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| **For Immediate Release:** | **Contact:** Megan Taylor |
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**Heller, Heinrich Work To Advance Bipartisan Bill To Improve High-Speed Internet for Students in Tribal Communities**

**WASHINGTON** – U.S. Senators Dean Heller (R-NV) and Martin Heinrich (D-NM) are working to advance their bipartisan legislation to improve access to high-speed internet in rural Tribal communities.

In a letter to the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, the senators requested a hearing on the bipartisan Tribal Connect Act. The bill would improve and increase access to the FCC's $4 billion schools and libraries universal service support program, known as E-rate, and establishes a $100 million Tribal E-rate pilot program for broadband access in Indian Country to tribes without libraries. While most of the nation's public libraries have received E-rate support, only an estimated 15 percent of Tribal libraries have received critical E-rate funds.

“*The Tribal Connect Act aims to improve broadband connectivity and close the digital divide for students and children living in Indian Country. Broadband access is vital for local economies and small businesses and is a cornerstone to improving education, tele-health services, and job-training opportunities. Yet, approximately 60 percent of people who live in rural tribal communities do not have access to fixed high-speed broadband*,” **wrote the senators**.

“*Connecting more tribes to the E-rate program will ensure that all of our students and children can compete on an even playing field and learn the skills they need to succeed in the 21st century*,” the senators continued.

The Tribal Connect Act is also cosponsored by U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) and supported by the American Library Association, National Congress of American Indians, National India Education Association, AMERIND Risk, and the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums. Senator Heinrich consulted with the Pueblo library consortiums in New Mexico representing the Pueblos of Cochiti, Jemez, Zia, Santa Ana, San Felipe, and Santo Domingo before introducing the legislation.

Congressman Ben Ray Luján (D-NM) and Congressman Markwayne Mullin (R-OK) introduced the bicameral, bipartisan Tribal Connect Act in the U.S. House of Representatives.

A copy of the letter is available [**here**](https://www.heller.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/3ea685e4-8f51-4fc4-aa6c-8e37258eea51/Tribal%20Connect%20Letter.pdf) and below.

*Dear Chairman Hoeven and Vice Chairman Udall:*

*We write today to respectfully request a hearing in the Committee on Indian Affairs on S. 2205, the Tribal Connect Act of 2017. The Tribal Connect Act aims to improve broadband connectivity and close the digital divide for students and children living in Indian Country. Broadband access is vital for local economies and small businesses and is a cornerstone to improving education, tele-health services, and job-training opportunities. Yet, approximately 60 percent of people who live in rural tribal communities do not have access to fixed high-speed broadband.*

*The Tribal Connect Act would increase access to the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) schools and libraries universal service support program, known as E-rate, that provides discounts to assist public schools and libraries obtain high-speed internet access and telecommunications at affordable rates.*

*In Indian Country, a library can often be the only point of access for broadband connectivity in the community. While most of the nation’s public libraries have received E-rate support, only an estimated 15 percent of tribal libraries have received critical E-rate funds. The Tribal Connect Act would increase access to E-Rate by opening eligibility to tribal libraries that do not receive assistance from a state library, as currently required by law. Additionally, the Tribal Connect Act would establish an E-Rate pilot program to allow tribal communities without libraries to designate a tribally-owned “anchor institution,” such as a chapter house or community center, as eligible for E-Rate support to provide internet access to students. The bill would also require the FCC to develop performance goals and measures to track progress on ensuring affordable internet access and telecommunications services to tribes and would improve training and technical assistance to Indian tribes to help them implement the E-Rate program.*

*The tribal Connect Act is supported by the American Library Association, National Congress of American Indians, National Indian Education Association, AMERIND Risk, and the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums. Connecting more tribes to the E-rate program will ensure that all of our students and children can compete on an even playing field and learn the skills they need to succeed in the 21st century.*

*Thank you for your consideration of this request.*

*Sincerely,*

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