31 percent** of respondents stated that their connection was ‘**spotty**’ or they had **no connection** at home.
- These findings emphasize the need for increased in-home high-speed broadband access for residents of tribal lands.

The digital divide is not new in Indian Country or other rural areas and the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these issues. For instance, in 2000 the U.S. Census determined that less than 10 percent of tribal lands had access to the internet. In 2019, the FCC acknowledged that the digital divide on rural and tribal lands remains significant with over **26 percent** of Americans in rural areas and **32 percent** on tribal lands lacking at-home high-speed internet access capable of handling data-intensive services.

Similarly, the 2018 Arizona Statewide Broadband Strategic Plan noted that:

- “In Arizona, **162,382 people** living on tribal lands (95%) have either unserved or underserved telecommunication infrastructure needs. They do not have access to fixed advanced telecommunications capabilities, and often resort to local (community anchor institutions, such as libraries and schools) for their only connection to the rest of the digital world.”

Public Wi-Fi is not always an option under normal circumstances, and especially now since businesses and public service institutions are closing to stem the spread of COVID-19. Where residents have internet access there are issues with limited bandwidth capabilities, meaning they cannot run data intensive applications such as video streaming and conferencing.

## **Policy Recommendations to Address Internet Access on Rural and Tribal Lands**

Future COVID-19 stimulus funding should direct resources for internet access on tribal reservations and Alaska Native villages. The following policy recommendations have been put forward by national tribal and non-tribal organizations and advocacy groups, including the *National Congress of American Indians*, the *New America Foundation's Open Technology Institute*, *Public Knowledge*, and the *National Hispanic Media Coalition*.

- **Support \$2 billion in E-rate funding for states and tribal anchor institutions.** The E-rate Program (also known as the Schools and Libraries Program) is administered by the Federal Communications Commission and covers connection costs to bring high-speed internet to schools and libraries. It can also cover internal connection costs at these institutions, such as the purchase of routers and other devices to provide Wi-Fi service. The E-Rate Program should also be expanded to allow school buses to act as mobile hot spots. While schools remain closed, buses can be parked in local communities to provide local Wi-Fi services.
- **Require unlimited voice, text, and data services for Lifeline subscribers.** Another FCC program, Lifeline, provides discounted telephone and cell phone service for low-income individuals that are 135% below the federal poverty line. However, these services are currently capped with limited voice, text, and internet data services. On some reservations up to 85% of residents are Lifeline subscribers.
- **Require the FCC to extend the 2.5 GHz Tribal Priority Window for tribes to access unclaimed spectrum licenses over their lands.** In December 2019, the FCC announced that tribes would have a first-in-right priority to claim dormant spectrum in the 2.5 GHz band (also known as the Education Broadband Service) over their reservations and Alaska Native Villages. This spectrum would provide high-speed wireless internet access for economic development, governance operations, public safety, education, and healthcare. The current filing window for tribes to submit applications to claim these spectrum licenses closes on August 3, 2020. Since COVID-19 has created unique challenges for government operations in general, the tribal priority window to these licenses should be extended until April 2021.
- **Provide waivers for matching fund requirements under all broadband loan and grant programs and do not limit funding based on "rurality".** There are over 50 federal programs that support broadband deployment, adoption, and digital skills training. Any required matching funds for these programs should be waived to address the digital divide on tribal lands. Additionally, programs with limiting definitions of "rural" should be waived to ensure that all tribal lands have access to federal funds for broadband deployment.
- **Direct federal funding for broadband deployment and feasibility studies solely to tribes and tribal entities.** Funds for broadband infrastructure planning, deployment, and maintenance should be directly awarded to tribal governments, tribal consortia, and other tribal entities. Funds awarded directly to states to conduct feasibility and deployment studies for broadband infrastructure have rarely been shared with tribes and has historically resulted in internet infrastructure needs being overlooked on tribal lands.

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