

Remarks of FCC Commissioner Mignon L. Clyburn (as prepared)
Broadband Connectivity in Tribal and Rural Communities
Washington, DC
April 12, 2018

Thank you, Jim, not only for that kind introduction, but for inviting me to join today's conversation on the pressing need to address the significant broadband connectivity challenges facing Tribal and rural communities. I am also extremely grateful to ALA and Senator Heinrich for co-hosting today's event, because as a daughter of a retired librarian whose family's mailing address was a rural route, I truly appreciate the opportunity to speak with librarians and other digital inclusion leaders, who directly serve these communities.

Broadband investment is critical infrastructure investment, which increasingly determines which city, town, or Tribal nation, thrives or not. Broadband is critical in generating sustainable social and economic growth, because like water, roads, railways, electricity, broadband is now fundamental when it comes to a community's development. That is why today's conversation is so important, and this is why closing persistent gaps is so important.

And those economic, infrastructure, and digital challenges facing many living on Tribal lands are widely known to us all. Access to telephone service, electricity, and broadband on Tribal lands, remains far below the national average. In 2016, over 92 percent of the overall population had access to fixed home broadband at 25 Megabit per second upload and 3 Megabit per second download speeds, just enough to be deemed eligible for advanced telecommunications services in the United States. In rural and Tribal America, however, the outlook is not so bright: over 30 percent of Americans in rural areas and over 35 percent of Americans in Tribal lands lack such access, as compared to about two percent of their urban neighbors and with respect to mobile broadband, approximately 14 million rural Americans and more than one million Americans living on Tribal lands, still lack access to mobile LTE broadband at speeds of 10 Megabit per second upload and 3 Megabit per second download.

What this means is the access to the information, resources, and services needed to thrive in an increasingly digitally dependent society, which are game-changers for most Americans, is not being realized on Tribal and in too many rural communities. This puts rural and Tribal communities at a clear disadvantage when it comes to being able to run their businesses, find jobs, access educational tools, take advantage of telehealth services, or simply pay their bills. Affordable, robust broadband opens a world of opportunity to those who have it, but for those without, they remain stuck in a digital canyon.

Education, employment, civic participation, and healthcare opportunities are all migrating online. So, students without broadband access at home have a tough time completing homework assignments, which puts them at risk of falling behind their digitally connected peers. There are also implications when it comes to key government services, as internet access provides opportunities to obtain information and apply for many government public assistance programs, which are also migrating online.

What this means, as it was during the analog years, is that community anchor institutions, like libraries and schools, are on the front lines in the fight to bridge the digital divide.

With free access to the internet, computers, books, adult learning, and digital literacy training—all under one roof, and with students spending more time at school than anywhere else, libraries and schools not only function as gathering places and learning hubs, they are lifelines in our communities, and ensure ubiquitous and robust internet access in these spaces.

As you know, this past January we celebrated the 20th anniversary of the landmark program that provides affordable internet access to US schools and libraries. I have supported efforts to improve E-rate, and have fought for the adoption of other initiatives aimed to increase broadband connectivity in Tribal and rural communities. But each of us can and must do more.

We each understand that the broadband connectivity challenge, has two critical components: infrastructure deployment and affordability. Infrastructure is particularly lacking in rural areas and Tribal lands. However, we cannot ignore the fact that cost remains the primary reason why households forego home service. This is why I continue to defend the FCC's Lifeline program, which directly provides qualified economically challenged households with a monthly discount on voice and/or broadband services. This program is critical in ensuring that millions of Americans on tight budgets do not have to choose between keeping food on the table and paying their phone or internet bill, and any attempts to weaken it should be challenged and challenged fiercely.

We should not ignore digital literacy education as a necessary companion to digital connectivity efforts. For if we fail to address this, we risk having an entire generation of people left offline.

Never forget, that there is a link between basic literacy and digital literacy, and this link also highlights the central role public libraries play in promoting digital inclusion.

We should be open to and continue to come up with fresh ways to increase digital literacy and promote the availability and affordability of devices and services necessary to realize full digital inclusion. Community organizations can and must play a role in being advocates for change. Schools and libraries can and will continue to play a central role in bringing our communities closer together by providing them with access to the tools and information necessary to thrive.

To this point, I applaud Senator Heinrich's leadership on the *Tribal Connect Act of 2017*, which would close an existing eligibility gap that currently prevents some Tribal libraries from participating in E-rate. It would ensure that, in the absence of a Tribal community library, other facilities owned by an Indian tribe, such as chapter houses, longhouses, community centers, and other public gathering places, could be eligible to receive E-rate support. These targeted reforms could help us chip away at the broadband connectivity challenge on Tribal lands, and I firmly believe that the FCC has a statutory duty to support broadband through traditional as well as novel means.

The *Tribal Connect Act* will prevent the Commission, now or in the future, from parsing words and cutting support for communities that need it most. And it is my hope that the direction from Congress is loud and clear: no artificial or unintended barrier, should prevent tribal communities from receiving the support they are entitled to from the Universal Service Fund.

The *Tribal Connect Act* would also ensure that the USF administrators will engage tribal schools and libraries to promote awareness of the E-rate program, and provide technical assistance with the program's application process. This is a critical step toward removing existing barriers faced by eligible institutions.

While there still is much work to be done to address rural and Tribal connectivity, like you, I am heartened to see conversations like this taking place, and legislation, such as Senator Heinrich's being introduced. Because in the fight for digital inclusion and digital equity, the quest for making high speed broadband universally available and affordable for all, will only happen if all of us weigh in.

Thank you.