

# GENERATION WEST VIRGINIA

## **Request for Information**

*for*

*Partnership for Federal Grant Funding and  
Deployment of High-Speed Broadband in  
West Virginia*

*Issued: May 21, 2021*

# Contents

- Contents** **2**
- 1. Overview** **3**
- 2. Background** **3**
- 3. Opportunity Outlook** **4**
  - 3.1 NTIA’s Broadband Expansion Grant Program 4
  - 3.2 Connecting Minority Communities Pilot Program 5
- 4. Goals of the RFI** **6**
- 5. RFI Response Requests** **6**
- 6. Response Process** **7**
  - 6.1 Deadline 7
  - 6.2 Submission 7
  - 6.3 Questions 7

# 1. Overview

Generation West Virginia (GWV), in coordination with and support from the West Virginia Broadband Enhancement Council and the State Broadband Office, is requesting information from Internet Service Providers (ISPs) that have interest in developing partnerships with local communities to expand high-speed broadband access in West Virginia. GWV works with a team of expert grant-writers and broadband consultants aiming to increase the number and amount of federal broadband awards that we bring back to the Mountain State. The goal of this RFI is to identify potential ISP partners and match them with interested communities to facilitate partnerships that can pursue and leverage federal broadband funding opportunities. Projects that are selected to match with local community stakeholders are eligible for full grant-writing services and assistance.

## 2. Background

Generation West Virginia (GWV) is a statewide nonprofit dedicated to attracting, retaining, and advancing young people in the Mountain State. Since 2015, GWV has identified broadband access as an organizational priority to accomplish this mission as the foundational infrastructure for economic-, educational-, and community-development advancement needed for more of the next generation to be able to work, live, and thrive in the Mountain State.

In 2020, GWV, in partnership with the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation, launched the Locally Driven Broadband Solutions Initiative. In response to the increasing opportunities for federal funding available for broadband infrastructure deployment, GWV serves as a capacity-building partner to support communities in leveraging and securing these funds to identify and build out projects to increase internet access. As local communities seek to improve access to broadband, GWV provides wrap-around technical assistance and process-navigation support, offering grant writing, strategic planning, and partnership development resources. GWV works closely with local governments, regional planning and development councils, and nonprofits throughout the state to identify and refine opportunities for broadband deployment and federal broadband funding to support those deployments.

A key role that GWV plays in West Virginia's broadband ecosystem is that of partnership facilitator for county and local governments and other public entities. This Request for Information (RFI) seeks to identify potential partners that are interested in collaborating with public entities in the state to pursue federal broadband funding and deploy broadband. The goal is for GWV to facilitate successful partnerships, help partnerships

secure federal grant funding, and ultimately support high-speed broadband expansion in West Virginia. Projects that are selected to match with local community stakeholders are eligible for full grant-writing services and assistance.

## 3. Opportunity Outlook

The present moment represents a historic opportunity for federal broadband funding. In particular, GWV has identified two federal grant programs—both enacted by the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 and set to be administered by the Department of Commerce’s National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA)—that could enable partnerships for broadband deployment in West Virginia. This RFI is primarily oriented towards these funding opportunities<sup>1</sup> as they are anticipated to be first out of the gate with developing grant guidelines and making funding available. However, GWV anticipates other federal funding opportunities to be available in the near future, including from the recently passed American Rescue Plan Act and future infrastructure and stimulus funding.

### 3.1 NTIA’s Broadband Expansion Grant Program

**This \$288 million program is intended to support partnerships between a state or local jurisdiction of a state and a service provider capable of providing fixed broadband service. This public/private partnership approach is meant to enable fast deployment of proposed projects while benefiting as many potential customers as possible.**

NTIA released official program rules and simultaneously opened the application window on May 19.

Applications will be accepted until August 17, 2021, and all grant funds must be expended within a year of award.

The grants will be highly competitive; NTIA’s rules will define a scoring system where ‘priority’ will be given to project proposals that:

- Are designed to provide broadband service to the greatest number of households in an eligible service area
- Will focus on rural areas (this doesn’t rule out a non-rural proposal)
- Demonstrate that they are the most cost effective, with rural projects being put at the front of the line

---

<sup>1</sup> For up to date information on the status of these programs, visit:  
<https://broadbandusa.ntia.doc.gov/resources/grant-programs>

- Are designed to provide service of not less than 100/20 Mbps

These priorities do not rule out other project proposals that do not meet one or all of the priorities; however, any proposal not addressing some or all of the priorities will have less chance at an award.

Finally, applying for this program should not impact applications to other broadband programs for the applicant entity. (That likely is not the case for the proposed project area, however. Applicants will be required to include detailed information about other funding support for which they have applied with regard to the area included in the application.)

The law did outline some important prohibitions to take into consideration as well. Grant funds cannot be used as collateral on loans, nor can they be used to repay or make payments related to a loan. Additionally, if awarded, no more than \$50,000 may be utilized to pay for grant application preparation costs.

## **3.2 Connecting Minority Communities Pilot Program**

**The \$285 million Connecting Minority Communities Pilot Program will provide grant funding to eligible recipients to purchase broadband or eligible equipment, or to hire and train IT personnel. Entities eligible to receive grants through this program include:**

- Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU), such as West Virginia State University and Bluefield State College
- Tribal colleges and universities (TCU)
- Minority-serving institutions (MSI), which include Hispanic-serving institutions (HSI); Alaska Native-serving institutions (ANSI); Native Hawaiian-serving institutions (NHSI); Predominantly Black institutions (PBI); American and Native American Pacific Islander-serving institutions (AANAPISI); and Native American-serving, nontribal institutions (NASNTI)
- A consortium led by an HBCU, TCUs, HSIs or MSI, that also includes a minority business enterprise or a nonprofit organization in the anchor community

Of the total awards given through the program, at least 40 percent of grants must be made to HBCUs, and at least 20 percent of grants must be made to HBCUs, TCUs, and other minority serving institutions to provide broadband service or equipment to their students. Eligible equipment includes Wi-Fi hotspots; modem, routers, or combined modem/routers; laptops, tablets, or similar internet-connected devices; and any other equipment used to provide broadband.

For higher education recipients, grants are intended to support instruction and learning, including remote learning. For minority business enterprises and nonprofits, grants are intended to support the operation of the organization. Educational institutions that receive a grant to support student connectivity must prioritize students that are eligible to receive the Pell Grant; receive need-based financial aid from the federal government, state, or the institution; qualify for the FCC's Lifeline program; earn less than 150% of the federal poverty line; or have been approved to receive unemployment insurance since March 1, 2020.

NTIA is expected to release official program rules and simultaneously open the application window at some point this summer.

## 4. Goals of the RFI

**The primary goal of this RFI is to identify ISPs that are interested in developing partnerships with local or county governments and other public entities to apply for NTIA broadband funding, and to develop and deploy broadband projects.** GWV seeks to facilitate successful partnerships, help partnerships secure federal grant funding, and ultimately support broadband deployment in West Virginia. Projects that are selected to match with local community stakeholders are eligible for full grant-writing services and assistance.

Because the application windows for both programs are expected to open this summer, and because the application windows will be a short 90 days, GWV is seeking responses from entities that have or could identify one or more projects that would be shovel-ready by the third quarter of 2021. Ideal applications for the NTIA Partnership program will propose projects that are 'shovel ready' and could, without roadblocks, be completed in approximately a year (the programs will allow for extension if needed).

*Note: Two nine-county regions<sup>2</sup> (see footnote for list) are the primary target for GWV's broadband support activities. Projects submitted outside of those regions will still be evaluated and supported in partnership development and reviewed for additional grant-writing assistance on an individual basis.*

## 5. RFI Response Requests

GWV is interested in as much of the following information as respondents are comfortable sharing (GWV can sign a mutual non-disclosure agreement if desired) to learn more about respondents and how they might be a good match with GWV's public sector partners:

---

<sup>2</sup> Priority counties include: Boone, McDowell, Logan, Mercer, Wyoming, Lincoln, Kanawha, Mingo, Wayne, Pocahontas, Preston, Webster, Tucker, Grant, Greenbrier, Randolph, Pendleton, Nicholas

- A. Cover Letter: Please include company name, address of corporate headquarters, address of nearest local office, contact name for response, and that person's contact information (address, phone, cell, email).
- B. Interest in Funding Opportunity: Please indicate which of the two grant opportunities described in section 3 your company may have interest in pursuing.
- C. Project Information: To the extent possible and appropriate, please provide the following as related to any projects of interest to your organization that might be a good fit for the relevant funding opportunities described in section 3:
  - a. A brief description of the potential project's scope and geography
  - b. A high-level overview of the project's technological and operational approach
  - c. The service options you intend to offer over this network
  - d. The potential project's timeline, including when the project would be able to be initiated and the project's duration
  - e. Services: Please describe the service options you plan to offer over this network.

## 6. Response Process

### 6.1 Deadline

Please submit responses by **Friday, June 11, 2021.**

### 6.2 Submission

Please submit your response via email to [broadband@generationwv.org](mailto:broadband@generationwv.org).

### 6.3 Questions

Questions related to this RFI should be emailed to [broadband@generationwv.org](mailto:broadband@generationwv.org) no later than **Friday June 2, 2021** and the project manager, John Golden, or GWV's Executive Director, Natalie Roper, will be in touch with you.