The FCC Updated Its Rules to Make It Easier For Tribal Libraries to Get E-Rate Support

In 2022 and 2023, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) unanimously approved two orders updating the E-Rate program rules and making it easier for Tribal libraries to get E-Rate funding for much-needed telecommunications and information services.

We invite you to learn more about the E-Rate program and consider whether it makes sense for your Tribal library to apply.

What is the E-Rate program?

The E-Rate program makes telecommunications and information services more affordable for schools and libraries, including Tribal libraries. With funding from the Universal Service Fund, the E-Rate program provides discounts of up to 90 percent of the costs for broadband connections to schools or libraries and internal connections (e.g., Wi-Fi networks) within eligible schools and libraries.

What constitutes a Tribal library eligible for E-Rate support?

Tribal government entities can designate a Tribal library (for example, through a Tribal Resolution). Tribal libraries may also work with the state library administrative agency where they are located. Tribal libraries should also be able to demonstrate that they have three basic components of a library:

1.   Regularly scheduled hours;

2.   Staff; and

3.   Materials available for library users.

In addition, Tribal College and University (TCU) libraries are eligible for E-Rate support when they also act as the public library by having dedicated library staff, regular hours, and a collection available for public use in its community.

What does my Tribal library need to do to apply?

After registering with the FCC and the entity that administers the program, the Universal Service Administrative Company (USAC), the process starts with competitive bidding and requesting bids for the eligible services (and equipment) you need for the upcoming year. You then select the most cost-effective provider. After you sign a contract or establish a service agreement, and USAC issues you a funding commitment, you can start to receive E-Rate support for the services and equipment USAC has approved. You must file an application requesting E-Rate funds each year.

When does a Tribal library apply each year?

Applicants request E-Rate funding for the upcoming funding year during the E-Rate application filing window, which opens in mid-January and closes in mid-March.

When does FY 2025 start?

FY 2025 covers services provided from July 1, 2025 through June 30, 2026. The FY 2025 FCC Form 470 is available now to begin the competitive bid process for FY 2025. Applicants will request funds during the application filing window, which will open in mid-January 2025, and close in mid-March 2025.

How do we begin the application process?

(1) Obtain an FCC Registration Number.

❖ All entities must have an FCC Registration Number issued through the FCC's Commission Registration System (CORES), to participate in the E-Rate program. Call (877) 480-3201 with questions.

(2) Obtain a Billed Entity Number (BEN) and create a user profile in the E-Rate Productivity Center (EPC) Portal.

❖ To obtain a BEN, contact USAC's Customer Service Center (CSC) at (888) 203-8100. USAC assigns a BEN, or unique identifying number, to each entity that participates in the E-Rate program.

❖ If a Tribal government wishes to create a consortium for its Tribally controlled schools and libraries, the following information is needed before calling CSC:

i. Contact information of the consortium leader;

ii. Contact information of the account administrator for each library that will join the consortium; and

iii. A Letter of Agency, establishing that applicant entities have authorized the person identified in the letter to act on their behalf. See a sample Letter of Agency.

(3) Designate your entity's Tribal status in EPC.

(4) File the FCC Form 470 in EPC to start the competitive bidding process and solicit bids for eligible services and equipment, and wait at least 28 days before selecting your service provider(s).

(5) File the FCC Form 471 in EPC during the E-Rate application filing window to request funding.

(6) Retain documentation.

The FCC and USAC want to help!

The FCC and USAC are working together on the Tribal Library E-Rate Advocacy Program (T-LEAP), which will provide one-on-one assistance to new Tribal library applicants interested in applying for E-Rate support. You can sign up for T-LEAP at https://tinyurl.com/T-LEAP.

To learn more, please visit https://www.usac.org/e-rate/learn/tribal-training/ or call the USAC Customer Service Center (CSC) at (888) 203-8100, Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. E.T. for help on how to apply. You can also email USAC at TribalTraining@usac.org for additional help or to ask questions about the E-Rate program or for help on how to apply.