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Regular Consultations

Tribes Seek Even More US Engagement on Broadband

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The effort to increase broadband access on tribal lands is gaining momentum, experts said in recent interviews. The next challenge is holding the FCC and Biden administration to their commitment to consult with tribal leaders and promote broadband deployment on tribal lands, they said.

Tribal leaders were hopeful the administration will act quickly to boost broadband access in their communities (see [2101250036](#)). In his first week in office, President Joe Biden signed an [executive order](#) requiring agencies report to OMB within 90 days actions they will take to improve such relationships.

"**It's nice to see some action**, said Partnership With Native Americans CEO Joshua Arce. The FCC Native Nations Communications Task Force December [recommendation](#) had a "good amount of thought behind the consultation process; Arce said. He said it made a "series of very well rooted recommendations in order to advance the tribal engagement and bring some of these solutions to Indian country."

There have been varying levels of success on outreach efforts to tribal communities, said Jenna Leventoff, Public Knowledge senior policy counsel. Tribes have "unique connectivity issues, Leventoff said. "It's important that these conversations happen with increasing frequency."

"**There's been such a whirlwind of consultations**," said Arizona State University's American Indian Policy Institute Executive Director Traci Morris. There have been "60 or 70 consultations in the last six weeks" across all agencies, said Morris, a Chickasaw Nation member. "We're still in the middle of all of this, and it's the kind of participation and governance that we've never had before."

The FCC held for tribes webinars and outreach calls on the emergency broadband benefit program, Morris said, which were "really straightforward." NTIA [held](#) formal tribal consultations on the tribal broadband connectivity program. "It is possible other tribal consultation sessions took place, but we are not aware of them; said Ryan SeeLau, National Congress of American Indians senior researcher. The FCC didn't comment Thursday.

Providing flexibility in how tribal communities gain access to broadband is key, Leventoff said, but they can be Locked out of FCC programs like E-rate. Community centers on tribal lands may act as a school or library but don't fit the definition of one under the rules. The FCC took this into consideration in draft Emergency Connectivity Fund rules and included tribal libraries (see [2104300084](#)). "That's a great thing, Leventoff said.

Holding the FCC and Biden administration accountable bears watching, Arce said. He said the federal, government and tribal communities have a "shared culpability" to advance projects and recommendations made by the FCC task force's December report. "I'm very hopeful that this regular engagement will continue; Morris said. It's a lot in a short period, she said. "There's a method to the madness as part of that executive order." It isn't surprising that the surge in consultations began so early in the administration, Morris said: "I don't think things will go back to what they were; she said: "This will be the level of expectation I think tribes will have."
