

GAO's Recent and Ongoing Tribal Broadband Work


August 29, 2023




Overview

- GAO's Role
- GAO's Current Review of TBCP
- GAO's Recent Report on TBCP

GAO's Role




GAO is an independent, nonpartisan agency within the legislative branch. GAO advises Congress about how to make the federal government more efficient, effective, ethical, equitable, and responsive.




GAO conducts reviews of federal agencies and programs, including those that serve Tribes, their citizens, and descendants. GAO does not audit or evaluate tribal governments and respects tribal sovereignty.

GAO's Role



These reviews result in publicly available reports that make recommendations to federal agencies on how they can improve program delivery.

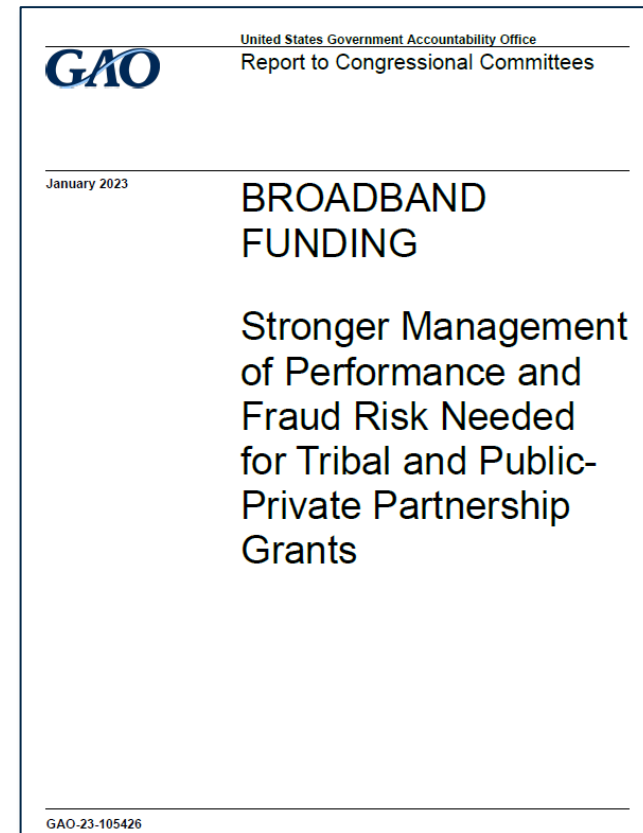


GAO reports, their recommendations, and agency actions to respond to GAO recommendations can be found at www.gao.gov.

Statutory Provision for GAO Reports

Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021,
Pub. L. No. 116-260, div. N, tit. IX, § 905,
134 Stat. 1182, 2136–44 (2020).

Not later than 6 months after the date on which the first grant is awarded under this section, and every 6 months thereafter until all of the grant funds awarded under this section are expended, the Inspector General of the Department [of Commerce] and the Comptroller General of the United States shall each submit to the Committee on Energy and Commerce of the House of Representatives a report that reviews the grants awarded under this section during the preceding 6-month period. Each such report shall include recommendations to address waste, fraud, and abuse, if any.



Current Review



Post-award Grants
Management

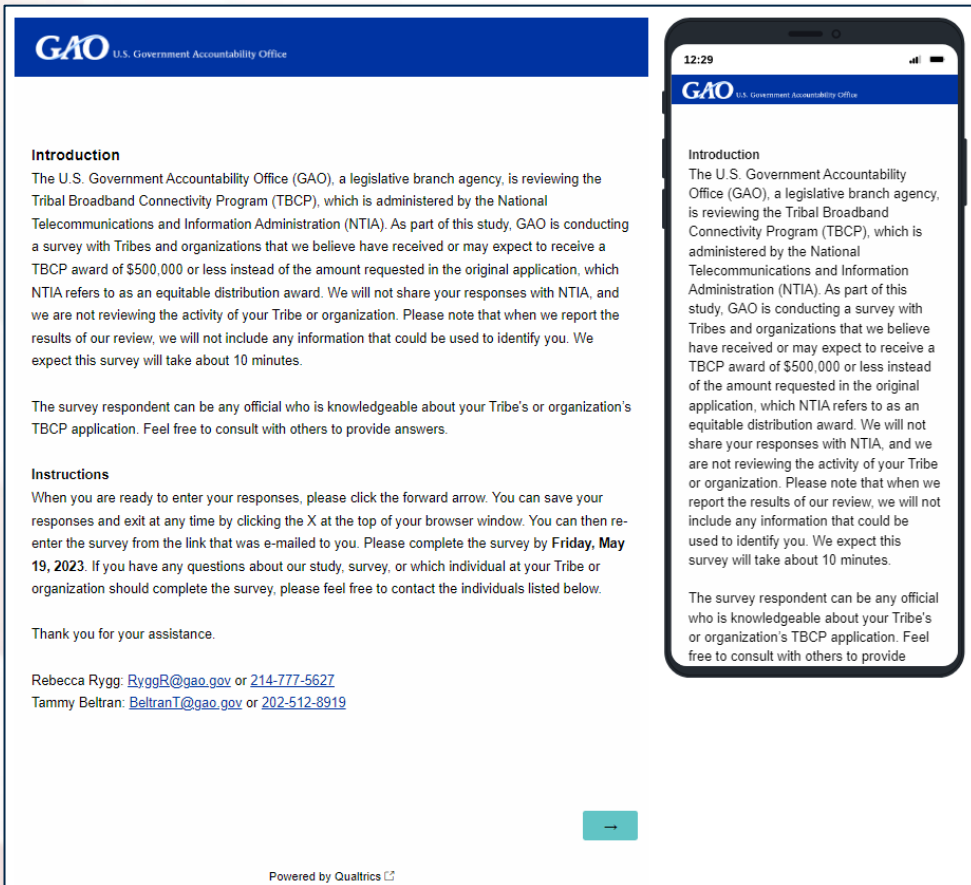


Equitable Distribution
Grants



Project Sustainability

Study Methodology



- Interviews for ongoing study
- Conversations at NTTA and NTIA's Tribal Broadband Leadership Network event
- Pulse survey in May
 - Sent survey to 29 applicants; 17 responses

Importance of Feedback

- Improve applications for second round
- Decide whether to apply for the second round
- Inform approaches toward other funding opportunities, such as BEAD
- Foster confidence in the program



The screenshot shows the NTIA website header with the logo, name, and search bar. The navigation menu includes 'About Us', 'Key Issues', 'Funding Programs', 'News', 'Data Central', and 'Publications'. The main content area features a news article titled 'Biden-Harris Administration Announces Nearly \$1 Billion in New Internet for All Funding Available to Tribal Lands'. The article includes a 'FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE' notice dated July 27, 2023, a 'News Media Contact' section for the NTIA Office of Public Affairs, and a 'WASHINGTON' section detailing the funding announcement. The text states that the Department of Commerce's NTIA announced nearly \$1 billion in funding to expand internet access on Tribal Lands, part of President Biden's agenda. It also mentions that a second round of funding from the Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program (TBCP) will provide approximately \$980 million for various initiatives on Tribal Lands.

NTIA's Reasons for Not Providing Feedback

NTIA Reason	GAO Response
NTIA not required to provide feedback	Providing constructive feedback is a leading practice
Changes to the 2 nd funding round reduce relevance of feedback	NTIA could provide tailored, relevant feedback as part of its technical assistance to applicants
NTIA has staffing challenges	Better applications can reduce the amount of curing needed after initial submission

Recommendation

August 24, 2023

The Honorable Maria Cantwell
Chair
The Honorable Ted Cruz
Ranking Member
Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
United States Senate

The Honorable Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Chair
The Honorable Frank Pallone, Jr.
Ranking Member
Committee on Energy and Commerce
House of Representatives

Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program: Feedback Should Be Provided to Applicants Receiving Equitable Distribution Grants

Tribal access to broadband internet lags behind the rest of the country. However, two recent appropriations totaling \$3 billion for the new Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program (TBCP) provided the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) with an opportunity to help increase tribal access to broadband.¹

In January 2023, we began our second review of TBCP in response to a provision in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 (2021 Act).² This act includes a provision for GAO to review, every six months until funds are expended, TBCP grants awarded during the prior six months.³ This report responds to the statutory deadline for the fourth report and provides timely information about an aspect of the program—feedback to applicants—related to the notice of funding opportunity issued on July 27, 2023. Meanwhile, we are continuing our review of NTIA's administration of TBCP, including reviewing the post-award process, additional topics related to NTIA's actions taken to distribute grants on an equitable basis, and the sustainability of projects.

¹The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, appropriated \$1 billion for TBCP. In November 2021, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act appropriated an additional \$2 billion. NTIA resides within the Department of Commerce.

²Pub. L. No. 116-260, div. N, tit. IX, § 905(f)(2), 134 Stat. 1182, 2144 (2020) (codified at 47 U.S.C. § 1705(f)(2)).

³This act also includes a provision for GAO to review, every six months until funds are expended, Broadband Infrastructure Program grants awarded during the prior six months. Pub. L. No. 116-260, § 905(f)(2), 134 Stat. at 2144. However, NTIA did not award any Broadband Infrastructure Program grants in the prior six months, so this report focuses on the TBCP. To meet the previous statutory deadline, GAO held briefings or submitted a draft report that was later issued. See GAO, *Broadband Funding: Stronger Management of Performance and Fraud Risk Needed for Tribal and Public-Private Partnership Grants*, GAO-23-10624 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 24, 2023). This report covers the additional equitable distribution grants made since our last response in May 2023.

- The Administrator of NTIA should provide applicants that receive equitable distribution grants in the first round of TBCP with constructive feedback—by providing debriefings or technical assistance—to help these applicants improve their applications for the second round of TBCP funding.
- NTIA agreed with our recommendation.

Share Your Story

- Highs and lows
- Thoughts on the 2nd NOFO

Questions?

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