Notice of Collaboration Opportunity
Illinois Connected Communities Program

2021 Illinois Connected Communities Program Application

<u>Up to 12 Applicants selected</u>
<u>Application period opens:</u> February 1, 2021
<u>Submission deadline:</u> April 1, 2021

✓ Prepare grant application

- **Read this entire NOFO document carefully**
- **Complete project analysis and gather all documentation**
- **Follow the format templates to complete the project cover sheet and application body**
- **Attach and label all application appendices correctly**

✓ Submit grant application

- **Submit the complete application package at any time during the open application period**
- **Applications that arrive after submission deadline will <u>not</u> be accepted**
- **Applications must be submitted in either electronic or paper copy form:**
  - ○ **One (1) electronic PDF copy submitted to broadband@illinois.gov by the application deadline OR**
  - ○ **Three (3) paper copies received by hand delivery or courier service or post marked by the application deadline, addressed to:**

    Illinois Office of Broadband
    Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity
    500 E. Monroe Street, 8th Floor
    Springfield, IL 62701

✓ Confirm receipt of your application

- **Email receipt via broadband@illinois.gov to confirm application submission**

✓ Any questions?

- **Contact the DCEO Office of Broadband team at 217-782-5968 or broadband@illinois.gov**
- Additional information regarding this grant program, including Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ), are available at: https://www2.illinois.gov/dceo/ConnectIllinois. The website, including FAQ, may be updated during the application window.

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A. GRANT PROGRAM INFORMATION

1. Background

The $400 million Connect Illinois Broadband Grant Program is an historic opportunity to improve broadband access throughout Illinois. The competitive matching grants will fund qualified applicants – such as providers, cooperatives, local governments, or public-private partnerships – beginning in 2020 and continuing through subsequent funding rounds in the years ahead.

As the largest state broadband competitive matching grant program ever, Connect Illinois seeks to achieve what no other state or federal approach has accomplished: ubiquitous broadband access to homes, business, and community anchor institutions in every corner of the state. In order to help Illinoisans both access and use broadband, the Illinois Office of Broadband offers related programming to add value to the state's infrastructure investment.

This "Notice of Collaboration Opportunity" recognizes that not all communities are prepared to take advantage of the Connect Illinois investment and that others could benefit from focus on complementary aspects of the digital divide, such as broadband adoption or utilization. Whatever a community's focus – and however prepared a community may be to set a broadband vision and take steps toward realizing that vision – the Illinois Connected Communities program is designed to promote community planning and capacity building around one or more aspects of an integrated broadband strategy.

2. Definitions

For purposes of the Illinois Connected Communities program, the terms broadband *access*, *adoption*, and *utilization* have the following meaning:

- **Broadband Access** refers to the availability of basic broadband service, currently defined by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) as wireline service of at least 25 megabits per second (Mbps) download and 3 Mbps upload.
- **Broadband Adoption** refers to daily access to the Internet: at speeds, quality and capacity necessary to accomplish common tasks; with the digital skills necessary to participate online; and on a personal device and secure, convenient network.
- **Broadband Utilization** refers to how broadband is used by individual households, businesses, or community anchor institutions – be it for improved quality of life, employment or commercial opportunities, economic development, or any number of related applications in areas such as distance learning, telehealth, or precision agriculture.

3. Program Description

The Illinois Connected Communities program seeks to provide qualified Illinois communities with resources and programming to engage in community broadband planning and capacity building for improved broadband access, adoption, and/or utilization.

To maximize the impact of the Connect Illinois broadband investment, this Notice of Collaboration Opportunity (NOCO) is designed to engage individual communities, inspire and support community

involvement in broadband planning, and build capacity in local leadership, resources, and informed engagement. Specifically, the competitive grant program will target funding and related programming to improve community planning and capacity building through cross-sector collaboration among the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (the Department, DCEO), the Illinois-based Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, and various philanthropic partners.

Awardees will comprise the 2021 Illinois Connected Communities cohort, which will participate in a combination of focused community-specific and cohort-wide activities throughout a period of up to 12 months in duration. Due to public health concerns over the Covid-19 pandemic, engagement may be entirely web-based. Whether online, in person, or a combination of the two, these activities will build toward creation of a community-driven Broadband Strategic Plan, and may include additional work in the following areas, with focus dependent upon a community's unique needs and interests:

- Community broadband leadership education
- Community and broadband provider market evaluation and/or engagement
- Discussion of technology choices, broadband funding and local-match options, and/or approaches to community-driven broadband access, adoption, and/or utilization.

A team of community broadband experts (Team) will lead the programming, which will leverage and build upon the program curriculum, resources, and instruction provided to all Illinois Connected Communities. In turn, each community will determine its own set of priorities and develop a plan that reflects these priorities. For instance, Illinois Connected Communities may prioritize broadband access and infrastructure as a means of preparing to take part in the Connect Illinois Broadband Grant program referenced above; likewise for preparation leading to participation in related programming opportunities in digital literacy, adoption, and inclusion.

In addition, the following is expected and required of the Illinois Connected Communities:

- Communities must have adequate capacity to participate actively over the course of the program, including providing leadership, project and Steering Committee management, event hosting, and grant administration.
- Communities must commit to recruiting and supporting an inclusive community Steering Committee that reflects community composition.
- Project managers and Steering Committee members must be able and willing to commit significant time and attention to planning and project development/implementation.
- Project managers and Steering Committee members must participate in select programming with other Illinois Connected Communities and state, regional, or in-community Team-led meetings.

At the end of the program, Illinois Connected Communities must complete a community-driven Broadband Strategic Plan that articulates the community's broadband vision and identifies an action plan for progress toward improved broadband access, adoption, and/or utilization that aligns, to the extent possible, with goals articulated in the statewide Connect Illinois Broadband Strategic Plan.

Notice of Collaboration Opportunity
Illinois Connected Communities Program

The Illinois Connected Communities program is designed, in part, to help communities plan for and participate in opportunities for expanded broadband access, adoption, and/or utilization – including as applicants or community partners to applicants seeking Connect Illinois Broadband Grant funding. Likewise, Illinois Connected Communities may have an opportunity to apply for a second year of funding specifically designated for community-driven efforts to promote digital literacy, adoption, and inclusion.

B. Funding Information

The Illinois Office of Broadband may award membership in the Illinois Connected Communities program as a non-monetary award to eligible Applicants. Additional complementary programming and non-monetary resources may be available for member communities.

The release of this NOCO does not obligate the Department to provide programming to any applicant.

C. Eligibility Information

1. Eligible Applicants. Eligible applicants for this program include any of the following Illinois-based entities serving Illinoisans: local governments; libraries; schools; churches; or similarly oriented nonprofit organizations, including institutions of higher education.

The Department complies with all applicable provisions of state and federal laws and regulations pertaining to nondiscrimination, sexual harassment and equal employment opportunity including, but not limited to: The Illinois Human Rights Act (775 ILCS 5/1-101 et seq.), The Public Works Employment Discrimination Act (775 ILCS 10/1 et seq.), The United States Civil Rights Act of 1964 (as amended) (42 USC 2000a-and 2000H-6), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 USC 794), The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (42 USC 12101 et seq.), and The Age Discrimination Act (42 USC 6101 et seq.).

2. Eligible Project Areas. The definition of "community" is flexible and subject to applicant definition, likely adhering to the jurisdictional boundaries of an eligible applicant/applicant partner.

D. Application Submittal Information

1. Address to Request Application Packet. Application forms are available at the web link provided in the "Grant Application Link" field of this announcement or by contacting the Program Manager:

> Illinois Office of Broadband
> Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity
> 500 E. Monroe Street, 8th Floor
> Springfield, IL 62701
> Phone: 217-782-5968
> Email: broadband@illinois.gov

Notice of Collaboration Opportunity
Illinois Connected Communities Program

2. Content and Form of Application Submittal Information. Completed applications and all required supporting documentation – including one (1) electronic PDF copy submitted to broadband@illinois.gov.

The paper copies of the completed application packages with all associated documentation must fit on 8.5" x 11" paper. This size restriction includes all paper copy versions of maps and tables.

A standard application package must be submitted to and reviewed by DCEO. Each package must contain the following items:

> a. Cover Letter
>
> b. Application Information
>
> c. Uniform Application in fillable PDF format. (print, sign and scan signature page with submission)
>
> d. Conflict of Interest Disclosure
>
> e. Mandatory Disclosures

3. Submittal Dates and Times. The Illinois Connected Communities program application window will open upon publication of this NOCO.

All applications must be received on or before the application deadline of:
April 1, 2021.

Failure to meet the application deadline may result in the Department returning application without review or may preclude the Department from making the award

4. Submittal Address. Application materials must be submitted to the Department via electronic PDF copy submitted to broadband@illinois.gov by the application deadline.

Files containing Application packets and supporting documents that are too large to send via standard email may be shared using the CMS data sharing link (https://filet.illinois.gov/filet/pimupload.asp). This link provides a secure platform to transfer large files to Illinois employees. Applicants must confirm receipt of the application and documents by contacting the program contact listed in this NOCO.

Electronic submissions including links to documents stored in Google Docs or other cloud-based servers are not allowed.

5. Submission Confirmation. Please email the Illinois Office of Broadband at broadband@illinois.gov to confirm that each complete application package has been mailed or delivered for receipt on or before submission deadline.

E. Merit Review, Criteria & Selection (100 points possible)

1. Merit Review. The Illinois Office of Broadband will award grants to projects that help advance the Connect Illinois vision through community broadband planning and capacity building. Applications will be reviewed and evaluated by a merit-based review Committee led by the Illinois Office of Broadband and consisting of other program Team members. This Committee will use the following criteria and associated point values (100 points possible) to assist in systematically scoring applications and awarding grants. These criteria will be applied to information provided by the Applicant in response to the requirements of this NOFO. To ensure that an application receives the highest possible scoring, please be sure to provide complete and comprehensive responses for all information requested.

The team will strive to achieve geographic balance throughout the state in awarding grants. As a result, applications may be considered on a regional basis per the 10 designated state economic development regions of Illinois, a map of which is available at: https://www2.illinois.gov/dceo/ConnectIllinois.

To be considered a qualified applicant, an organization must comply with all of the specifications and respond to all items listed within the application instructions.

2. Scoring Criteria. Applications will be evaluated on the following criteria:

- The level of commitment and appropriate skills of the lead organization to manage the local program, and the ability to serve as the fiscal agent.
- The commitment of the lead organization to recruiting an inclusive project steering committee, including underserved and underrepresented populations, and following processes to ensure all voices are heard.
- The commitment to be actively engaged participants at multiple program-sponsored events over the program period.
- The level of demonstrated support from key community organizations, including local government, chamber of commerce and/or economic development groups, school districts, health care providers, libraries and others.
- The level of demonstrated need for improved broadband access, adoption, and/or utilization.

3. Selection Process. Applications will be graded using the merit-based review process and scored on the criteria specified herein. The Department will designate a merit-based review Committee to grade each application received for this funding opportunity. The final score of each Committee member will be calculated and an average of all scores will be the final grantee score. Each applicant will then be ranked by their score.

The Merit Based Review process is subject to appeal. However, competitive grant appeals are limited to the evaluation process. Evaluation scores may not be protested. Only the evaluation process is subject to appeal. The appeal must be submitted in writing to the Department within 14 calendar days after the date that the grant award notice has been published. The written appeal shall include the name and address of the appealing party, the identification of the grant and a statement of reasons for the appeal.

To file an appeal, applicants must submit the appeal in writing and in accordance with the Merit-Based Application Review Appeals Process listed on the Grant Opportunities page of the DCEO website: https://www2.illinois.gov/dceo/AboutDCEO/GrantOpportunities/Pages/MeritAppReview.aspx.

F. AWARD ADMINISTRATION INFORMATION: STATE AWARD NOTICES

Upon completion of the merit-based review process, the Illinois Office of Broadband will notify all Applicants of the merit review determination. A list of successful Applicants will be posted to: https://www2.illinois.gov/dceo/ConnectIllinois.

Appendix: Grant Application Instructions

Applications should be no longer than eight pages (excluding Applicant biographies, financial statements, other legal documents, and letters of support) and contain the following information:

1. Cover letter that introduces the applicant, defines the "community," and makes a clear link between the community's broadband aspirations and:

    a. The goals of the Illinois Connected Communities program – including preference for program curriculum focused on broadband *access, adoption,* and/or *utilization* (if known and/or applicable.)

    b. The vision articulated in statewide Connect Illinois Broadband Strategic Plan.

    In addition, the cover letter should note if the Applicant expects to apply for or partner to apply for separate Connect Illinois Broadband Grant funds and/or program funding for digital literacy, adoption, and inclusion. [Note: application to additional Connect Illinois programming is not required to take part in the Illinois Connected Communities program.]

2. Applicant Information

    a. Complete contact information, including Applicant name, primary contact name, title, address, email address, phone number, website address, and federal ID number.

    b. Summary of Applicant's history, including the date established or incorporated.

    c. Summary of Applicant's mission and goals.

    d. List of the Applicant's key project staff and leadership team, including brief bios and qualifications relevant to the Illinois Connected Communities program.

    e. Description of Applicant's current broadband-related programs or activities, including any service statistics and strengths or accomplishments (if applicable).

3. Community Description

   a. Define the geographical area of your community.

   b. Describe community and economic development priorities and current efforts around these priorities.

   c. Preview the opportunities and challenges that exist in the community, and how they might be addressed through the Illinois Connected Communities program.

4. Anticipated Focus

   a. Describe the opportunities and challenges that exist in the community, and how they might be addressed through the Illinois Connected Communities program.

   b. If applicable, describe preference for curriculum focused on *access, adoption,* and/or *utilization*. For instance, does the Applicant expect to apply for or partner to apply for separate Connect Illinois Broadband Grant funds and/or program funding for digital literacy, adoption, and inclusion?

   c. Other information regarding how the Applicant and Community expect to benefit through participation in the Illinois Connected Community program.

5. Description of supporting organization(s), affiliated companies, strategic partners or joint ventures (if applicable). This should include: legal name, mission statement, services and programs, addresses, and staff contacts.

   a. List and describe the local/regional organizations that have provided letters of support and participation.

6. Letters of support or other attachments.