

COVID-19 DISASTER in Indian Country Act

COVID-19 Designation of Immediate Special Authority of Spectrum for Tribes' Emergency Response in Indian Country Act

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The Problem: Lack of access to broadband networks has left approximately 1.5 million people living on tribal lands without access to basic healthcare public safety, and educational services. Due to the increased necessity of wireless services during this national crisis, lack of connectivity in Indian Country has left Tribes further behind in the digital divide resulting in devastating impacts of coronavirus on reservations.

These alarming rates are unacceptable during a national emergency. Regardless of where you live, everyone should have equal access to wireless broadband networks to access to life-saving health care, public safety, and educational opportunities during the COVID-19 crisis.

Background: Indian reservations are some of the most digitally disconnected areas in the world, with broadband and wireless penetration rates lower than some third-world countries. Even though the United States ranks above the world average for fixed broadband services, only 65 percent of Native Americans living on tribal lands have access to broadband compared to 92 percent of Americans living off-reservation lands.

The Government Accountability Office found that health information technology systems at the Indian Health Service (IHS) rank as the Federal Government's third-highest need for agency system modernization since 50 percent of Indian Health Service (IHS) facilities depend on outdated circuit connections, resulting in slower response times than any other health facility system in the United States. Additionally, the Bureau of Indian Education's (BIE) recent estimates collected from 142 BIE schools have reported that a wide range of students — up to 95 percent in some cases — don't have access to broadband at home due to Indian Tribes' geographically isolated locations and data cap limitations.

COVID-19 Designation of Immediate Special Authority of Spectrum for Tribes' Emergency Response in Indian Country Act directs the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) Wireleses Telecommunications Bureau to grant Tribes emergency temporary authority of available spectrum to efficiently support wireless broadband networks over Tribal lands and Hawaiian Homelands. This will allow Tribes to immediately deploy wireless services so Native Americans can access basic life-saving resources like anyone else. Specifically, this bill aims to deploy wireless networks in Indian Country by granting:

- Emergency special temporary authority of available spectrum to efficiently support wireless services
 - Grants \$300 million to USDA's Community Facility Grant Program for immediate deployment of broadband networks, repairs to damaged infrastructure, and technical assistance
 - Extends Emergency Special Temporary Authority of spectrum on tribal lands to operate for 6 months
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