

**Statement of
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**Testimony before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
Oversight Hearing on the Current Status of Telecommunications in Indian Country
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Good morning Chairman Nighthorse Campbell and Vice Chairman Inouye, members of the Committee, tribal representatives and leaders, and distinguished guests. Thank you for your invitation to come before the Committee today to present testimony on the current status of telecommunications access in Indian Country.

My name is Marcia Warren Edelman and I am the President of the Native Networking Policy Center (NNPC), a new non-profit organization incorporated in March 2003 that focuses on facilitating the development of a collaborative policy-making process, building Native capacity, and increasing education and outreach among tribes and policy-makers at all levels of government on issues regarding the Digital Divide in Indian Country.

I also serve as the President of S.M.E. LLC, a consulting firm that provides strategic planning and business development services in the areas of Native American policy, economic development, and telecommunications and information technology, and from 1999 to 2002, served as the first Senior Policy Advisor to the Secretary for Native American Affairs for the U.S. Department of Commerce in Washington, D.C. During that time, I had the opportunity to lead an intra-departmental Native American Affairs Working Group in the development of a five-year strategic plan for Indian programs and policy; coordinate the "Digital Opportunities in Indian Country" site visit on Secretary Norman Mineta's *Digital Opportunities Tour*; and serve as the Department's representative to the White House Domestic Policy Council's Working Group on American Indians and Alaska Natives, and to the National Congress of American Indian's (NCAI) Digital Divide Task Force. I am also the co-author of "Native Networking: Telecommunications and Information Technology in Indian Country," a policy report and resource manual published by the Benton Foundation in 1999.

I am pleased to come before the Committee today to provide background information and an overview of the Digital Divide in Indian Country, and discuss a number of current policy and advocacy efforts that have been taking place in the last few years.

Digital Divide in Indian Country: An Overview

In 1999, the term "Digital Divide" emerged as a new cultural catch phrase, describing the country's state of connectivity to the rapidly growing world of the Internet and its partner technologies. On one level, the Digital Divide spoke to the need for additional infrastructure to bring the Internet to the entire country, not unlike early discussions regarding the national highway system. But on a deeper level, it highlighted familiar divisions within our society, those

of race, income and access to economic opportunities. In essence, the Digital Divide made the country re-examine and recognize who falls into the categories of “haves” and “have-nots,” while providing the banner phrase that would begin an unprecedented effort in both the public and private sectors to equalize these groups under the umbrella of technology.

But for some of the “have-nots,” namely Native Americans, access to technology was not as simple as establishing the highest-speed connection or purchasing the optimal computer system. For the majority of American Indians, the Digital Divide reflected a much more basic problem. According to three reports released in 1999, over half of American Indians were excluded from the emerging digital economy at its very point of entry—the telephone line:

“Falling Through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide” published by the Commerce Department’s National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) found that:

- For telephone penetration, rural Native American households (76.4%) ranked far below the national average (94.1%).
- Rural Native American households’ access to computers (26.8%) was also lower than the national average (42.1%).
- Overall, Native Americans were also behind in their access to the Internet (18.9%), compared to the national average (26.2%).

The Economic Development Administration (EDA) supported these findings in their report, “Assessment of Technology Infrastructure in Native Communities,” with similar data and identified the dilemma faced by many tribes in this area:

“Today, many Native communities find themselves in a vicious circle. The weak economic base of these communities makes it difficult to support infrastructure investment. And in turn, the poor state of infrastructure undermines their ability to undertake and attract successful economic development initiatives.”

Finally, the Benton Foundation’s report, “Native Networking: Telecommunications and Information Technology in Indian Country,” provided not only an effective guide to the policies and resources affecting tribes, but also presented the following challenge:

“Tribes must begin at home to define the needs and goals important to their communities, and then reach out and forge the relationships necessary to achieve those goals. As well, federal agencies, foundations, businesses and policy makers must include tribes and Indian people in their scope of telecommunications and technology growth and opportunities. Only then, when these two spheres meet and a new network of relationships is created, will the mandate of the Information Superhighway truly be fulfilled.”

Two years later, in July 2001, the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) released their own report on the issue, “Connecting Indian Country: Tribally-Driven Telecommunications Policy.” Based on the work of the NCAI Digital Divide Task Force, it provided valuable policy recommendations and emphasized the need in Indian country for additional coordination of resources, and access to capital and technical assistance in order to fully address the challenges faced by tribes today.

The findings of these reports made it clear that for Native communities in this country, the Digital Divide was, in reality, a “Dial-Tone Divide.” This urgent situation continues to exist

today where the current infrastructure capabilities of these areas fall far behind that of the rest of the country, threatening the economic, educational and cultural self-sufficiency of tribes and their communities.

Current Policy and Advocacy Efforts in Indian Country

Last May this Committee held a joint oversight hearing on tribal telecommunications issues. In my testimony at that time, I identified three reasons that contribute to the fact that the telecommunications infrastructure needed to support connectivity for every Indian individual in his or her home or community continues to remain, for the most part, unavailable and unaffordable. These reasons were as follows:

- Lack of investment capital and technical assistance
- Lack of current and accurate information
- Lack of ongoing coordination of resources

Investment Capital and Technical Assistance

Since that time, we have seen some progress in addressing the funding question, beginning with the preservation of two important federal programs which continue to have a significant impact for tribes: the National Telecommunications and Information Administration's Technology Opportunities Program (TOP) and the U.S. Department of Education's Community Technology Center (CTC) Program. We have also seen the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Utilities Service Broadband Technology Grant award \$8.2 million to 13 Native American communities this year, and the continued funding to Native American Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) under the Department of Treasury. All of these programs provide much-needed funds for initial investment and ongoing technical assistance; however, overall funding for telecommunications and information technology projects in Indian Country remains inadequate to address the needs of these communities, especially in the areas of feasibility studies and upgrades/ongoing operations support.

Current and Accurate Information

In the past four months that we have seen a marked resurgence in examining the telecommunications and information technology landscape in Indian Country, both in terms of policy development and current data. Over the course of two days in February 2003, these issues were examined in three very important meetings:

1. The National Congress of American Indians' (NCAI) Telecommunications Subcommittee conducted a half-day policy and advocacy meeting after the NCAI Winter Session;
2. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Chairman Michael K. Powell and Commissioners Kathleen Q. Abernathy, Michael J. Copps and Jonathan S. Adelstein, and several bureau chiefs held a day-long meeting with a high-level delegation of tribal leaders and representatives of tribal telecommunications companies and organizations to discuss ways to improve access to telecommunications products and services throughout Indian Country; and,

3. The U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs invited attendees of both meeting above to an informal brainstorming session to explore ways to develop legislation to address this issue.

The fact that these meetings took place highlights the increasing recognition of the federal government and national tribal organizations of the importance of closing the telecommunications gap in Indian Country, and marked an important milestone in the efforts of those involved to bringing possible solutions to policy-makers at all levels.

We saw the first result of those meetings at the beginning of this month with the release of a new FCC report, "Telephone Subscribership on American Indian Reservations and Off-Reservation Trust Lands." This report based its findings on data from the 2000 Decennial Census, showing that **67.9 %** of American Indian homes currently have telephone service compared to **46.6%** in the 1990 Census. The good news is that over the past ten years, there has been a **20% increase** in residential access to telephone service throughout Indian Country; however, the bad news is that Native communities remain well below the **national average of 95.1%** (based on figures from the July 2002 Census Current Population Survey).

Ongoing Coordination of Resources

It was evident during the meetings that even though many efforts have been made to address the need in Indian Country for access to infrastructure, funding, information and technical assistance, yet these efforts have not resulted in consistent and coordinated activities that can best serve tribes and tribal organizations working to close the gap. Specifically, tribal governments, regional intertribal organizations and national Indian organizations are not adequately participating in policy-making processes, and as a result lack:

- notification and guidance regarding policy making proceedings impacting Indian Country;
- a well-defined and coordinated policy advocacy strategy; and,
- adequate research, data and analysis to support policy advocacy endeavors.

What is missing is a central repository for policy development, research and educational outreach, which can effectively address the problems being presented today to the Native community.

For this reason, the **Native Networking Policy Center (NNPC)** was created in order to leverage the existing expertise, resources and efforts already underway to finally achieve the goal of digital inclusion in Indian country. In March 2003, the NNPC was formed as a non-profit organization whose mission is to ensure equitable and affordable access to, and the culturally appropriate use of, telecommunications and information technology throughout Indian Country. NNPC is working to achieve this mission by addressing the following goals:

- **Policy Development** – Ensure the inclusion of Native interests in the development and promotion of policies on all levels of government to improve and increase the deployment and use of telecommunications and information technology throughout Indian country.

- **Research and Evaluation** – Conduct research and data collection to create a baseline of information to support NNPC policy development and education efforts, as well as inform local and federal stakeholders of relevant and current information impacting telecommunications and information technology needs deployment in Indian country.
- **Education and Outreach** – Analyze, evaluate and disseminate all relevant information and resources to tribes, Native organizations, policymakers and practitioners so that they can develop policies that will promote the appropriate and timely deployment of telecommunications and information technology infrastructure and services throughout Indian Country.

We feel that the expertise to address these issues exists among tribes and the public and private sector today – all that is needed is an organization to focus on providing the information and communication between the stakeholders necessary to achieve results. NNPC is willing to serve in this capacity as an **added value** to any tribe and/or public or private sector entity by providing the policy and information tools necessary to best coordinate efforts, create resources, identify relevant information and promote awareness and action.

Conclusion

Today, tribes are at a pivotal point in history. Self-determination policies have begun to yield measurable results in Native communities, from the development of diversified tribal economies to the revitalization of Indian languages and culture. Throughout the country, the number of tribal and Indian-owned enterprises has grown dramatically, and many tribes have become active participants in economic and political arenas, on both local and national levels. However, the impressive growth we see in these areas will continue to be limited as long as the opportunities afforded by access to the digital economy of the nation exist beyond the boundaries of infrastructure, funding and regulations.

It belongs to those of us in the room today and who we represent – individual tribes, regional and national tribal organizations, Congress and the federal government – to work together to further the progress being made in closing the Digital Divide in Indian Country. I am confident that today's hearing will provide the substance and direction to bring the resolution of this issue into action. Thank you again for your invitation to testify, and I welcome any questions you may have.