

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-222](#), a report to congressional requesters

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. However, in 2015, FCC reported that the lack of service in tribal areas presents impediments. GAO was asked to review the status of high-speed Internet on tribal lands. The report 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. GAO visited or interviewed officials from a non-generalizable sample of 21 tribal entities and 6 service providers selected to provide diversity in size, location, and poverty levels. GAO also reviewed FCC and USDA fiscal year 2010 through 2014 program data, funding, and materials and interviewed federal officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FCC (1) develop joint training and outreach with USDA; (2) develop performance goals and measures for tribal areas for improving broadband availability to households; (3) develop performance goals and measures for improving broadband availability to tribal 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-16-222](#). For more information, contact Mark Goldstein at (202) 512-6670 or goldsteinm@gao.gov.

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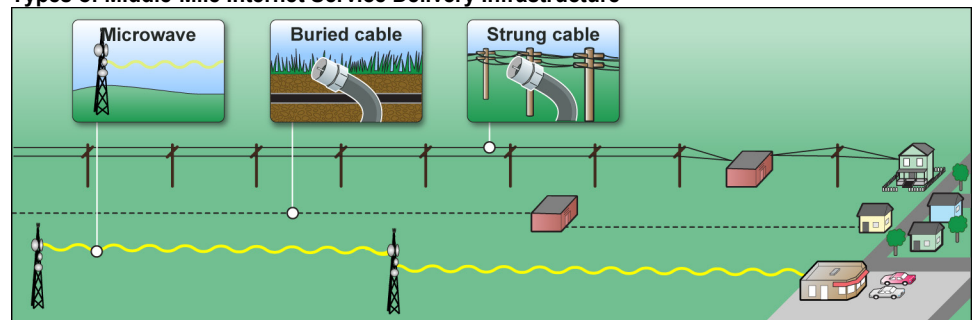
TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Additional Coordination and Performance Measurement Needed for High-Speed Internet Access Programs on Tribal Lands

What GAO Found

Although all 21 tribes GAO interviewed have some access to high-speed Internet, tribes and providers GAO interviewed cited barriers to increasing access. For example, high poverty rates and the high costs of connecting remote tribal villages to core Internet networks—called middle-mile infrastructure—limit high-speed Internet availability and adoption on tribal lands (see fig.). 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.

Types of Middle-Mile Internet Service Delivery Infrastructure



Source: GAO. | GAO-16-222

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 in that they 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. This could result in an inefficient use of federal resources and missed opportunities for resource leveraging between FCC and USDA.

FCC has placed special emphasis on improving Internet access on tribal lands following the issuance of the National Broadband Plan, 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. Without these goals and measures FCC cannot assess the impact of its efforts. The National Broadband Map includes data on Internet availability on tribal lands that could allow FCC to establish baseline measures for Internet availability on tribal lands. Further, FCC also lacks performance goals and measures for 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 not set any performance goals for the program's impact on tribal institutions. Nor has FCC defined "tribal" on the E-rate application. Without such information, it will be difficult to accurately track progress in making broadband available in tribal institutions.