CHAIRMAN FRANK PALLONE, JR.

MEMORANDUM

July 6, 2020

To: Committee on Energy and Commerce Members and Staff

Fr: Committee on Energy and Commerce Staff

Re: Hearing on "Addressing the Urgent Needs of Our Tribal Communities"

On <u>Wednesday</u>, <u>July 8</u>, <u>2020</u>, <u>at 11 a.m.</u> (EDT), <u>via Cisco Webex online video</u> <u>conferencing</u>, the Committee on Energy and Commerce will hold a hearing entitled, "Addressing the Urgent Needs of Our Tribal Communities."

I. COMMUNICATIONS AND TECHNOLOGY ISSUES AFFECTING TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

A. Background

Broadband infrastructure is critical for economic development, educational and job opportunities, and public health and safety. Tribal lands are generally in remote and rugged areas and residents of tribal lands have lower levels of broadband access than residents of non-tribal lands; a reflection of what is often called the "digital divide." As a result, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has reported that the lack of service in tribal lands presents impediments to the efforts of tribal nations related to self-governance, economic opportunity, education, public safety, and cultural preservation. The coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has only exacerbated the digital divide as students and employees across the United States have attempted to transition to attending school remotely or working from home.

B. <u>Digital Divide</u>

Two-thirds of the people on rural tribal lands in the United States lack high-speed internet connectivity.³ Eighteen percent of people living on reservations have no home internet access at all, according to a 2019 study by the American Indian Policy Institute at

¹ Native Americans on Tribal Land Are 'The Least Connected" to High-Speed Internet, National Public Radio (Dec. 6, 2018) (www.npr.org/2018/12/06/673364305/native-americans-on-tribal-land-are-the-least-connected-to-high-speed-internet).

² Federal Communications Commission, *In the Matter of Improving Communications Services for Native Nations*, Notice of Inquiry, 26 FCC Rcd 2672, 2673 (2011).

³ Tackling the Tribal Digital Divide, Stanford Magazine (Mar. 2020).

Arizona State University. According to the FCC's May 2019 *Report on Broadband Deployment in Indian Country*, tribal lands experience lower rates of both fixed and mobile broadband deployment as compared to non-tribal areas of the United States, particularly in rural areas. For example, while 92 percent of housing units on urban tribal lands have access to 25/3 Mbps fixed terrestrial broadband service—six points behind their non-tribal urban counterparts—just 46.6 percent of housing units on rural tribal lands have access to that service, a nearly 27-point gap compared to non-tribal rural areas. With respect to mobile broadband, 4G LTE deployment on tribal lands lags behind coverage of non-tribal lands, and generally, tribal lands that are covered by fewer carriers.

The digital divide has become particularly stark during the COVID-19 pandemic foreclosing members of tribal communities from working and attending school remotely. Students sent home from colleges and schools are encouraged to continue their studies online, yet many tribal students return to homes without sufficient internet connections for downloading and playing videos or uploading assignments. Many individuals cannot work from home or sell goods online, and these same tribal communities are also among the last to receive important updates on health and emergency procedures, which are critically important for prevention. 9

C. FCC Actions

According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), the ways in which the FCC collects broadband availability data overstates access to broadband service on tribal lands. Because the FCC bases its funding decisions on this exaggerated data, the FCC has underfunded certain tribal broadband initiatives. In addition, the FCC removed a critical mass of facilities-based providers offering Lifeline benefits to tribal residents in 2017 by removing them from the Lifeline program. Upon appellate review the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals vacated the FCC's

⁴ *Id*.

⁵ Federal Communications Commission, *Report on Broadband Deployment in Indian Country, Pursuant to the Repack Airwaves Yielding Better Access for Users of Modern Services Act of 2018*, submitted to the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation and the House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce (May 2019), at 3.

⁶ *Id*.

⁷ *Id*.

⁸ For Tribal Lands Ravaged by COVID-19, Broadband Access is a Matter of Life and Death, AZCentral (May 9, 2020) (www.azcentral.com/story/opinion/op-ed/2020/05/09/arizona-tribal-lands-need-broadband-access-help-fight-covid-19/5177693002/).

⁹ *Id*.

¹⁰ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Broadband Internet: FCC's Data Overstates Access on Tribal Lands, Report to Congressional Requesters*, GAO-18-630 (Sept. 2018).

¹¹ *Id*.

¹² Ajit Pai Loses in Court: Judges Overturn Gutting of Tribal Broadband Program, Ars Technica (Feb. 4, 2019).

order in February, and remanded the case back to the Commission for it to conduct a new notice-and-comment proceeding. ¹³

The FCC also attempted to roll back protections of historically and culturally significant tribal sites through the National Historic Preservation Act requirement. ¹⁴ This particular effort failed following a rejection by the D.C. Court of Appeals of that portion of the Commission's order which would have allowed telecommunications carriers to install small cell sites without conducting historical reviews. ¹⁵

The FCC has attempted though, to make more spectrum available to tribes. Last year, the FCC adopted new rules to make 2.5 GHz spectrum available to commercial entities and established a priority filing window for rural Tribal Nations, to be followed by a public auction of any remaining unassigned spectrum. ¹⁶ The FCC has also granted Special Temporary Authority (STA) to tribes to use the 2.5 GHz band during the pandemic. Thus far, the FCC has granted STAs to the SHIWI College and Career Readiness Center for the Zuni Tribe in New Mexico, ¹⁷ the Navajo Nation for wireless service over its reservation, which is located in parts of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah, ¹⁸ and the Makah Tribe in Washington State. ¹⁹

II. ELECTRICITY AND ENERGY ISSUES AFFECTING TRIBAL COMMUNITIES AND LANDS

A. <u>Electricity Access and Reliability</u>

¹³ Nat'l Lifeline Ass'n v. FCC, 921 F.3d 1102, 1118 (D.C. Cir. 2019).

¹⁴ Federal Communications Commission, *In the Matter of Accelerating Wireless Broadband Deployment by Removing Barriers to Infrastructure Investment*, Declaratory Ruling and Third Report and Order, WT Docket No. 17-79, WC Docket No. 17-84 (Sept. 27, 2018).

¹⁵ United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians in Okla. v. FCC, 933 F.3d 728, 740 (D.C. Cir. 2019).

¹⁶ Federal Communications Commission, *In the Matter of Transforming the 2.5 GHz Band, Public Draft Report and Order*, WT Docket No. 18-120 (Jul. 10, 2019).

¹⁷ Federal Communications Commission, FCC Grants Temporary Spectrum Access to Support Connectivity on Tribal Reservation During Covid-19 Pandemic (Mar. 30, 2020) (press release).

¹⁸ Federal Communications Commission, *FCC Grants the Navajo Nation Temporary Spectrum Access to Meet Increased Wireless Broadband Needs During Covid-19 Pandemic* (Apr. 17, 2020) (press release).

¹⁹ Federal Communications Commission, FCC Grants Makah Tribe Temporary Spectrum Access to 2.5 GHz Band to Meet Increased Wireless Broadband Needs During Covid-19 Pandemic (May 29, 2020) (press release).

As of 2019, 27 percent of Native Americans living in rural areas experienced problems with electricity access and reliability. However, nearly 15,000 homes in Navajo Nation – 30 percent of all Navajo homes – still lack electricity. Households on tribal lands are often spread out, and extending utility distribution lines to remote residences can cost up to \$60,000 per mile. Additionally, due to high unemployment numbers, it is not feasible to cover the costs of energizing all homes on tribal lands by increasing electricity rates. Instead, communities must often rely on expensive diesel microgrids and generators to power homes and businesses. Alaskan Native villages, for instance, pay some of the highest energy costs in the country, with diesel fuel prices reaching over \$7 per gallon.

Access to reliable and affordable electricity is especially important in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Diagnostic testing, treatment, and sanitation procedures all require facilities with reliable electricity. Additionally, lockdowns and social distancing measures depend on reliable and affordable electricity supply. Reservations currently face high numbers of confirmed COVID-19 cases and are without crucial infrastructure necessary to cope with them. 8

²⁰ NPR, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, *Life in Rural America Part II* (May 2019) (media.npr.org/documents/2019/may/NPR-RWJF-HARVARD_Rural_Poll_Part_2.pdf).

²¹ U.S. Department of Energy, *Strengthening Tribal Communities*, *Sustaining Future Generations* (Aug. 2017) (energy.gov/sites/prod/files/2017/09/f36/DOE-IE-brochure_0917.pdf).

²² Rocky Mountain Institute, *Native Energy: Rural Electrification on Tribal Lands* (rmi.org/blog_2014_06_24_native_energy_rural_electrification_on_tribal_lands) (Jun. 24, 2014).

²³ NPR, For Many Navajos, Getting Hooked Up To The Power Grid Can Be Life-Changing (npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/05/29/726615238/for-many-navajos-getting-hooked-up-to-the-power-grid-can-be-life-changing) (May 29, 2019).

²⁴ *See* note 21.

²⁵ National Congress of American Indians, *Fiscal Year 2021 Indian Country Budget Request: Advancing Sovereignty Through Certainty & Security* (2020) (ncai.org/resources/ncai-publications/indian-country-budget-request/Energy.pdf).

²⁶ Brookings Institution, *You can't fight pandemics without power – electric power* (brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2020/06/05/you-cant-fight-pandemics-without-power-electric-power) (Jun. 5, 2020).

²⁷ International Energy Agency, *The coronavirus crisis reminds us that electricity is more indispensable than ever* (iea.org/commentaries/the-coronavirus-crisis-reminds-us-that-electricity-is-more-indispensable-than-ever) (Mar. 22, 2020).

²⁸ Axios, *Native Americans struggle to fight the coronavirus* (axios.com/native-americans-unprepared-coronavirus-pandemic-62659da0-e49b-4a1b-bbf3-5cf3bc1df53b.html) (May 16, 2020).

B. Energy Production

While many Native American households do not have access to reliable electricity, tribal lands have significant potential for energy production. Tribal lands comprise about five percent of the United States, but may contain ten percent of the country's energy resources. Estimates show tribal lands in the lower 48 states contain nearly 18,000 billion kilowatt-hours (kWh) per year of solar energy potential and 535 billion kWh per year of wind energy potential. Utility-scale renewable energy potential on tribal lands is estimated at 6.5 times the national potential. Tribes are pursuing residential renewable systems, energy storage, and renewable-powered microgrids to take advantage of these resources, address the infrastructure challenges of powering remote locations, and significantly reduce energy costs. ³²

Tribal nations face many challenges when developing new energy projects. Challenges include a lack of needed physical infrastructure, an inability to access project financing, and a lack of energy workforce training.³³ Additionally, Native American communities have a diversity of opinions and experiences with respect to energy development. Some tribes have fought energy development on tribal lands, particularly projects that will not benefit tribal communities. A high-profile example of this is the ongoing litigation brought by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe challenging the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline in North Dakota.³⁴ Others have invested in coal, oil, and natural gas development that raises substantial revenues for tribal governments, provides jobs, and supports programs serving tribal communities. However, tribes that depend on the revenues and employment provided by fossil fuels face significant challenges when the economics tied to those sources change. For example, when the Navajo Generating Station in Arizona closed and demand for fuel from the associated Kayenta coal mine collapsed, the Navajo and Hopi Tribes faced severe revenue shortfalls and steep job losses.³⁵

III. ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES AFFECTING TRIBAL COMMUNITIES AND LANDS

A. Tribal Water Access

²⁹ Sandia National Laboratories, *Identifying Barriers and Pathways for Success for Renewable Energy Development on American Indian Lands* (Nov. 2016) (SAND2016-311J).

 $^{^{30}}$ *Id*.

³¹ *See* note 24.

³² *See* note 21.

³³ *See* note 24.

³⁴ New York Times, *Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Wins a Victory in Dakota Access Pipeline Case* (nytimes.com/2020/03/25/climate/dakota-access-pipeline-sioux.html) (Mar. 25, 2020).

³⁵ AZ Central, *Navajo Generating Station – the largest coal plant in the West – has just shut down* (azcentral.com/story/money/business/energy/2019/11/18/navajo-generating-station-coal-plant-arizona-closes/2567154001/ (Nov. 18, 2019).

According to the Indian Health Service (IHS), 17 percent of tribal homes lack access to adequate sanitation services. Of those homes, nearly two percent lack access to a safe water supply, compared to less than one percent of all homes nationwide. In fact, Native American households are 19 times more likely than white households to lack indoor plumbing. Where indoor plumbing is available, the tap water often fails to meet national drinking water standards. For the most recent year tracked by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) under the Tribal Public Water System Supervision program, 92 of 708 systems serving tribal communities were in violation of health-based drinking water standards. These 92 facilities served over 100,000 people on tribal lands. This lack of access to safe water may complicate efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19 among tribal communities.

EPA offers technical and financial assistance to improve drinking water infrastructure in tribal communities through several different programs. The Drinking Water State Revolving Fund includes a two percent set-aside for tribal communities. ⁴⁰ The Tribal Public Water System Supervision program includes technical assistance and capacity building for water operators. ⁴¹ Water systems serving tribal communities are also eligible for funding through new programs created in 2016, to assist small and disadvantaged communities, reduce lead in drinking water, and support lead testing in schools and child care programs. ⁴²

B. Superfund

Under Superfund, EPA is required to consult and coordinate with federally recognized tribal governments when a Superfund site affects tribal interests. EPA published guidance in 2011 – revised in 2016 – on tribal consultation under Superfund. Even with that guidance in place, the GAO has found that EPA does not have reliable data identifying National Priorities

³⁶ Indian Health Service, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Safe Water and Waste Disposal Facilities* (ihs.gov/newsroom/factsheets/safewater) (May 2019).

³⁷ U.S. Water Alliance, *Closing the Water Access Gap in the United States: A National Action Plan* (Nov. 2019).

 $^{^{38}}$ *Id*.

³⁹ *Id*.

⁴⁰ Memorandum from Anita Thompkins (Director, Drinking Water Protection Division, Office of Ground Water and Drinking Water, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency) to Regional Drinking Water Program Managers, Regions 1-X (Apr. 18, 2017) (epa.gov/sites/production/files/2017-04/documents/dwig_wiintraining_april_2017_508.pdf).

⁴¹ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, *Other Training and Technical Assistance for Tribes* (epa.gov/tribaldrinkingwater/other-training-and-technical-assistance-tribes) (May 19, 2017).

⁴² Pub. L. No. 114-322 (2016).

⁴³ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, *Remedial Program in Indian Country* (epa.gov/superfund/remedial-program-indian-country) (Mar. 9, 2020).

List sites that are located on tribal property or that affect tribes. That report included four recommendations, only one of which has been implemented.⁴⁴

IV. HEALTH CARE ISSUES AFFECTING TRIBAL COMMUNITIES AND LANDS

A. Health Care Delivery and the Indian Health Care Improvement Act

The United States has a treaty and trust responsibility to provide health care to all 574 federally recognized Tribes and their members. Health care includes clinical health services, public health services, and facilities infrastructure. The Indian Health Care Improvement Act (IHCIA) is the statutory foundation for the provision of health care to Native Americans and Alaskan Natives. The IHCIA was permanently authorized as part of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) on March 23, 2010.

Health care services for tribal members are delivered through one of three channels: the IHS, which is an agency within the Department of Health and Human Services, programs and facilities provided by Tribes and Tribal Organizations via self-determination contracts or self-governance compacts, or Urban Indian Organizations. These health care delivery systems are commonly referred to as I/T/U. Under certain circumstances, IHS-funded services may be delivered by private providers through the Purchased/Referred Care (PRC) Program when an I/T/U is unable to meet a patient's medical needs.

The IHS is primarily funded through annual Congressional appropriations and third-party collections. IHS is authorized to be reimbursed by Medicare, Medicaid, and other third-party insurers under the IHCIA. HS relies on third-party payment collection from these programs to maintain its current level of services. Additionally, according to a recent GAO report, several federally and tribally operated facilities have reported that increases in coverage that resulted from the ACA have allowed them to use such funds to expand services. He is primarily funded through the services and the services in the services are the services and the services are the services and the services are the services are

⁴⁴ Government Accountability Office, *EPA Should Improve the Reliability of Data on National Priorities List Sites Affecting Indian Tribes* (Jan. 23, 2019) (GAO-19-123).

⁴⁵ Indian Health Service, *Historical Basis for Health Services 2015* (Jan. 2015) (www.ihs.gov/sites/newsroom/themes/responsive2017/display_objects/documents/factsheets/Bas isforHealthServices.pdf).

⁴⁶ Congressional Research Service, *Indian Health Service (IHS) Funding: Fact Sheet* (July 2017)

 $⁽www.everycrsreport.com/files/20170717_R44040_26f7f41da6a2dd20af971a29387ab4af137a2480.pdf).$

⁴⁷ Indian Health Service, *Purchased/Referred Care (PRC)* (July 2020) (ihs.gov/forpatients/prc/).

⁴⁸ 25 U.S.C. § 18.

⁴⁹ Government Accountability Office, *Facilities Reported Expanded Services Following Increases in Health Insurance Coverage and Collections* (Sept. 3, 2019) (GAO-19-612).

B. Funding and Infrastructure Deficiencies

Due to chronic underfunding by the federal government, the IHS cannot currently meet basic healthcare needs of tribal populations. Many IHS facilities are in highly rural areas, and their infrastructure and medical equipment is older or outdated due to lack of revenue. Further, as a result of this lack of appropriations there has been a historic funding disparity for tribes. For example, in fiscal year 2017, the IHS per capita expenditures for patient health services were \$3,332, whereas health care spending nationally per person was \$9,207. Tribes support increased resources for IHS to support current services, as well as program increases for hospitals and health clinics, greater investments in PRC, and additional funding for dental, mental health, and substance use disorder programs. Tribes report difficulties in providing services and retaining a skilled workforce, and IHS faces recruitment challenges given the state of their medical facilities and equipment, rural locations, and insufficient housing for providers. They have also requested funding the full implementation of a comprehensive and inter-operable electronic health record (EHR) system and support additional telehealth investments.

The Tribal Budget Formulation Working Group – comprised of tribal leaders from all twelve IHS service areas – has calculated that annually \$48 billion is needed to meet the needs of Indian Country. ⁵⁶ In comparison, in recent years, the IHS budget was \$5 billion in Fiscal Year (FY) 2017, \$5.5 billion in FY 2018, and \$5.8 billion in FY 2019. ⁵⁷ IHS relies on third-party collections, primarily through Medicaid, to support its budget each year; for FY 2019, Medicaid covered 724,359 tribal members and brought \$1.15 billion in collections to the IHS. ⁵⁸

⁵⁰ *Ibid*.

⁵¹ Government Accountability Office, *Tribal Programs: Resource Constraints and Management Weaknesses Can Limit Federal Program Delivery to Tribes* (Nov. 19, 2019) (GAO-20-270T).

⁵² National Congress of American Indians, *Fiscal Year 2020 Indian Country Budget Request:* Winds of Change, Protecting our Nations and People into the Future (2019).

⁵³ *Id*.

⁵⁴ Government Accountability Office, *Indian Health Service: Agency Faces Ongoing Challenges Filling Provider Vacancies* (Aug. 15, 2018) (GAO-18-580).

⁵⁵ National Indian Health Board, *Health IT* (May 2017) (www.nihb.org/docs/09182017/Health%20IT%20One%20pager.pdf).

⁵⁶ The National Tribal Budget Formulation Workgroup, Recommendations on the Indian Health Service Fiscal Year 2022 Budget, *Reclaiming Tribal Health: A National Budget Plan to Rise Above Failed Policies and Fulfill Trust Obligations to Tribal Nations* (Apr. 2020).

⁵⁷ Indian Health Service, *IHS Profile* (Apr. 2020) (www.ihs.gov/newsroom/factsheets/ihsprofile/).

⁵⁸ *Ibid*.

On January 17, 2020, Chairman Pallone, Ranking Member Walden, Rep. Ruiz (D-CA), and Rep. Mullin (R-OK) sent a letter to the GAO requesting a study regarding an assessment of IHS facilities and equipment and what steps the facilities are taking to improve capacity, including other programs or technologies to address the longstanding chronic underfunding of IHS infrastructure.⁵⁹

C. <u>Health Inequities and COVID-19</u>

Comorbidities as well as other social determinants of health – including lack of housing or poor sanitation – have contributed to lower life expectancies among tribal communities; with tribal members expected to live 5.5 fewer years than other U.S. races. ⁶⁰ American Indians and Alaskan Natives have a lower quality of life and are disproportionately affected by chronic conditions compared to other racial groups. ⁶¹ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) lists heart disease, cancer, and diabetes amongst the leading causes of death for tribal populations. ⁶²

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted health care delivery and infrastructure challenges experienced by tribal communities. As of June 30, Navajo Nation has 7,549 confirmed cases and 364 deaths due to COVID-19.⁶³ Their per capita rate of positive cases is higher than many states.⁶⁴ Further, according to CDC, non-Hispanic American Indian and

⁵⁹ Letter from Rep. Frank Pallone, Jr., Chairman, Committee on Energy and Commerce, Rep. Greg Walden, Ranking Member, Committee on Energy and Commerce, Rep. Raul Ruiz, M.D., Rep. Markwayne Mullin, to Gene Dodaro, Comptroller General, U.S. Government Accountability Office (Jan. 17, 2020) (energycommerce.house.gov/sites/democrats.energycommerce.house.gov/files/documents/GAO. 2020.1.17.%20Letter%20re%20IHS%20Review.HE .pdf).

⁶⁰ Indian Health Service, *Indian Health Disparities* (Oct. 2019) (www.ihs.gov/sites/newsroom/themes/responsive2017/display_objects/documents/factsheets/Disparities.pdf).

⁶¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Adakai M, Sandoval-Rosario M, Xu F, et al, *Health Disparities Among American Indians/Alaska Natives* — *Arizona, 2017* (Nov. 30, 2018) (Rep 2018;67:1314–1318).

⁶² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, *Health of American Indian or Alaska Native Population* (May 3, 2017) (www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/american-indian-health.htm).

⁶³Navajo Nation Department of Health, *Dikos Ntsaaígíí-19 (COVID-19) COVID-19 Dashboard* (July 1, 2020) (www.ndoh.navajo-nsn.gov/COVID-19).

⁶⁴ *Navajo Nation: The people battling America's worst coronavirus outbreak*, BBC News (June 16, 2020) (www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52941984).

Alaskan Native populations have an age-adjusted hospitalization rate approximately five times that of Whites.⁶⁵

Congress set aside funding for tribes to respond to the coronavirus pandemic, and the IHS has acted as the conduit between tribes and the federal government in the disbursement of healthcare related relief funds. The IHS has received almost \$1.1 billion from the Families First Coronavirus Response Act and the CARES Act.. ⁶⁶ Also included in these bills were provisions extending access to the Strategic National Stockpile to the IHS and tribal organizations, increasing Federal Medical Assistance Percentages (FMAP) payments, and ensuring individuals do not face out-of-pocket costs for COVID-19 testing.

V. WITNESSES

The following witnesses have been invited to testify:

Charles Grim, D.D.S., M.H.S.A.

Secretary

Chickasaw Nation Department of Health

Jonathan Nez

President

Navajo Nation

The Honorable Christine Sage

Chairman

Southern Ute Indian Tribe

Fawn Sharp

President

National Congress of American Indians

Pilar M. Thomas

Partner

Quarles & Brady LLP

⁶⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Coronavirus Disease 2019, Racial & Ethnic Minority Groups* (June 25, 2020) (www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extraprecautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html).

⁶⁶ Pub. L. No. 116-127 (2020); Pub. L. No. 116-136 (2020).