



Governor Pritzker Announces Commitment To Digital Equity With \$750,000 Investment To Expand Access And Adoption Of High-speed Internet

November 17 2020 2:36 PM



CHICAGO – Governor JB Pritzker and the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) Office of Broadband today announced a new Digital Equity Package, enlisting state, local, nonprofit and philanthropic support to address gaps in digital access, adoption, and affordability for high-speed internet access. The comprehensive approach is designed to help communities identify and address existing broadband equity gaps, as well as to leverage new and existing sources of funding for long-term broadband equity. New plans to spearhead digital equity for Illinois build on Governor Pritzker’s bold Connect Illinois program, a \$420 million investment to bring universal access throughout the state by 2024.

Today’s announcement directs an initial \$750,000 to advance these goals through complementary grants and programming to promote broadband planning and capacity

building and to aid in the creation of the nation's first integrated statewide network for improving digital equity and inclusion – namely, by addressing gaps in household access to computing devices, hotspot connectivity, and digital literacy skills.

“High speed broadband internet is an absolute necessity for economic progress and educational attainment, but too many of our towns and counties and communities have been left out of the digital revolution, especially downstate. It is time for that to change. To accomplish our goals, we need resources and expertise,” said Governor JB Pritzker. “As part of our bipartisan Rebuild Illinois capital plan, the state is making a historic \$420 million investment in expanding broadband capacity and connectivity. The funding opportunities announced today will help launch a statewide effort to address inequities in our digital landscape and give Illinoisans the opportunity to dictate what investments are needed in their communities.”

To create an ecosystem of digital equity and inclusion, the State of Illinois will prioritize a series of grants and related programming to complement its ongoing capital investments to ensure the provision of affordable in-home broadband service and access to personal computers, digital literacy training, and ongoing technical support. The Pritzker administration will work alongside public, private, nonprofit, and philanthropic partners to raise capital and awareness to the digital equity challenges facing communities.

“High speed internet access is essential for our Illinois economy and in our everyday lives – and is made even more essential today as many Illinois families are learning and working from home,” said Erin B. Guthrie, Director of the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, (DCEO). “DCEO is proud to join Governor Pritzker and community and regional partners in launching this groundbreaking new initiative that will ensure the community is at the helm as we work to create a roadmap for digital equity and to drive broadband implementation in a way that levels the playing field for all Illinoisans.”

The announcement opens application windows for three complementary opportunities – for funding and collaboration – involving regional broadband equity evaluation and engagement, community broadband planning and capacity building, and locally-integrated “digital navigator” development.

Broadband READY Grants - \$250,000

A collaborative effort between the Illinois Office of Broadband and the Illinois Innovation Network, the Broadband Regional Engagement for Adoption + Digital Equity (READY) grants will direct \$250,000 to qualified regional entities statewide to explore opportunities for equitable advances in the areas of broadband access, adoption, and utilization. Grant awards of up to \$50,000 will identify current digital inequities as

well as next steps in creating a digital inclusion ecosystem through regional collaboration among community and economic development organizations, education, local leaders, and other related stakeholders. The program seeks to provide scalable solutions for broadband utilization across all ten Illinois economic development regions – including pressing needs such as telehealth and remote learning. The Illinois Innovation Network will contribute \$100,000 to support the effort, which will leverage emerging resources in statewide computer refurbishing and digital navigator capacity. [Click here](#) for the NOFO.

“As we have all realized during this tumultuous year, reliable high-speed internet access has become a core need of daily life,” said University of Illinois System Vice President for Economic Development and Innovation Jay Walsh, who leads the Illinois Innovation Network (IIN). “IIN hubs, which are primarily public universities, can play a key role in connecting key stakeholders in their regions to best practices for broadband access, adoption, and utilization through the Broadband READY program. Not only will Illinois have a robust broadband infrastructure, but we can also determine the best ways to use it to grow the state’s economy and improve our residents’ quality of life.”

Illinois Connected Communities Grants - \$150,000

A partnership by the Office of Broadband, the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, and local philanthropic organizations, the Illinois Connected Communities (ICC) program was first launched in the summer of 2020 to help drive community planning and capacity building. A total of \$150,000 in second round state funding, combined with philanthropic dollars that underwrites the cost of expert consultative services, and access to best practice curriculum, will be made available to assist local governments, libraries, schools, and various local organizations with planning and progress around broadband access, adoption, and utilization.

A first round of state grant funding, combined with a philanthropic match, was directed to 12 community-based organizations in July to assist with planning to ensure access, adoption, and utilization of high-speed broadband. This latest round will allow communities to apply for up to \$15,000 in grants that will support community based broadband planning and capacity building. [Click here](#) for the NOFO.

“One of the many rationales for standing up the Illinois Connected Communities program was to give communities a comprehensive set of options for ‘next steps’ in their broadband journey,” said Benton Institute Executive Director Adrienne B. Furniss. “In addition to Connect Illinois infrastructure grants, the ICC cohort will now have additional pathways to realize their community-driven broadband strategic plans with the digital equity programs the Governor and DCEO are announcing today.”

Digital Navigator Collaboration

To support community digital equity needs, the Office of Broadband will partner with the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) and PCs for People to establish digital navigator capacity within communities around the state. Navigators will work to address the digital inclusion process – including home connectivity, devices, and digital skills. Digital navigators will assess residents' needs and connect with them to resources that match their households' lifestyles. These navigators can be volunteers or cross-trained staff who already work in social service agencies, libraries, healthcare, and more and who will offer remote and socially distant in-person guidance. A cohort of qualified applicants will be provided with expert training as well as the opportunity to work directly with project partners on resource establishment and digital equity mapping. [Click here](#) for the NOCO.

“That so many communities within one state will have the support they need to create plans and implement digital navigator programs is incredible,” said National Digital Inclusion Alliance Executive Director Angela Siefer. “The State of Illinois is creating a model that will inspire and encourage other states and regions. NDIA is honored to be supporting the State of Illinois in their multi-pronged approach to address digital equity.”

The implementation of the comprehensive Digital Equity Package 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. Earlier this year, Governor Pritzker launched an historic \$50 million investment in broadband infrastructure, which pairs \$65 million in nonstate matching funds for a total of \$115 million for high-speed reliable access to more than 26,000 homes, farms, and businesses. A second \$50 million round of Connect Illinois funding was announced in October, with an application window of December 1, 2020 – March 1, 2021. This initial investment is part of the Governor's 4-year plan to bring universal access to communities across Illinois.