



Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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As an Inupiaq, I grew up north of the Arctic Circle in Alaska, home to some of the most remote communities in the United States. Arctic living requires resourcefulness, respect for nature, and, most importantly, strong connections to community members. You can't make it on your own, and like all tribal communities, social connectivity and kinship are critical to survival.

Connectivity has taken on a new, important layer of meaning today: broadband.

Broadband internet now serves as a vital pillar of social infrastructure; quality broadband is necessary for education, health, commerce, and cultural retention and revitalization. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the critical need for accessible and reliable broadband connectivity, especially for American Indian and Alaska Native tribes.

I invite tribal leaders and staff, industry thought-leaders, small and big business representatives, and policy advocates to participate in the second annual National Tribal Broadband Summit (Summit) taking place on Sept. 21 - 25. The Summit will be virtual with a conference line option and feature expert panelists and speakers from industry and government. Indian Affairs is proud to co-sponsor the Summit with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Institute of Museum and Library Services, and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration.

Native people in Alaska and across Indian Country face significant challenges with accessibility to broadband when compared to non-tribal populations. Overall, broadband deployment across tribal areas lags 25 percent behind urban areas and an average of five points behind non-Tribal rural areas.

The Trump Administration has worked to carve out a long-term broadband policy focus, including accessible broadband for Bureau of Indian Education students. Recently, Indian Affairs installed broadband on 25 BIE buses to promote learning and help with homework on bus rides that can be hours-long for many students.

Indian Affairs also awarded the first National Tribal Broadband Grant to 25 tribes in August 2020. This grant facilitates the funding of feasibility studies for tribes to determine the best path forward for broadband deployment.

The Federal Communications Commission Chairman Ajit Pai, NTIA leadership and other federal partners have opened their doors to Indian Affairs for collaborative problem-solving.

Indian Affairs recently offered several tribes technical assistance on their applications to the FCC Tribal Priority Window for the 2.5 GHz spectrum, which allows tribes to bid on available 2.5 GHz spectrum. At the request of the tribes, Indian Affairs successfully advocated for FCC to extend the priority window

deadline by 30 days to Sept. 2.

Indian Affairs strives to honor tribal treaty rights and live up to the federal trust responsibility. We seek to develop initiatives informed and guided by tribal leadership and invite private sector participation to amplify fresh ideas and highlight new sources of capital. Closing the broadband gap in Indian Country requires collaboration from and between government and industry.

The 2020 National Tribal Broadband Summit provides opportunities for collaboration and problem-solving with policy and industry experts. I encourage those interested to review the agenda and look for possibilities to make creative connections with the Summit participants. Innovative investing, effective and consultative federal policymaking, and strong tribal leadership can overcome the broadband gaps for tribal communities.

Connectivity in the traditional and cultural sense for tribal communities – like my own – is everything: kinship and social bonds create the foundation for community. In a technological sense, connectivity or internet access is everything: broadband facilitates communications and transactions vital to homes and businesses. Please work with me on securing accessible, affordable and reliable internet connectivity for tribal communities across the U.S. and join me at the National Tribal Broadband Summit on Sept. 21 – 25.

Tara Katuk Sweeney, an Iñupiat citizen of the Native Village of Barrow and the Iñupiat Community of the Arctic Slope, has served as assistant secretary for Indian Affairs at the Department of the Interior since June 2018. She also serves as a member of the Operation Lady Justice Task Force established by President Donald Trump's Nov. 26, 2019, executive order on supporting and protecting Native American women and children.

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