



# State Of Illinois Announces \$300,000 Public Private Investment To Support Community-driven Broadband Plans

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CHICAGO – The Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) Office of Broadband today announced the first recipients of the *Illinois Connected Communities* grant program, created to assist some of the most underserved areas of the state with building broadband capacity. Through cross-sector collaboration, this new program directs \$150,000 in state-funded small grants for 12 community and local government partners to lead the development of strategic plans to ensure access, adoption, and utilization of high-speed broadband in their communities. The state grants will be paired with \$150,000 in philanthropic matching funds.

These grants will help lay the groundwork for individual communities to play a part in Governor Pritzker’s ambitious statewide high-speed internet expansion, Connect Illinois, a \$420 million program to bring basic access to all communities by 2024.

“For too long, too many of our neighborhoods and towns and counties and communities have been left out of the digital revolution and, in an increasingly competitive global economy, we simply cannot afford to leave any Illinoisan behind when it comes to high speed connectivity. This is about the right of all our communities to access health care, education, and economic opportunity,” said Governor JB Pritzker. “The grants announced today will deliver real opportunities to Illinois residents and help us reach our goal of delivering near-ubiquitous broadband access to every corner of Illinois in the coming years.”

The first Illinois Connected Communities cohort includes four school districts, two community-based organizations, two local governments, two county-level organizations, and two economic development groups.



“Now more than ever, access to reliable high-speed internet is a necessary tool for our communities to support their residents and businesses in competing in an ever-changing and increasingly digital world,” said Michael Negron, acting Director of the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity. “The inaugural Illinois Connected Communities cohort taps a diverse group of local organizations, school districts and governments and empowers them to forge their own community-based broadband vision and strategic plans for transformative broadband progress.”

*Illinois Connected Communities* is a partnership among the Illinois Office of Broadband, the Evanston-based Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, and local philanthropy. The program is designed to engage a first-year cohort of communities through best practice curriculum, expert consultation, and a state grant of up to \$15,000. The initial cohort includes the following organizations leading community-wide initiatives:

- Brown County School District 1
- City of Harvey
- Housing Authority of Champaign County
- Leadership Council Southwestern Illinois
- Mattoon School District 2
- McKinley Park Development Council
- Mercer County Better Together
- Neighborhood Network Alliance
- Palatine School District 15
- Park Forest-Chicago Heights School District 163
- Region 1 Planning Council (Winnebago County and City of Rockford)
- Village of Flanagan

“I was very impressed by the breadth of organizations that applied, the articulation of their challenges, and the passion they exhibited to engage a variety of stakeholders in the *Illinois Connected Communities* process,” said Adrienne B. Furniss, Executive Director of the Benton Institute. “These grants will support our communities to think through broadband strategies and goals that will work best for them, inspire broad community involvement, and engage more stakeholders in building broadband capacity.”

Local philanthropic contributions raised to date will support more than 50 hours of free expert consultation and best-practice curriculum for each of the twelve *Illinois Connected Communities*. Guidance will include assisting communities to define their technology goals; measuring current levels of broadband access, adoption, and use; and seeking technical assistance and other funds to meet community needs.



“Reliable and equitable broadband access for everyone in Illinois is critical to democracy because it permits all to participate in the civic life of our state and nation,” said Jim McDonough, Executive Director at Alphawood Foundation. “This is essential to maintaining a strong and vibrant society. Alphawood Foundation is proud to be a part of the *Illinois Connected Communities* initiative through our long-standing support of the Benton Institute for Broadband and Society.”

By the end of the 12-month program, each *Illinois Connected Community* will have completed a community-driven, broadband strategic plan that articulates the community’s broadband vision and identifies an action plan for progress toward improved broadband access in the areas of community and economic development, education, civic engagement, healthcare, agriculture, and more.

"The City of Harvey applied because digital equity and inclusion is a priority that we share with Governor J.B Pritzker," said City of Harvey Mayor Christopher Clark. "We believe broadband access is just as important as utilities like water, gas, and electricity. Harvey has been on the wrong side of the digital divide. This grant gives us the opportunity – and the strategy – to right that wrong. We are excited to partner with DCEO and the Benton Institute's experts to devise a community-led strategy for our city."

The Notice of Funding Opportunity was announced with Governor Pritzker during the launch of the Office of Broadband’s Developing Broadband Leadership webinar series on May 10. Applications were accepted through June 16, considered on a competitive basis, and scored by a merit review team comprised of technical experts and community and economic development professionals.

“In light of the recent COVID shut down of schools and many public services that are important to daily life, the fact that quality connectivity is absolutely vital for a community to thrive has become clearly evident,” said Superintendent Vicki Phillips of Brown County School District. “Brown County is known for thriving, not just surviving, but without availability of quality access to the world through broadband, thriving is not possible. We thank local philanthropy that has helped make this program possible, the Benton Institute, and the Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity for the funding to move this work forward.”

The implementation of broadband strategic plans builds on concerted efforts by the Pritzker administration to increase broadband capacity and is critical for the economic growth of Illinois communities in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Just last month, Governor Pritzker launched an historic \$50 million investment in broadband infrastructure, which pairs \$65 million in nonstate matching to deliver high-speed reliable access to more than 26,000 homes, farms and businesses. This initial investment



is part of the Governor's 4-year plan, Connect Illinois, to bring universal access to communities across Illinois. Connect Illinois contemplates a second round of grants later this year.