



Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity

JB Pritzker, Governor

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Contact:

Lauren Huffman, Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity

lauren.huffman@illinois.gov

STATE OF ILLINOIS AND PHILANTHROPIC PARTNERS ANNOUNCE \$150,000 IN GRANTS TO SUPPORT LOCAL BROADBAND PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

Illinois Connected Communities program combines innovative public-private partnership and community engagement to increase broadband access, adoption, and utilization across Illinois

SPRINGFIELD – The Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) Office of Broadband today announced its second cohort of the **Illinois Connected Communities** grant program, created to assist some of the most underserved areas of the state with building broadband capacity. Through a unique cross-sector collaboration, participating communities will have the opportunity to embark on a 12-month program to help them complete a community-driven, broadband strategic plan. To help communities improve broadband access and utilization, the State and its partners are providing up to \$15,000 in state-funded small grants, access to best-practice curriculum, and more than 50 hours of consultation and community planning facilitation.

“My plan to deliver broadband infrastructure to every corner of Illinois by 2024 requires an ambitious, all-hands-on-deck approach, and the Illinois Connected Communities program is a vital asset in closing the digital equity gap,” **said Governor JB Pritzker**. “I’m proud to have another eight organizations and institutions join our growing team. In the 21st century, access to health care, education, and economic opportunity rely on digital connectivity. The time is now to bring high speed internet access to the front doors of all Illinoisans.”

Following a successful initial cohort supporting 12 communities in developing broadband strategic plans, the second round of *Illinois Connected Communities* will support three local governments, two community-based organizations, a school district, a county-level organization, and a regional economic development organization. The second cohort includes the following organizations leading community-wide initiatives:

- City of Carrollton
- City of Waukegan
- Community Builders
- Fairmont City
- Greater Peoria EDC (Tazewell County)
- Internet Freedom for McHenry Co
- North Chicago CUSD 187

- The Center: Resources for Teaching and Learning/Latinx Digital Leaders Now (DLN)

“Access to reliable high-speed internet is a critical tool for our communities to compete in a 21st century economy,” said **Sylvia Garcia, Director of the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity**. “Under Governor Pritzker’s leadership, DCEO and the Illinois Office of Broadband are proud to provide a second round of funding for this unique program that supports transformative community driven planning to grow local broadband implementation.”

All Round 2 *Illinois Connected Communities* participants will receive extensive support from the State and its partners to facilitate broadband planning, including 50+ hours of consultation and facilitation. 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.

“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**. “We share Governor Pritzker’s vision for expanding universal access by bringing communities directly to the table as we work to build 21st century broadband capacity, engage more people in adopting new technology, and use broadband to deliver on larger community goals in education, healthcare, economic equality, civic engagement, and more.”

Five organizations will receive funding allowing them to facilitate community engagement and planning sessions. ICC round 2 leverages a total of \$75,000 in state grant funding against \$75,000 in philanthropic matching funds to support the essential expert consultation and best-practice curriculum for each community. Philanthropic support is provided by Evanston-based Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, and other local philanthropy. Their contributions, alongside state funds, will help participating communities 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.”

“The Center and Digital Leaders Now applied because digital equity and inclusion is a priority that we share with Governor J.B Pritzker,” said **DLN Founder/CEO Caroline Sanchez Crozier, The Center: Resources for Teaching and Learning/Latinx Digital Leaders Now (DLN)**. “We believe broadband access is just as important as utilities like water, gas, and electricity. Our Latino community has been on the wrong side of the digital divide. This grant gives us the opportunity – and the strategy – to take action. 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 as part of the Illinois Office of Broadband’s digital equity package in November 2020. Applications were considered on a competitive basis and scored by a merit review team comprised of technical experts and community and economic development professionals.

“With COVID-19 placing unfathomable challenges for those at work, in school and in our daily lives, it evident that broadband access planning is absolutely vital for any community,” **said CEO Chris Setti of Greater Peoria Economic Development Council.** “The Peoria community is a leader in innovation, and the Illinois Connected Communities program will take our efforts to bring internet household to every community in our area to the next level. We thank local philanthropy that has helped make this program possible, the Benton Institute, and the Illinois Office of Broadband for prioritizing community involvement and for providing to move this important work forward.”

The initial cohort of Illinois Connected Communities has concluded its work, including their respective broadband strategic plans. The Illinois Office of Broadband and Benton Institute will continue to provide internal support to help these communities put their plans into action.

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 equity gap 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. Last year, the Pritzker administration took action to invest \$750,000 in local capacity building programs, which included ICC Round 2, the READY community navigator grants program and the digital navigator collaboration program.

These grants will help lay the groundwork for individual communities to make smart investments with broadband-eligible funds included in the American Rescue Plan Act and to participate in Governor Pritzker’s ambitious statewide high-speed internet expansion, Connect Illinois, a \$420 million program to bring basic access to all communities. Earlier this month, the State joined civic organization, Heartland Forward, and community partners in calling attention to the Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) program, launched by the FCC and making \$3.2 billion available to make internet service more affordable and accessible for qualifying low-income families. Illinois residents, schools and communities can seek more information on the program by visiting <https://www.fcc.gov/broadbandbenefit> .

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