

Robert Tse USDA

## Technical Assistance for Broadband

Good morning Chairperson Tong and Members of the California Broadband Council:

My name is Robert Tse, Senior Policy Advisor, Rural Utilities Service, Telecommunications Office, Rural Development, USDA.

The Governor's Broadband Executive Order is great news. I am excited about the charge to create a new broadband action plan and drive 21<sup>st</sup> century California broadband.

I suggest that the Council adopt three action items for the Broadband Action Plan.

- 1) Create Technical Assistance Grants
- 2) INVENTORY EXISTING BROADBAND ASSETS and take actions to ease assimilation into Broadband Service Infrastructure. Public Utilities and Water Districts are an example.
- 3) Create a Broadband Cooperative Model like the Rural electric cooperatives that brought electricity to rural America in the 1930's. Cooperative specialists at the University of California can help create this model.

Covid 19 has accentuated the importance of broadband for telework, telemedicine, tele-education (distance learning), tele-agriculture (digital ag) and radically exposed the existing fault lines of the digital gap, particularly in rural areas and tribal lands.

The broadband infrastructure gap is receiving increased attention and resources from the federal government.

The FCC's recent 2.5 Ghz free tribal spectrum offer; ongoing RDOF auction with tribal incentives; upcoming 5G auction with Phase 1 \$680 Million set aside for eligible tribal lands; USDA's ReConnect series (ReConnect 1 and 2 \$1.2 Billion); and CARES Act broadband eligible \$1.5 Billion Economic Development Administration (EDA) grants are examples of rising federal broadband resources available.

Yet, the most remote rural areas, tribes and small communities, still face high barriers to access these programs.

The simplified core barrier is lack of inhouse expertise, time and monetary resources to navigate the barrier of complex federal application requirements and development of broadband plans. Technical assistance grants would help tribes and local communities surmount that gap. Technical assistance grants can serve as the catalyst launching local broadband efforts. It is the preverbal nail in the horseshoe. The crucial need for technical assistance was raised at this week's National Tribal Broadband Summit.

On the federal side, The Department of Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, created tribal technical assistance grants.

I suggest that California create its own technical assistance grant program to help tribes and communities to surmount the broadband resource barrier.

The purpose of the technical assistance broadband grant program is to improve the quality of life, spur economic development and commercial activity, create opportunities for self-employment, enhance

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educational resources and remote learning opportunities, and meet emergency and law enforcement needs by bringing broadband services to tribal and small communities that lack them.

Technical assistance grants will assist Tribes and small communities access broadband resources from all sources. And to make informed decisions regarding deployment or expansion of broadband in their communities.

Finally, I want to let you know that the USDA Community Connect Grant Program opened for applications today. The deadline is December 23, 2020. This is a grant program with a 15% match requirement. Grants range from \$100,000 minimum to a maximum \$3 million. It is for rural areas with less than 20,000 persons.

And, I would like to do a segue introduction of Deborah Simpier, CEO of Althea and Dan Desmond, CEO of California Health Medical Response Corp. Deborah Simpier has done incredible work helping Hoopa, Bear River and Round Valley tribes deal with the Covid impact on the Broadband (Tele) Fault Line. These projects are prime candidates for the Governor's Broadband Action Plan helping tribes.