

Opening Statement
Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr.
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Hearing on “Addressing the Urgent Needs of Our Tribal Communities”
July 8, 2020

Today’s hearing is long overdue. Day after day, our nation’s tribal communities are suffering terrible health inequities, unequal access to safe drinking water, unreliable access to the energy grid, little to no broadband connectivity, unreliable funding from the federal government and other systemic problems that have created unnecessary hardship and turmoil. And now COVID-19 is exacerbating many of these long-existing problems.

More than one-third of tribal members are at high-risk of serious COVID-19 complications due to underlying health factors, and Navajo Nation has seen higher infections rates than those in Wuhan, China during the peak of the pandemic.

Despite this stark reality of the impact of COVID-9 on tribal communities, we have heard repeatedly about the struggles of tribal communities in accessing the personal protective equipment and testing needed to protect against COVID-19.

As this pandemic rages on and COVID-19 cases continue to rise in many areas of the country, access to PPE and testing, as well as access to proper sanitation and well-equipped health facilities, will be critical to flattening the curve for tribal communities.

Our tribal communities deserve better. That is why we are here to listen to representatives of tribal governments and organizations so that we can ensure Congress meets its obligations to tribal governments and communities.

While I would like to believe that we have made incremental improvements for tribes over the years, it is clear that not enough has been accomplished.

In the area of health care, as I noted, tribal communities experience greater health disparities compared to other groups, which increases their risks of hospitalization due to COVID-19 and associated complications. We must tackle the fact that the Indian Health Service (IHS) remains chronically underfunded. It is impossible for IHS to meet the health care needs of tribal members, whether in a pandemic or not, without sufficient and stable resources — which has contributed to outdated infrastructure and medical equipment.

While Congress has provided increased resources to IHS in recent coronavirus packages, this Administration has failed to get this money to tribal communities swiftly, putting tribal members further at a disadvantage in receiving the testing, PPE and health care access they need in order to respond to COVID-19.

The Moving Forward Act includes \$5 billion for IHS and tribal recipients for the construction and renovation of hospitals and outpatient health care facilities money that can also be used to help with public health preparedness during the COVID-19 response.

I also look forward to hearing about what the Federal government can do to make sure all tribal communities have access to reliable, secure, high-speed internet service. This pandemic has driven home how internet connectivity is essential for everyone. Telehealth services are vital, especially in remote areas, distance learning is the only option for many, and telework and e-commerce are growing in importance.

Yet for all of its benefits, two-thirds of people living on rural tribal lands have no internet connectivity. This is a disgrace.

Fortunately, the Moving Forward Act brings more connectivity to Tribal households by providing \$80 billion for broadband deployment projects, and includes a preference for projects that bring broadband to rural areas and Tribal lands. It also creates grant programs for broadband adoption and digital inclusion, with specific tribal consultation requirements and set asides.

Electricity and water access on tribal lands also continue to be major issues, even in the 21st Century. Tribal households are less likely to have access to indoor plumbing and a safe water supply, with some communities driving weekly to get water, rationing it for their household uses. Many households are also left without reliable electricity or must pay extremely high rates.

The Moving Forward Act addresses these issues by investing \$47 billion in drinking water programs, including the Indian Reservation Drinking Water Program, and \$50 million to improve tribal communities' access to affordable and reliable energy sources.

Tribal lands have also long suffered from development projects that use their land without any benefit to them. That's simply not right, and now, as some tribes explore renewable or other energy production, they run into roadblocks like federal

and state regulations, and lack of access to project financing and workforce training. We need to look at ways to encourage this type of development.

I thank our witnesses for being here today, and I'd like to yield the remainder of my time to Rep. Ruiz and Rep. O'Halleran – both champions for the tribal communities on this Committee.