

Legislative Update - April 11, 2001

(Broadcast #347)

President Proposes Major Cut For Technology Access Program That Assists Tribes - In his April 9 budget, President Bush proposed slashing funds for the Technology Opportunities Program (TOP), a critical technology access program, from \$45.4 million to \$15.5 million. If Congress approves this proposal, tribes and tribal organizations seeking to bridge the digital divide in their communities would be significantly impacted. TOP, formerly known as the Telecommunications and Information Infrastructure Assistance Program (TIIAP), is a competitive grant program that provides resources to rural and underserved communities for advanced telecommunications technologies.

In FY2001, approximately \$42.5 million in grants will be awarded in by the Commerce Department's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) to state, local, and tribal governments, colleges and universities, and non-profit entities. The FY2001 grant competition closed on March 22, 2001. TOP received 665 grant applications, requesting \$366 million in federal funds.

In FY2000, 35 awards (of 662 applicants) totaling \$13.9 million were provided. Of these, \$1.03 million was provided for three tribal projects. The Round Valley Indian Health Center received funds to use telemedicine to improve health care services. The Pueblo of Santa Ana was awarded a grant to create a wireless community network to provide Internet access to the pueblo and information-sharing among tribal government departments. Finally, the Suquamish Indian Tribe received funds to use wireless technology to provide educational services to the tribal families and children. It is anticipated that additional tribal projects will be funded in FY2001.

According to "Falling Through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide", a report published by the Commerce Department in July 1999, Native Americans rank far below the rest of the country in terms of access to telephones, computers, and the Internet. Rural Native American households are particularly lagging in connectivity. For telephone penetration, rural Native American households (76.4%) rank far below the national average (94.1%). Rural Native American households' access to computers (26.8%) is also lower than the national average (42.1%). Overall, Native Americans are also behind in their access to the Internet (18.9%), compared to the national average (26.2%).

Given these statistics, it is vitally important that programs such as TOP be funded at the highest possible level so that tribal governments can utilize them to help bridge the digital divide facing their communities. We urge tribal leaders to contact their Senators and Representatives to ask that they support funding TOP at its FY2001 funding level of \$45 million during the FY2002 appropriations process.

For additional information about Indian Country technology issues and funding sources available to tribes, please visit NCAI's digital divide clearinghouse at www.indiantech.org or call Becky Johnston at 206-788-9504 (email: rdjohnstongovaffairs@hotmail.com).