

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-504T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Indian Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

High-speed Internet service is viewed as a critical component of the nation's infrastructure and an economic driver, particularly to remote tribal communities. This testimony examines: (1) perspectives of tribes and providers on high-speed Internet access and barriers to increasing this access; (2) the level of interrelation and coordination between federal programs that promote high-speed Internet access on tribal lands; and (3) existing data and performance measures related to high-speed Internet on tribal lands. This statement is based on GAO's January 2016 report (GAO-16-222). For this report, GAO visited or interviewed officials from a non-generalizable sample of 21 tribal entities and 6 service providers. GAO also reviewed FCC and USDA fiscal year 2010 through 2014 program data, funding, and materials and interviewed federal officials.

What GAO Recommended

In January 2016, GAO recommended that FCC take the following actions in tribal areas: (1) develop joint training and outreach with USDA; (2) develop performance goals and measures for improving broadband availability to households; (3) develop performance goals and measures for improving broadband availability to schools and libraries; and (4) improve the reliability of FCC data related to institutions that receive E-rate funding by defining "tribal" on the program application. FCC agreed with the recommendations.

View [GAO-16-504T](#). For more information, contact Mark Goldstein at (202) 512-6670 or goldsteinm@gao.gov.

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TRIBAL INTERNET ACCESS:

Increased Federal Coordination and Performance Measurement Needed

What GAO Found

In January 2016, GAO found that, although all 21 tribes GAO interviewed have some access to high-speed Internet, barriers to increasing access remain. Tribal officials and Internet providers said that high poverty rates among tribes and the high costs of connecting remote tribal villages to core Internet networks limit high-speed Internet availability and access. About half of the tribes GAO interviewed also said that the lack of sufficient administrative and technical expertise among tribal members limits their efforts to increase high-speed Internet access.

The Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) Universal Service Fund subsidy programs and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Rural Utilities Service grant programs are interrelated. The programs seek to increase high-speed Internet access in underserved areas, including tribal lands. GAO's previous work on overlap, duplication, and fragmentation has shown that interagency coordination on interrelated programs can help ensure efficient use of resources and effective programs. However, FCC and USDA do not coordinate to develop joint outreach and training, which could result in inefficient use of federal resources and missed opportunities for resource leveraging. For example, USDA and FCC held separate training events in the Pacific Northwest Region in 2015 when a joint event could have saved limited training funds and reduced costs.

FCC has placed special emphasis on improving Internet access on tribal lands following the issuance of the National Broadband Plan in 2010, which called for greater efforts to make broadband available on tribal lands. However, FCC has not developed performance goals and measures for improving high-speed Internet availability to households on tribal lands. FCC could establish baseline measures to track its progress by using, for example, the National Broadband Map which includes data on Internet availability on tribal lands. FCC also lacks both reliable data on high-speed Internet access and performance goals and measures for high-speed Internet access by tribal institutions—such as schools and libraries. Specifically, FCC's E-rate program provides funds to ensure that schools and libraries have affordable access to modern broadband technologies, but FCC has neither defined "tribal" on its E-rate application nor set any performance goals for the program's impact on tribal institutions. Without these goals and measures FCC cannot assess the impact of its efforts.