

STATEMENT
OF
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COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS
BEFORE THE
MAY 22, 2003 HEARING
ON THE
STATUS OF TELECOMMUNICATIONS
IN
INDIAN COUNTRY

The Committee on Indian Affairs meets today to receive testimony on the status of telecommunications in Indian country.

Last year, this Committee held a joint hearing with the Subcommittee on Communications of the Commerce Committee on some of the issues related to telecommunications serving Native America, but today we have structured a more comprehensive hearing.

I think it is clear that whether it is characterized as a “gap” or a “digital divide” or by some other term, Indian country lags far behind the rest of America in some of the most basic services that most Americans take for granted.

Thirty-two percent of all Indian homes nationwide lack basic

telephone service.

In some areas of the country, like the State of Arizona, fifty percent of tribal homes have no access to telephone service.

A study conducted by the Economic Development Administration in 1999 informs us that at that time, only nine percent of Indian households had computers, and only eight percent had access to the Internet.

As always, Indian country has been resourceful in trying to bridge the gap in telecommunications capacity, and some tribal governments, after assessing their community's needs, have elected to start up their own telephone companies to serve reservation communities, and both the Indian and non-Indian residents of those communities.

There are new approaches being explored to connecting Indian country to bridge the absence of sophisticated telecommunications infrastructure in most tribal communities – because often the costs associated with putting in land lines in remote, rural areas are so prohibitive that land-based communications simply are not an economically-viable solution.

And then there is the interesting fact that Federal agencies which have a physical presence in tribal communities – such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Indian Health Service – have their own telecommunications infrastructure on tribal lands, but because of various regulatory restrictions, they can't make that infrastructure available to tribal governments, schools, teachers or students, or the average citizen.

So you may have a high-performance computer right next to homes that have no electricity and no telephone service.

Clearly, this basic lack of telecommunications infrastructure means that in an emergency, there is no one who can call "911".

And naturally, there is no means for law enforcement officers or emergency medical technicians to know that they are needed.

People have died because they can't reach help in a timely fashion, and tragically, it is likely that more people will suffer serious and life-threatening injuries as long as there are no means of communicating with the outside world.

This is a gap that must be closed.

Finally, we know that at the Federal level, there is no one point of

access nor any agency that serves a coordinating function to assure that those existing Federal programs that provide support for the community assessments and the development of telecommunications infrastructures and capacities are adapted to the unique needs of Indian country.

So we look forward to the testimony of the witnesses today, and we begin by welcoming the first panel.