



## Leech Lake Tribal College: *TCU Ongoing Challenges During COVID-19 Pandemic* 117<sup>th</sup> Congress – February 2021

Through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSAA), **Leech Lake Tribal College** received urgently needed funding to move classes online to the extent possible and begin to address tremendous digital divide challenges. We were also able to provide emergency grants, equipment, and tuition assistance to our students to help them stay enrolled in classes. As we continue to support students during this difficult time and plan for onsite classes, our needs are growing. To address current pandemic-related challenges and plan for an uncertain future, TCUs need your ongoing support.

### CARES and CRRSAA Funds at Leech Lake Tribal College

- Direct student aid
- Increased emergency student aid
- Upgraded safety/sanitation
- Provided technology support (laptops, internet hotspots, etc.) for all students.
- Provided technology upgrades to staff and faculty
- Professional development on online services provided for Staff and Faculty
- Food security issues addressed through food pantry giveaways



In order to meet the challenges of the pandemic, Leech Lake Tribal College had to switch from 95% face-to-face classes to 100% online/virtual classrooms. This necessitated a complete reworking of all curricula and providing faculty with training in online instruction. Partnerships were formed with ACUE and Innovative Educators' Go2Knowledge program. Using a variety of funding sources before the CARES Act funding became available, the college provided laptops and hotspot technology to those students who were most in need in order to complete their coursework. With CARES Act funding, we then supplemented our technology offerings to students to ensure that all students would have access to coursework. Student services worked diligently from home to establish connections with students who were also homebound so that we could continue to provide the services that the students would need to be successful.



### Ongoing Challenges at Leech Lake Tribal College

- Emotional, mental, and behavioral health concerns for students, faculty, and staff
- Communications with students, even with improved technology, continues to be a challenge.
- Providing emergency support for students becomes more crucial as we move into our second year of the pandemic.
- Academic support (tutoring, library services, etc.)
- Rebuilding ties to community
- Providing necessary training to faculty

Although Leech Lake Tribal College strives to meet the needs of its students (and the community), there are ongoing and growing challenges as we move into the second year of the pandemic. Students are struggling emotionally, mentally, physically, and financially while at the same time remaining dedicated to their academic goals; and the college continues to work at finding ways to reach out to the students. It is also important to note that many traditional and cultural methods that have been used in the past are not available, due to technological constraints and the need to protect our elders. Faculty and staff are feeling the strain of working in an entirely new environment. As detailed below, upgrading our facilities for safety without funding will be a huge challenge.

### **REQUEST: \$24 TCU IT Service Fund: USDA – Rural Utility Service**

The ongoing pandemic has exacerbated the digital divide and homework gap and underscored the lack of broadband access across Indian Country. To address these deficiencies, Congress should establish a *permanent TCU IT Service Fund* within the existing (and previously under-used) **USDA-Rural Utilities Service Program**. An annual \$24 million set-aside for TCUs, which are the 1994 Land-grant institutions, is needed to cover ongoing equipment costs, maintenance and upkeep, infrastructure expansion, and IT staffing. If TCUs had adequate funding for IT service and infrastructure support, they would have already put in place many of the community-based mobile hot spots needed to address the “homework gap” on many reservations.



### **Leech Lake Tribal College: Broadband and IT Challenges**

- A large percentage of Leech Lake Tribal College students do not have access to any internet, much less broadband. Many do not have cellular service so cannot rely on cellular data services.
- Leech Lake Tribal College’s Larry P. Aitken Library also serves as the community library, and many people used the library for internet access.
- Many of our classrooms use outdated technology that needs to be upgraded, not just now, but on a regular schedule.
- For many students, with limited exposure to the technology that is required for virtual learning, there are two learning curves that the student must negotiate: the academic learning curve of the classroom and the technological learning curve of how to navigate in a virtual learning environment.
- Providing IT services to students and staff and faculty continues to be a challenge



### **REQUEST: \$500 million TCU Construction Fund: DOI – Bureau of Indian Education**

A recent AIHEC survey of TCUs revealed a list of chronic facilities-related maintenance and rehabilitation needs, including student and faculty housing, classrooms, libraries, and laboratories. The TCUs have an estimated total need of \$489.75 million in deferred maintenance and rehabilitation and need \$837 million to fully implement existing master plans. A dedicated TCU deferred construction and maintenance/rehabilitation fund through the DOI-BIE would help meet the 21st century needs of *all* TCUs, including technology-enabled facilities; campus renovations; IT infrastructure; and facilities necessary for career, technical, and pipeline programs.

### **Leech Lake Tribal College: Facilities Needs -- Construction, Maintenance, Rehabilitation**

Facilities have always been an issue at Leech Lake Tribal College and the pandemic exacerbated facilities already stretched too thin. Our facilities personnel have worked diligently to provide safe and healthy spaces for the students when they return and for staff and faculty. While we have done as much as we can to make the facilities as safe for the community as possible, without funding for construction, there are shortfalls that we do not have the ability to address to adequately meet the demands that COVID-19 has placed upon us:

- Lack of office space that allows for safe social distancing
- Limited staff for COVID mitigation and recovery procedures
- HVAC filtration overworked due to unpaved parking lot and subsequent dust that clogs filtration intakes
- Many classroom spaces are too small to allow safe social distancing and would require major construction upgrades.
- Larger classrooms would need Plexiglas shields for students and faculty to be safe.
- No safe commons area for students, staff, or faculty to allow any form of safe social gathering.