

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS**

Re: *Schools and Libraries Universal Support Mechanism*, CC Docket No. 02-6, Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (September 30, 2021).

For millions of Americans, E-Rate has made the local library an on-ramp to all the benefits broadband offers. In 1994, only 21 percent of libraries offered Internet access to the public. By 2014, an annual study conducted by the American Library Association and the University of Maryland's Information Policy & Access Center found that virtually all libraries offered free public Wi-Fi.¹ Today, after more than twenty years of investment through the E-Rate program, twenty-first century libraries now offer an invaluable combination of publicly accessible technologies, digital content, and staff who are able to help users navigate these resources to meet educational, employment, health, or other goals and needs. It would be hard to overstate the difference these services make to someone who needs help applying for a job online or finding healthcare information. Libraries are truly changing lives.

In Tribal communities, these offerings are especially critical. USAC has reported that thirty-eight percent of Tribal libraries are the *only* source of free public internet access in their communities.² At the beginning of my tenure as Commissioner, I dedicated one of my first trips to learning about the many strategies, including library programs, that Tribal communities are using to close the digital divide. During that trip, I accompanied then-Congressman, now-Senator Ben Ray Luján to the libraries in the Pueblos of San Felipe and Santo Domingo. There, I learned about the Middle Rio Grande Valley Tribal Consortium's effort to bring fiber connectivity to libraries in the Pueblo of Santo Domingo, an area where many homes lack broadband service. And I'll never forget the words of Ms. Cynthia Aguilar, a librarian with the Santo Domingo Pueblo Library. Ms. Aguilar described the transformative impact of broadband connectivity when she compared its arrival to that of the railroad to the Pueblo a century prior.

E-Rate support should be amplifying and expanding what librarians like Ms. Aguilar can offer their communities. But the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums report that only 15 percent of Tribal libraries reported receiving E-Rate support.³ We must expand E-Rate's reach in Tribal areas, and I am pleased to support this Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, which proposes to update the E-Rate program's definition of "library" and make clear that Tribal libraries are eligible. I am hopeful that this update, which mirrors our rules for the Emergency Connectivity Fund, will lead to more E-Rate support for Tribal libraries. This item has my strong support, and I thank all the Commission staff who have worked on this issue for their efforts. I look forward to moving quickly to update our E-Rate rules and to reviewing comments in this proceeding on other ways the Commission can better promote Tribal library participation.

¹ Information Policy and Access Center, *Digital Inclusion Survey: Survey Findings and Results* at vii (2014), <https://digitalinclusion.umd.edu/sites/default/files/uploads/2014DigitalInclusionSurveyFinalRelease.pdf>.

² Universal Service Administrative Co., *Broadband Funding for Tribal Libraries: Schools and Libraries (E-rate) Program*, Universal Service Administrative Co. (2016), <https://www.usac.org/wp-content/uploads/e-rate/documents/training/ATALM-Presentation.pdf>.

³ See Institute of Museum and Library Services & Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, & Museums, *Digital Inclusion in Native Communities: The Role of Tribal Libraries* at 22-23, Figure 23 (2013), <http://www.atalm.org/sites/default/files/Report.pdf> (reporting that "we are unsure if the library is eligible for support" was one of the leading reasons for why Tribal libraries do not apply for E-Rate support).