



## Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity

JB Pritzker, Governor

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### GOV. PRITZKER ANNOUNCES ACCELERATE ILLINOIS INITIATIVE TO HELP COMMUNITIES PREPARE FOR BROADBAND INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT

*State's new cross-sector pilot, in collaboration with Heartland Forward and Benton Institute, to offer 14-week intensive planning session for communities leveraging federal and state infrastructure dollars*

SPRINGFIELD – Governor JB Pritzker and the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) [Office of Broadband](#) today announced a new planning and capacity building program to help Illinois communities leverage historic broadband infrastructure funding for community-driven broadband expansion. The Accelerate Illinois Broadband Infrastructure Planning Program – a collaborative effort by the Illinois Office of Broadband, Illinois-based Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, and University of Illinois Extension – will help local governments throughout Illinois receive expert support as they prepare to leverage new dollars that will be made available by the state as well as through the historic passage of the federal infrastructure program. The collaboration opportunity is made possible through the financial support of Heartland Forward and its Connecting the Heartland Initiative.

The Illinois Office of Broadband is calling on local units of government – particularly cities, counties, and multi-county regions – to apply to receive expert support offered as part of an intensive 14-week community engagement program designed to turn available public broadband funding into sustainable broadband access.

“Access to high speed, reliable internet is not a luxury – it’s a necessity for healthcare, success in school, and to compete in a 21<sup>st</sup> century economy,” **said Gov. Pritzker.** “Keeping our communities connected has never been more important than it is today and this pilot will help communities play a direct role in delivering broadband infrastructure improvements to close the gaps on service. With an historic amount of funding available thanks to our own Connect Illinois initiative and with new federal infrastructure dollars coming from Washington we are committed to reaching our goal of delivering universal broadband access across our state.”

“Access to high-speed, reliable internet is now one of the key pillars of equity in this country,” **said Lt. Governor Stratton.** “We must end these disparities and increase quality broadband for households and businesses across our state to ensure that every resident can tap into more resources for education, jobs, healthcare and more.”

Illinois communities stand to receive a significant amount of funding for broadband infrastructure enhancement, thanks to the recent passage of the \$1 trillion federal infrastructure plan. Additionally, the State

of Illinois has its own \$420 million capital plan, underway now, and funds available through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), which will soon be made available for communities to apply for. Community planning support offered through initiatives like Accelerate Illinois will help even the playing field so that more cities and counties – regardless of size or staffing – can prepare to submit for capital dollars to help transform broadband in their communities.

“Under Governor Pritzker’s leadership, we are committed to closing the digital divide in Illinois,” said **Sylvia I. Garcia, Acting Director of DCEO**. “To meet this goal, the State is not only mobilizing capital investments to improve broadband access, but also building capacity in communities by providing resources to develop and implement plans that will help guide local broadband improvements for years to come.”

The Accelerate Illinois program works to prepare communities for establishing and implementing a full-scale broadband connectivity vision. Through over 30 hours of no-cost expert counsel provided by the Benton Institute, the program offers structured engagement for communities to identify broadband goals, understand available funding options, and target capital dollars to support implementation.

“The Accelerate Illinois program builds on efforts we launched earlier this year in collaboration with the state’s Office of Broadband and other stakeholders, including a public awareness campaign for the FCC’s Emergency Broadband Benefit program to get affordable internet to those in need and placing four American Connection Corps fellows in Illinois communities to help advance high-speed internet access, adoption, and utilization. While the historic influx of federal funding for high-speed internet is welcome news in the fight to close the digital divide in Illinois and across the heartland, we have heard that many communities – especially smaller ones – are not prepared to take advantage of this opportunity to bring connectivity to their communities. Supporting local planning and capacity building is critical to making sure infrastructure dollars are spent efficiently and in the best interest of the communities they’re intended to help, and Heartland Forward is proud to play a part in this work,” said **Angie Cooper, Chief Program Officer for Heartland Forward**.

“Once-in-a-lifetime state and federal broadband infrastructure funding provides our communities with an unprecedented opportunity to eliminate the digital divide through community-driven broadband expansion and partnership,” said **Matt Schmit, Director of the Illinois Office of Broadband and Chair of the Illinois Broadband Advisory Council**. “Along with our program collaborators, the Illinois Office of Broadband is committed to helping communities seize this opportunity.”

The Accelerate Illinois [“Notice of Collaboration Opportunity”](#) is open now and accepting applications through December 30, 2021. The State expects to serve up to 12 communities as part of this initial pilot initiative.

“We are honored to collaborate with Illinois Office of Broadband and Heartland Forward to engage unserved and underserved communities in a planning and engagement process modeled after a successful program implemented by Blandin Foundation,” said **Adrienne B. Furniss, Executive Director of the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society**.

“Extending broadband connectivity to all corners of Illinois is like constructing a superhighway to integrate our state’s communities and residents into an evolving global economy and dynamic learning hub,” said **Joe McCoy, Executive Director of the Illinois State Association of Counties**. “Broadband expansion will break down existing barriers and help create opportunities for everyone. The Accelerate Illinois program will provide a roadmap to help counties and other communities utilize state and federal dollars to invest in digital equity. ISAC looks forward to working with the Pritzker administration to achieve this objective.”

Focus on local broadband planning and implementation has been a hallmark of Governor Pritzker's efforts to increase 21st century broadband and to help close the digital divide that has been further exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Immediately after taking office, Governor Pritzker launched Connect Illinois, an historic \$420 million investment in broadband infrastructure, designed to bring universal access to communities across Illinois. Since then, the Pritzker administration has invested approximately \$1 million in community planning and capacity building, through such programs as Illinois Connected Communities and Broadband READY: Regional Engagement for Adoption and Digital Equity.

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