**Officials praise $72M grant that will bolster internet service on Hawaiian homestead lands**

By John Burnett

A longstanding effort to increase internet connectivity in Department of Hawaiian Home Lands communities received a big boost Tuesday thanks to a $72 million grant from the federal government.

The grant from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration's Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program, along with a $17 million grant DHHL received from NTIA earlier this year, provides $89 million to expand broadband internet access to thousands of underserved households on homestead land by funding new telecommunications infrastructure, workforce development programs and digital equity initiatives for DHHL lessees.

"This new federal funding will mean communities on Hawaiian home lands will have better, more reliable high-speed internet at home, helping more people access education, health care and employment resources online," said U.S. Sen. Brian Schatz, a Hawaii Democrat and chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, who helped secure funding for the grant.

"I want to thank Sen. Schatz for his work to make NTIA grant happen," said Katie Lambert, DHHL deputy director, during a press conference Tuesday at the state capitol office of Lt. Gov. Sylvia Luke.

"We would not be here today without his advocacy on behalf of the beneficiaries on the Hawaiian home lands."

The grant will help bring fast fiber optic internet connections to thousands of DHHL lessees statewide and fund telecommunications infrastructure in DHHL areas that have limited access to broadband service – and will be used to establish connections at planned housing developments.

Doug Kinkoph, associate administrator of the NTIA, called approval of the TBCP grant "a historic moment … for the future generations of Native Hawaiians."

"The project goes beyond merely laying fiber to the homes," said Kinkoph. "It's about connecting people, closing gaps and opening new doors for opportunity for indigenous communities. For too long, indigenous communities have been on the wrong side of the digital divide.

"Today, we take a major step in correcting that inequity."

Kinkoph said grant funds will be disbursed over a four-year period, with projects rolling out through 2028. He added there could be an option for more time at DHHL's request.

"For too long, many communities on Hawaiian home lands have lacked equitable access to the digital tools citizens need to participate fully in our modern economy," said Luke. "This grant empowers people with the resources they need to succeed and will strengthen the bonds of our communities.

"… We have an effort to connect all the islands. Because we're an island state - which is very unique, unlike the 48 other contiguous states or Alaska - our islands, themselves, have to be connected with each other. So we are working with the University of Hawaii and a private partnership to connect the islands. … The state of Hawaii will have some ownership, and that is a discussion we will be having with DHHL."

Sandwich Isles Communications discontinued telephone and broadband service to DHHL properties in early June without the 30-day notice required by state and federal laws, as well as the company's certificate of authority that allowed it to operate in the state.

The impact to DHHL beneficiaries at Puukapu in South Kohala, which doesn't have cell service, was particularly severe, because residents there were unable to contact emergency services after Sandwich Isles pulled the plug on telephone services.

State Sen. Tim Richards of Waimea, who didn't speak at the press conference but was introduced as the new chairman of the Committee on Hawaiian Affairs, called the grant funding's impact on Hawaii Island "a huge deal."

"There are about 5,200 DHHL beneficiaries on the Big Island, and about half don't have internet service," Richards told the Tribune-Herald. "During the pandemic, there were people whose kids couldn't get online for classes and families couldn't get telehealth, all kinds of issues because of the digital divide.

"But beyond that, there are a lot of rural areas on the Big Island that don't have service. This qualifies as BEAD program funding," he added, which is an acronym for Broadband Equity and Access Deployment. "We have a lot of Native Hawaiians who aren't on homestead land, and under this grant, they also qualify for access.

"So, this is huge."

Email John Burnett at jburnett@hawaiitribune-herald.com