



Tribal communities still lag behind the rest of the United States in access to radio, wireless, and broadband services. This disparity underscores the critical opportunity to ensure the advancement of telecommunications access throughout Indian Country. Photo credit: Patrick Michael McLeod

Telecommunications

Engagement and coordination with tribal nations is essential during the ongoing national transition from analog to digital communications. To ensure that American Indian tribes and Alaska Native villages are included in this digital transition, it is essential that programs offering financial assistance to establish, maintain, and upgrade telecommunications systems are accessible to tribes and adequately funded. As stated in the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, “It is necessary and appropriate for the Federal Government to complement, assist, and support a national policy that will most effectively make public telecommunications services available to all citizens of the United States.” Tribes are a critical part of local and regional economies and must be included in strategic efforts to keep pace with technological advancement and strengthen telecommunications infrastructure.

Key Recommendations

CORPORATION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING

Labor, HHS, Education Appropriations Bill

Grant Programs

- *Appropriate at least \$5 million to fund American Indian and Alaska Native radio stations.*
- *Appropriate at least \$1 million to Native Public Media and Koahnic Broadcast Corporation.*

For more than 30 years, decisions on the amount of federal support for public broadcasting have been made two years ahead of the fiscal year in which the funding is allocated. In other words, Congress approves the FY 2015 funding level for Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) during the FY 2013 appropriations process.

Thus, where the overall budget for the CPB in FY 2014 was \$445 million, Indian Country requests an advance appropriation of \$5 million to fund American Indian and Alaska Native radio stations for FY 2015.

Since 2011, the Native radio system has grown from 33 stations to 53 stations to provide service to more of Indian Country. CPB funding supports 30 of the 53 Native radio stations, which collectively reach more than eight percent of the American Indian and Alaska Native population with free radio programming. These stations are funded through a variety of sources, including: individual donors, local businesses, CPB, tribal governments, and grants. Native-owned and operated radio stations are a model of local community service radio, serve as the primary and most consistent sole service providers of public safety information and cultural and linguistic preservation, and stand as an invaluable outlet for local news in tribal communities. Native radio stations employ at least 1,000 broadcasters, engineers, station staff, consultants, and others local community members.

Additionally, the Public Broadcasting Act directs CPB to utilize six percent of the appropriation for “projects and activities that will enhance public broadcasting.” This funding supports the research, planning, professional development, and industry consultations that guide CPB’s decision-making in other budget categories. Native Public Media and Koahnic Broadcast Corporation provide valued services to develop and maintain the Native radio system and are funded from the six percent allocation (currently amounting to \$1 million over two years). Native Public Media has assisted in filing for 51 new stations and secured construction permits for 38 of these new stations. Native Public Media also provides education and training for tribal broadcasters in digital literacy, journalism, and community-based strategies that will broaden the impact of the Native radio system in unserved tribal communities across the United States. Koahnic Broadcast Corporation produces Native programming and content for radio broadcast and oversees Native Voice One—the distribution mechanism that utilizes satellite technology to deliver programming and content to Native radio stations and other affiliates across the United States.

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

Commerce, Justice, Science Appropriations Bill

Public Telecommunications Facilities Program

- *Reinstate a \$4 million appropriation for construction of American Indian and Alaska Native radio stations through the Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC) Public Telecommunications Facilities Program.*

Congress eliminated funding for the Public Telecommunications and Facilities Program (PTFP) for FY 2011, which was the only source of federal support for infrastructure needs required to maintain and expand the nation’s public radio system. This program was vital to Indian Country as PTFP covered costs associated with public radio equipment and construction of new stations to provide services to underserved communities. The program also maintained an emergency fund for the replacement of radio equipment due to natural disasters and terrorist attacks. Contrary to some assertions that the now-defunct PTFP program served only to assist with the digital TV transition, the PTFP also served an essential function for communities new to telecommunications by providing the only source of funding for communities looking to initiate first-time public broadcasting service. Also, as deployment of FirstNet (the First Responder Network Authority) begins in the coming years, these funds will be needed to bring communications towers into compliance for the new nationwide public safety broadband network. Towers that may be considered for use in FirstNet will need to be retrofitted to adhere to new technical standards and undergo environmental review assessments to become compliant. PTFP funds would facilitate FirstNet deployment in tribes and provide other much needed telecommunications support if reinstated.

FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION (FCC)

Financial Services Appropriations Bill

Office of Native Affairs and Policy

- *Provide a permanent fixed annual budget of \$2 million to fund the FCC's Office of Native Affairs and Policy.*

The FCC's Office of Native Affairs and Policy (FCC-ONAP) was created in 2010. However, Congress has yet to provide a dedicated annual budget for this important office. FCC-ONAP has instead been reliant on a continuing resolution, which has hindered its ability to fully engage with tribal governments through consultations and to adequately staff its office. Tribal nations face a persistent and pervasive digital divide that creates inequities in accessing information, managing data, and participating in strategic planning efforts that require a robust telecommunications infrastructure. During the critical development phase of 21st century broadband infrastructure, a dedicated annual budget is vital to facilitate meaningful and productive consultations with tribal governments.

While the FCC-ONAP received an increase in its travel budget for consultation and training with tribal governments in FY 2012, a dedicated budget is still needed to conduct full outreach to Indian Country. FCC-ONAP is responsible for and actively engaged in new rulemaking aimed at closing the digital divide and providing regulatory oversight. Tribal engagement and consultation efforts developed by FCC-ONAP have generated policies that specifically address the telecommunications needs of tribal nations – such as those in the National Broadband Plan, the Connect America Fund, and the Tribal Mobility Fund – have produced reforms to the Lifeline and Link Up Programs and to other universal service reforms and further rulemakings that serve tribal communities as well as many others. Throughout 2012 FCC-ONAP also conducted numerous regional trainings and outreach efforts, reminiscent of the FCC Indian Telecommunications Initiatives, but these regional trainings were conducted through one-time funds (as opposed to a continuous appropriation).

As newly-promulgated regulations are implemented and further rulemakings considered, it will be important for the FCC to seek ongoing guidance from the FCC-ONAP to ensure tribal needs are addressed. Meaningful rights and responsibilities have been created in the rulemaking process to bridge the digital divide in Indian Country, but without adequate resources and funding FCC-ONAP will not be able to assist tribes in these efforts.