



# NEWS

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**Washington, D. C. 20554**

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This is an unofficial announcement of Commission action. Release of the full text of a Commission order constitutes official action. See MCI v. FCC, 515 F 2d 385 (D.C. Circ 1974).

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## **FCC CHAIRMAN WILLIAM E. KENNARD PRESS STATEMENT ON TRIBAL LAND DECISIONS**

This is a great day for the Commission. Over two years ago I asked our staff to find ways to address the woefully inadequate state of telephone penetration on Indian lands. Ninety-four percent of American households have telephone service today. Even in rural areas where the average family income is less than \$5000, the average telephone penetration rate is 74 percent. And yet only 47% of Indian households on reservations have phone service.

But the story behind these statistics is even more compelling: lack of telephone service has real, profound consequences. It results in deaths and permanent injury because of the inability to get help. It robs communities of hope and economic opportunities. And it deprives individuals and families of a means of contact essential to every community. Because of these concerns, I asked the Commission staff to address this problem with the sense of urgency that it deserves.

What ensued was over two years of consultations with tribal communities and governments; federal agencies; state and local governments; Members of Congress and service providers to address the challenge of improving basic telephone service. The Commission also held two field hearings in January and March 1999 to examine the barriers to providing basic telephone service.

As I said in our field hearings: We can and must do better to serve the Native American communities. We recognize that solutions to these problems are complex and require commitment from a broad range of service providers and regulatory stakeholders, and we must stand ready to take the lead.

Today, the Commission took concrete steps towards addressing these complex issues. We approved three items designed to increase service reach in tribal communities and support the ability of residents in high poverty communities to acquire basic telephone service.

The first item, a Policy Statement, embraced the Commission's trust responsibility to tribal communities to improve telecommunications services on reservations and native lands, recognized the sovereignty of federally recognized tribes, and committed to consulting with them on matters uniquely or significantly affecting them.

The second item, from the Common Carrier Bureau, modified our universal service rules to provide additional, targeted support to telephone companies that serve tribal communities. We also addressed fundamental barriers to maintaining basic service by expanding the Lifeline and Link Up programs for tribal communities, so that service can be obtained for as little as \$1 per month; broadening the eligibility requirements so that more Indians can participate in the programs and clarifying when and how carriers seeking to serve tribal communities can be designated eligible telecommunications carriers.

The third item, from the Wireless Telecommunications Bureau, will promote deployment of wireless telecommunications services to under-served tribal lands by awarding substantial bidding credits to future auction winners who agree to provide service to those communities.

The barriers to providing basic telephone service on Indian lands are difficult and complex. But we can't let these challenges discourage us. We owe this community affordable and equitable access to basic phone service. We should do no less than accept and honor that responsibility. With today's decisions, we have taken the first important steps toward making this commitment a reality.

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