

**DOC-NTIA-OTIA (US)
Infrastructure Transcript**

**Moderator: Laura Spining
Speakers: Gilbert Resendez, Sarah Bleau, Karen Perry
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Laura Spining: 0:12 Good afternoon. I wanted to be sure, and bring to your attention to a slide that you should be seeing, which is explaining an audio difficulty that we have recently learned about.

0:28 You likely will not be able to hear the presentation today if you're on phone audio. As in if you called in for phone audio, and so we would encourage you, if you'd like to listen, you'll need to download the GoToWebinar app and follow the instructions on the screen here, I hope that helps, and apologies again. We wish we didn't have this issue, and that we can make it available for folks who need to use phone audio for a number of different reasons, and we appreciate your patience with us and thanks for joining us today.

2:39 All right. So, I'm seeing a number of people joining us this afternoon, or morning, depending on where you are. And I just want to, again, bring to your attention an issue that we have only recently validated, which is that our webinar presentation can't be heard if you're on phone audio only. And so, in order to hear the presentation, you will need to download the GoToWebinar. And that should be pretty easy from either Google Play or the iPhone App Store. So, we'll give it just another minute in case people need to do that, before we start. We are here, and we're looking forward to sharing information about this program today, and appreciate your patience. Thank you.

3:59 Good morning or afternoon as the case may be, and thank you for joining the Broadband USA webinar Series on NTIA's Broadband Grant Programs. Today's webinar is going to be on the broadband infrastructure program.

4:15 I'm going to get us started first by going through some housekeeping items and most important is that everybody is in listen only mode. So, if you have questions or comments throughout the presentation, please put them in the Q&A box. That's in the GoToWebinar menu box to the right of your screen.

4:37

We will be taking questions at the end of the presentations and I'll try to address those that I can throughout my colleagues' presentations. Also, the presentation, a recording, and a transcript from today's webinar, will be available on our website within one week of today, so, by next Wednesday, May 5th, we will definitely have this information up and we are making every effort to get it up before then.

5:06

All right. We have a fantastic lineup of speakers today, including my boss, Mr. Douglas Kinkoph, who serves as the associate administrator for the Office of Telecommunication and Information Applications at NTIA.

5:21

Internally, we refer to ourselves as NTIA's broadband team, Doug spent the better part of 2019 and 2020, serving as the administrator for NTIA. And prior to joining NTIA, Doug spent most of his career in private industry at XO, NextLink, and at Sound Path and has extensive knowledge and experience in telecommunications and tech policy.

5:50

We also have Sarah Bleau, who's a Broadband Program Specialist with NTIA's Broadband programs.

5:55

Sarah is one of our newest employees who joined us just a couple of months ago and joins us from a number of years serving with service providers, including Level 3 communications, ViaSat and others who has extensive experience in both the wireline and wireless industry. Next, we'll have Gilbert Resendez. Gilbert is also fairly new to NTIA. Gilbert joined us after graduating from Hynes School of Public Policy at Carnegie Mellon, and has very extensive experience working with local governments, state governments, and is very committed to public policy. Finally, we have my colleague, Karen Archer Perry. Karen spent about 20 years in the private sector at Bell Labs and Lucent Technologies.

6:44

And then she spent a couple of years at the Gates Foundation working with libraries. That's where she really built her expertise on digital inclusion. We're thrilled to have Karen on the team and to share with you today, a little bit about resources that are available. Then you have myself, I'm Laura Spining. I serve as the Deputy Associate Administrator for NTIA's Broadband Programs, and will be your moderator today.

7:06

All right, let's go through the agenda. First up, we've got Doug Kinkoph, He's going to talk to us a little bit about the Biden Administration and all of their efforts on broadband. I'm sure that you've seen quite a bit in the news, because they have been extremely bold about making sure that 100% of Americans have access to high speed, affordable, and reliable broadband. And NTIA is proud to be a part of that effort.

7:30

Next up, my colleague Sarah, is going to talk about and provide an overview of the Broadband Infrastructure Program. She's going to turn it over to Gilbert Resendez and he's going to talk a little bit about NTIA's inter-agency and state coordination work. And then, finally, Karen Perry is going to share with you some resources that are available on broadband planning and data resources that are available to you.

7:57

And then finally, we've saved some time to take your questions and do our best to answer them, understanding that while we had hoped that the NOFO would be published for this program in advance of this webinar, it has not yet been published, so there will be some limitations on how much we can talk about in that regard, but we'll do our best and share with you as much as we can today. Thank you for joining, and Doug, over to you.

8:26

Doug Kinkoph:

Thank you, Laura. Thank you for the introduction. As Laura said, I'm Doug Kinkoph, the Associate Administrator for NTIA's Broadband Programs.

8:34

Let me start off by just sharing a quote with you. I believe this quote is applicable to all types of infrastructure, but I truly believe it particularly underscores the importance of broadband and the need to connect 100% of Americans.

8:51

Connecting 100% of America's broadband is critical to ensure Americans have the opportunity to fully participate in the digital economy, whether that's utilizing distance learning, telehealth, launching home based businesses, or even helping communities attract new businesses. NTIA has been working to connect America in one way or another since its inception.

9:17

In connecting all Americans, we need to first focus on those communities of greatest need. Connecting all Americans will support job creation, workforce development by ensuring Americans have access, not only to broadband, but to devices and digital skills.

9:33

To achieve these goals, though, it will require collaborations with many parties, states, Tribes, industry, and federal agencies. We will also require accurate data to form these policies and investments. Millions of Americans lack access to reliable broadband, and that is why the administration is seeking \$100 billion to solve this problem. 17 million Americans do not have basic broadband speeds of 25/3 megabits per second, 21% of Tribal lands and 17% of rural living do not have speeds of 25 megabits download and three megabits per second upload. While

95.6% of households have access to 25/3 megabits per second broadband, only 68.9% of households subscribe to that service at that level or above. The map to the right, areas in red show you those locations in the United States, based on the FCC benchmark speed of 25/3, that don't have access to that speed.

10:41

So, I think this underscores the problem that the country is facing, based on ensuring that all Americans have access to reliable broadband. Not only do millions of Americans lack access to reliable broadband, adoption is uneven across the country. 65 million Americans do not use the internet at all. 10 million internet users rely solely on mobile data plans. Five million households not online identified cost as their main reason for not using the internet.

11:19

Unconnected Americans are disproportionately likely to be low-income, nonwhite, Tribal, older, and differently abled. It is a crosscutting issue that we need to address.

11:35

And it's these statistics that I've mentioned not only underscore the need for connecting all Americans, but the need is further underscored by the fact that 77% of all jobs require at least some technology skills. 48% of hiring managers say that candidates lacked the skills needed to fill open jobs. 29% percent of students without basic digital skills say they won't consider post-secondary studies. More than 12 million households lack access to a computer, tablet, or smartphone.

12:11

The map on the right, I think, underscores the issue relative to the lack of devices in American households. So, this map basically demonstrates through the American Community Surveys, the darker the color, the greater number of households that do not have access to a computer, smartphone, or tablet. And those that are the darkest brown, those homes at 30% or greater or the households in those counties do not have access to a computer or smartphone or tablet.

12:46

Having said all of this, we know that the administration is looking to solve this problem, but NTIA was provided with three programs through the Consolidation Appropriations Act of 2021, that will help start addressing these problems.

13:02

The first is a Tribal Broadband Connectivity Grant. It's focused on providing access to infrastructure and adoption on Tribal lands, such as

remote learning, Telehealth and Telehealth resources. And we've been allocated one billion dollars to implement this program.

13:21

The second program is the Broadband Infrastructure Deployment Grant Program. And it's focused on providing funding up to \$300 million to states or political subdivisions of the state and a provider of fixed broadband services. And it focuses on building infrastructure within those states to those of greatest need.

13:43

Then the third program is Connecting Minority Communities Pilot programs. We were allocated \$285 million to focus on providing funding to HBCU's, TCU's, MSI's, HSI's, to purchase broadband Internet access, or eligible equipment, or to hire technology personnel to help implement the programs.

14:10

Now let me turn this back over to Laura Spining who will introduce our next guest.

14:15

Laura Spining: So, thank you, Doug, for that overview of where the Biden Administration is going on Broadband, we appreciate that context. And with that, I'm going to turn it over to my colleague, Sarah Bleau, to give you an overview of the Broadband Infrastructure Program. Sarah?

14:33

Sarah Bleau: Thank you, Laura. Good morning. Good afternoon to all of you, depending where you are joining us from. My name is Sarah Bleau, and I am super excited to be here today to talk to you a little bit more about the Broadband Infrastructure Program.

14:48

As Laura mentioned, the Notice of Funding Opportunity, which we call the NOFO, has not yet been published. So, my hope today is to provide some clarity around defined terms contained within the statute. So as soon as the NOFO is published, you can hit the ground running.

15:08

At a very high level, let's talk about the Broadband Infrastructure Program, Who, how much, when, all of those kinds of questions. This is for about \$300 million. It will be granted to covered partnerships, which I'll talk about in a moment.

15:27

In order to facilitate covered broadband projects, which I will explain also, and I'll say that NTIA anticipates reviewing/accepting the applications through about July of this summer, July 2021. A covered Partnership has been defined in the statute as a partnership between a state or one or more political subdivisions of a state and a provider of fixed broadband service.

15:57

What can these funds be used for? The Covered Broadband Project has been defined as a competitively and technologically neutral project for the deployment of fixed broadband service, that provides qualifying broadband service in an eligible service area, I'll go into detail on those two in just a moment here.

16:20

A qualifying broadband service has been defined as a broadband service that is not less than 25 megabits per second download and 3 megabits per second upload and the latency or what my son likes to call lagging that is sufficient to support real-time and interactive applications. The definition of unserved in an eligible service area.

16:47

This is a household that lacks access to that qualifying broadband service of 25/3. And here's what's important to note. The statute requires we do not duplicate. So, in a few moments, you will hear from my colleague Gilbert, who's going to further discuss the co-ordination between agencies and in the States.

17:07

The definition goes on to say that no broadband provider has been selected to receive, or is otherwise receiving state or federal funds, subject to buildout commitments to deploy that 25/3 broadband service in the specific area where the household is located.

17:27

So, we've defined a few of the terms, and now let's talk about eligibility. Covered partnerships will be expected to describe in their application, who is in the covered partnership, what the project will entail, details around who they plan to reach, and any other federal or state support information that might be relevant.

17:50

Please note, here, also, that each Covered Partnership may only submit one single application for the grant program. Now, we've talked about definitions and eligibility, and this particular slide is the one that I'd really like you to walk away with, keeping in mind as you plan for your application. There is some prioritization which has been defined in the statute.

18:12

According to the statute, the Assistant Secretary will give priority in the decreasing order.

18:18

First, for projects designed to provide broadband service of 25/3 to the greatest number of households.

18:26

Second, to projects designed to provide broadband service in an eligible service area that is wholly within any area other than a county, town, or city of at least 50,000 inhabitants, as well as the urbanized area contiguous and adjacent to a city or a town of 50,000 people.

18:50

Third, the projects which are the most cost effective, particularly projects in an area that is the most rural.

18:58

And fourth, let's talk about bandwidth. While the qualifying broadband service level is 25/3, there will be some prioritization for those projects designed to provide broadband service with a download speed of not less than 100 megabits per second, and an upload speed of at least 20 megs.

19:17

Now, I want you to think about the application.

19:19

You can anticipate that you should be registered with SAM, and we know that that might take a few days to confirm, so build that into your timeline. The standard forms will also accompany the application.

19:34

And finally, the applications will be submitted through grants.gov. I know that sometimes, grants.gov goes down for maintenance, so you don't want to wait until the very last minute to submit your application.

19:46

Speaking of timelines in submitting your application, the statute requires that the applications are submitted no later than 90 days after the publication of the NOFO. Furthermore, NTIA will complete its review and selection of successful applicants 90 days thereafter.

20:07

Finally, it's important to understand that awarded funds must be expended within one year following the grant. And trust me, we know that construction can sometimes take more than one year. So, for that reason, the Assistant Secretary may grant an extension for broadband construction projects.

20:25

In order to qualify for an extension, the Covered Partnership must certify that there is a plan to use the funds, that construction for the project is underway, or that there are extenuating circumstances which require an extension to ensure project completion.

20:42

And with that, I would like to say thank you, and I would be very pleased to introduce my colleague, Gilbert Resendez. Thanks again.

Gilbert Resendez:

20:51

Thank you very much, Sarah.

20:52

My name is Gilbert Resendez and like Laura mentioned, at the top of the meeting, I'm a Broadband Program Specialist here at NTIA supporting our state partnerships and outreach.

21:03

Today I'm going to spend a little bit of time talking about NTIA's role, state coordination and inter-agency coordination. NTIA's primary way that it coordinates with states is through State Broadband Leaders Network, or SBLN. SBLN is a community of practitioners who work on state broadband initiatives.

21:24

NTIA currently has participants from all 50 states, the District of Columbia and three territories. At NTIA, we convene the SBLN once a month for virtual meetings, as well as twice a year for our in-person summits. At these meetings, the SBLN discuss emerging telecommunications policy issues, as well as share best practices and resources on state broadband topics. Participants in the SBLN are state broadband directors and managers, as well as members of Governors offices, State Department of Commerce, or Community Development for Economic Development.

22:00

We also see a number of participants from state CIO offices and well as University Extension Programs. Our SBLN participants serve as an important resource for understanding state broadband programs and initiatives. We use the SBLN to collect and gather information on state broadband programs, funding, plans, data and mapping collection practices to name a few.

22:25

We take this information and we publish it on our State resources webpage. That web page is accessible from the Broadband USA website. If you click on state, you'll find information on that state's broadband website, coordinating agency within the state, contact information for our state point of contact in that state, as well as information on broadband programs and our funding.

22:49

We also have information on State plans. Broadband USA and NTIA play also an important role as an inter-agency coordinator for broadband. NTIA convenes its federal inter-agency partners regularly to discuss improving coordination, Federal broadband, programs, and policies.

23:07

NTIA also discusses with its inter-agency partners promoting consistency across Federal broadband programs, as well as encourages coordination

amongst federal, regional, technical assistance programs. NTIA also serves as a one stop place to get information on federal programs, policies, permitting, as well as funding programs.

23:30

That's a great place to pause and pass it off to my colleague, Karen Perry who will discuss broadband planning resources.

Karen Perry:

23:39

Well, thank you, Gilbert. For those of you who haven't worked with us at NTIA and BroadbandUSA before, I'd like to give you a quick overview of some of the resources that we have available that might be helpful to you as you prepare your grant application.

23:52

And as you continue to work to implement your broadband project. We've worked with communities across the country for a number of years to help plan, fund, and implement broadband infrastructure and digital inclusion projects. And as Gilbert mentioned, we've also worked with more than 26 different federal agencies in order to support them as they expand their support for broadband.

24:18

Much of that information is available on our Broadband USA website, and then it will give you a quick guide to how to find that information.

24:28

So, let's start with funding. We have a funding search on the Broadband USA website. Every year, we survey all federal agencies and we ask them what funding they have available to support broadband projects. That information is available to you as a one stop funding search. It's searchable by eligible recipients' program, program type, and agency, or department.

24:52

Although you can expect an update from us in the next couple of months, most of the funding programs stay relatively consistent year over year. What we're expecting in the next update is more funding because I'm happy to say that more federal agencies are supporting broadband right now. So do look, right now. Although this \$300 million Infrastructure Grant Program is a very significant investment in broadband, there might be needs for additional funds to support or complement in your broadband program. So do look at the broadband funding search to see if there's additional funding that might be helpful to you as you build out your broadband program.

25:30

We also have the one stop shop for information on permitting. You might be aware that the federal government owns or controls about a quarter of the land in the United States. Much of that land is out in the West. You can go to our one stop shop for permitting information to get contact information for most of the federal agencies that control that land.

25:53

In addition to that, there are flowcharts that outline the permitting process for each of those agencies. A number of those agencies have also consolidated their permitting process to a single permitting form, the SF-299 form. They've been working hard to streamline their processes, and many of the processes are at least much more streamlined than they used to be. And we continue to work with those agencies to improve their permitting processes and make it easier for you to work with them.

26:21

We also have a broadband planning roadmap process. The broadband planning roadmap starts with stakeholder engagement, and then it goes to assembling a team, identifying community priorities, looking at broadband data, looking at both infrastructure and digital inclusion, assessing your resources, engaging partners, evaluating solutions, and then implementing your project.

26:45

There are resources on our website for looking at a toolkit, and then a number of different resources that really help you at every step in this process. We are updating our toolkit, and one of the ways that we're updating our toolkit is to better articulate the difference between an infrastructure roadmap and a digital inclusion roadmap.

27:06

Really, the steps are very much the same, but they have kind of a little bit of a different flavor. For example, your asset inventory is going to be quite different if you're looking at infrastructure versus digital inclusion. You're still looking at assets, but the assets you look at for infrastructure might be poles, or towers, where the assets that you're going to look at for digital inclusion might be public computer centers or libraries, or broadband discount programs. So, similar paths, but different kinds of tools, different elements.

27:37

Another key element along that process is data. We're big fans of data, and I'm sure you are too. We recommend that you jumpstart your broadband data process by looking at federal data, but don't stop there. Local data is important, and there's a lot you can do in that area, as well. So, two of the major Federal datasets are the FCC Form 477 data, and the American Community Survey data. You can also get wonderful trend data from the NTIA Internet and Computer Use Survey.

28:10

There's a lot of tools that are available for you to access that data. What we recommend is that you use those tools to capture your own data but then you bring in your own insights in order to kind of customize or localize that data and identify kind of what's true about the data in your community. We've had some wonderful webinars on that data on data

recently and you can catch a rebroadcast of those webinars by clicking on these links when you get access to this broadcast and the download. One of the webinars was done in February of this year.

28:47

We had two great speakers, one from Ookla, and one from M-Lab who talked about speed tests. I also gave an overview and talked about a couple of great tools. And we also had a webinar in February where we showcased the NTIA dataset as well as the American Community Survey. Each of these webinars focused not just on the data, but on the tools you can use to access the data.

29:14

Speaking of tools, I'd like to highlight some of the tools that you can use when you would like to access data. Some of those tools include the American Community Survey, data.census.gov.

29:27

You can use that to access almost all of the census data, but particularly the Internet and computer subscription data. The quick facts data, which you can use to get a quick demographic summary of your data.

29:41

Broadband now, which is a commercial data set that you can use to get kind of commercial data on broadband. And then the Ookla and M-Lab speed test datasets.

29:53

And then also the I3 connectivity explorer. The I3 connectivity explorer is also kind of a one stop shop.

30:00

It gives you access to both FCC Form 477 data, as well as the American Community Survey demographic data, and internet and computer data, and M-Lab speed test, as well as some other datasets. So, it's a great way to get local data all in one spot. All of the data tools that are listed here with the asterisk are not federal tools. They're external tools, but we've listed them here, because we find them useful. At least our clients find them useful, and so do we, and we wanted to make sure that we offered them and made them available to you.

30:34

NTIA does not endorse those tools, so I should mention that we wanted to make sure that we highlighted them for you as well.

30:42

We wanted to also bring to your attention some digital inclusion resources that are available for your use. We have a map that lists some digital inclusion resources, and our map highlights some of the state and local programs that are available. The National Digital Inclusion Alliance also lists additional programs, and you should include them as a wonderful

resource as well. We've had some great webinars that highlight a number of programs, and our webinar archives is a wonderful resource for you to browse through to learn more about those programs.

31:17

We also have a number of publications, and those publications are a resource that you can use to look back at resources that kind of guide you through the process of broadband planning and implementation. I've mentioned the broadband toolkit. We have a speed simulator. We have a Guide to Effective Partnerships. We have a Glossary of Terms and a number of other publications. So, check out that publications page and see if there's any tools that might be helpful for you.

31:48

I could go on, but I don't want to. I want to leave time for you to ask your questions and for our team, to do our best to answer them. So, I'm going to hand it back to Laura, so that she can moderate and answer your questions.

32:15

Laura Spining: All right, let's see. Let me make sure I've got my audio on. Karen, can you hear me?

32:26

Karen Perry: I can hear you. I'm moving the questions over so you can get to it to answer as many as we can.

32:32

Laura Spining: Awesome. Very good. So, I'll start us off. We had a number of questions about availability of the deck that we used today. And just want to remind folks that, yes, we will be making the deck and the recording of today's presentation available on our website. We try to get it up within one week.

33:04

So, by next Wednesday, although I'll confess that we've had some issues with last week's recording and transcript, and we're working diligently to get those up. Those were on the Tribal Broadband Connectivity program. But we do make every effort to get it up within one week of the presentation.

33:25

Karen, did you see some other questions?

33:31

Karen Perry: It just dropped off my screen, but I can answer a couple of them before I find it, back, on the screen. Again. I'll answer first a few of the easy ones before we get to some of, the more challenging ones we got. First let me answer a few of the easy ones about communications. A number of folks ask questions about how to communicate with us, the way to reach us is to send us an e-mail to BroadbandUSA.

33:59

The e-mail can go to broadbandusa@ntia.doc.gov and we will put that e-mail address in the chat in just a minute, as well as we will show it on the screen at the end of our slide presentation. You can send us an e-mail to ask to be put on our mailing list, so that when we have information to share, we send it out to you when we blast it out. You can also send us e-mail if you've got feedback.

34:29

A number of people also asked, Will all the Webinars be the same, because we're going to be doing one a month for each of our three grant programs. So, this is the infrastructure webinar. We also will be doing one next week on the Connecting Minority Communities Webinar Program. And we did one last week on the Tribal program.

34:52

Next month in May, we will do three new webinars for each of those three grant programs. And we will do that for every month, all summer. And the purpose of each of those webinars is to give you the information you need to submit great grant applications.

35:12

So, you can send us e-mail if there's information that you think would be particularly helpful for us to provide to you. So please do feel free to give us that feedback either in the chat right now, or in the question box right now, or through e-mail. So that's where you can provide information to us. So that's just some information on communication.

35:34

There's also a lot of questions about the NOFO and about the overall grant program. We'll get to those in just a minute. Let me pull them up on my screen.

35:44

Laura Spining:

Thanks, Karen for covering the information about how to communicate with us. Yes, we definitely want to hear from folks.

35:54

We got a number of good questions in the chat box or in the Q&A box today, and we're going to make every effort to answer as many of those as we can. Understanding, again, we had hoped that the Notice of Funding Opportunity, or NOFO, would have gone out by now.

36:13

I'll just confess that we are as disappointed as I'm sure some of you are, that that's not actually the case and our team is working diligently to address some final questions in the clearance process so that we can get that out and published and the application window open.

36:30

Karen Perry:

OK, Laura. I've got the questions up, so let me pitch you a few of them.

36:33

Laura Spining: OK, thank you.

36:36

Karen Perry: First off, this idea of a covered partnership is still a little bit confusing to people. So, I know that Sarah covered it in her presentation, but would you just explain a covered partnership one more time for us?

Laura Spining: So, I'll cover what's in the statute, which is about as much as we can do today, again, back to, I'm not trying to be elusive.

37:00

But until the NOFO does get published, there are limits on how much we can say. But what is in this statute is in Section 905(a)(5), let me just make sure I got that right, the 905(a)(5), The Consolidated Appropriations Act.

37:16

And it states that a covered partnership is between **A**: a state, or one or more political subdivisions of a state and **B**: a provider of fixed Broadband Service. And so, just a matter, as a matter of a state, right, there are 50 states and six territories in the U.S. So those are pretty well defined or one or more political subdivisions of the state.

37:50

So, a county, a municipality. I'm sure that there are other definitions of a political subdivision, but those would be good examples of a political subdivision. And then B, it's a provider of fixed broadband service and that's all that the Statute states about what makes up a covered partnership which is an eligible entity for this grant program.

38:26

Karen Perry: So, can a service provider apply by themselves?

38:31

Laura Spining: That would not meet the definition as it's outlined in the statute.

38:36

Karen Perry: And do we know yet, or can we say whether the application needs to come only from the state or only from the municipality or is that something we're going to have to wait for the NOFO to find out?

38:50

Laura Spining: I think we're going to have to wait for the NOFO for any additional clarification. But it is a good point. We have had that question in a number of different forms. So, we'll probably be continuing in our FAQs, refine how that question gets answered, and through, you know, the workshops and webinars that we do.

39:11

The more questions that we get, that are specific to, you know, what you're looking to submit. We can work to answer your, your specific

situation. But right now, what we can say is that the statute defines it as a state or one or more political subdivisions of the state and a provider.

39:30

Karen Perry:

Does somebody have to come from a private entity? And the answer is, no. It is going to come from a government entity.

39:38

It will be a state or municipality, but they are definitely looking for via the statute that partnership with service providers, and then somebody asked, what do we mean by a service provider? And the statute particularly says a fixed broadband service provider. That is what it says. A fixed broadband service provider.

39:59

Laura Spining:

That's correct, that's what it states.

40:03

Karen Perry:

A number of people ask questions about permitting, can you talk a little bit about what the project will need have to be permitted ahead of time?

40:14

Laura Spining:

And so, in fact, this is really important, in terms of being sure that you're not spending money that you expect to be reimbursed for. And so, I'll try to cover that generally, in terms of how federal grant programs that at least I have experience working on have worked. And that is to say that.

40:39

There are, there are limited expenses, and it does depend typically on what's either in the statute or in the NOFO, once it's published, about any expenses that are incurred once the NOFO or whatever the funding mechanism is, has been published, and the date that the application window closes.

41:06

Those are typically referred to as, application expenses, pre-award expenses, they may have different names under different programs, but there, it's usually limited.

41:19

And sometimes that's written in the statute. Sometimes it's written in the NOFO. Sometimes it's provided in guidance. But it is typically limited amount, or a certain percentage of the grant award.

41:33

But that has to be after the NOFO is published, and before an award is made, and then, of course, it only applies if an award is made.

41:44

And so, it wouldn't be possible or reasonable for permitting costs to be eligible in that scenario. And therefore, you shouldn't expect that you

would need to have permits on poles and all the engineering that has to be done in order to secure a permit before the application is submitted.

42:12

Karen Perry:

We have a two-part question here. We have somebody who says that they've been waiting more than 12 months for a permit from the US. Forest Service for a project that cuts across US. Forest Service lands, and they're concerned about meeting that one-year deadline because of that, and so the two-part question, I think implied, is a question about an extension. And the other part is a question about what can be done to expedite that permitting process through the US. Forest Service?

42:49

Laura Spining:

So, Karen, I would just come back to the offer that you made, which is, I mean, usually, it's hard to answer or address that without knowing any more specifics.

43:04

I'll acknowledge having worked in the industry and worked to secure rights of way and permits and those kinds of things that certainly public lands have a high bar in terms of the permitting requirements and we would welcome an e-mail from you if there's a specific situation that we can assist, if you will, and how you might address that with the Forest Service.

43:37

But, I'm reluctant to say any more about, as a general statement, without knowing more about the specifics, other than generally, understanding that that permitting process can take a while. And certainly, that's understood in terms of projects and why there is consideration for project construction projects specifically, potentially taking longer.

44:03

Karen Perry:

And, we do have the, there's a provision in the statute that says that the Assistant Secretary has the opportunity to grant extensions for construction projects beyond one year.

44:17

So, we have, that is kind of built into statute, and we fully expect to be able to, we're already planning on granting those extensions.

44:29

So, we understand that specifically for this issue, if you would like to send us an e-mail with the details on this issue, we'd be happy to look and see if there's any calls, we can make to understand the issue better.

44:48

Laura Spining:

Let me pull up my question list OK, yeah, there's quite a few coming in. I'm noticing. I'm having a little trouble keeping up with them. So, we talked about the issues around covered partnerships and talked a little bit about permitting.

45:27

So, there's a clarifying question because it came in, time-wise around when you were talking about cover partnerships, and it just states, can multiple towns join together and submit one application as a single entity to provide a larger physical area with more people and more communities? And, the way I read that language, yes. It states one or more political subdivisions of the state.

45:56

And, actually, we would, you know, very much encourage reaching larger numbers of people in areas that are not getting appropriate service today.

46:07

Karen Perry:

In a similar vein, a number of folks have pointed out that \$300 million is a lot of money. It might not be enough money. And they've asked how we can support them in looking at how the projects, how these three grant programs and other grant programs can be complementary, rather than working against each other.

46:31

And Broadband USA, as part of this same legislation, was asked to continue the work we've been doing with other federal agencies to make sure that all the broadband work that the federal government does is complementary, and we have been working with really, all the federal agencies that touch broadband to provide coordination efforts, both as a policy effort, as well as through a mapping program that we do. And so, we're very well along the way, from an agency-to-agency perspective, as well as our work with states in doing that.

47:17

And one of the things that we will be doing through this grant program, down the road, is we'd like to work with all of you to see how we can support you in making sure that your efforts are complementary. So, we already have that funding search on our website, which will be updated within another couple of months, as I mentioned.

47:38

And you can use that to see how additional funding might be available in order to support your efforts. But, at some point in time, I expect one of our webinars will specifically talk about how some of the evolving funds that are available, might help you really build back better, build up, you know, create programs that address the larger needs in your community. So that is definitely on our agenda going forward.

48:14

Laura Spining:

Thanks, Karen. I'm trying to look at some of the other questions that have come in as you were talking through that. And. Because it's in there so often, I'm wondering if we should touch on the timing again, which is around the NOFO that hasn't been released. And so, what do we expect?

48:38

Karen Perry:

And I'm just reluctant. As much as I'd like to say that I know, I don't know. It's somewhat out of our hands, I just do know that we are working diligently to address questions that have come up through the inter-agency review process. And we do have to wait until those are all addressed and answered before we can make it public and publish it on grants.gov and via our website. So, wanted to just re-iterate that again.

49:13

One of the other areas where there was a number of questions, and there really always is questions about data and mapping and challenge processes, and kind of what data can you trust.

49:27

Um, and I can't address what is specifically in the NOFO, but I can address how NTIA has generally looked at data and asked, recommended that people look at broadband data when doing their broadband planning.

49:50

And what we've generally championed is the use of multiple data sources and that people include not just federal data sources but local data sources and local insights in their planning, and that they use kind of a community-based approach to kind of pull their data sources together. And so, of course, the FCC Form 477 data is a very important data source in looking at broadband availability. We know that's a data source that has strengths and weaknesses.

50:26

We highly recommend that you also look at the American Community Survey data, which has information on broadband adoption or broadband subscriptions. And that's another excellent data source that was highlighted in my presentation.

50:42

Many communities run speed tests, and that kind of is more of a user experience view of the data. And a number of states have their own mapping programs, and that is also an excellent kind of set of data elements. But no matter what data you put together, it's very important to look at that data from your own community lens.

51:10

One of the things that the folks at USDA do is they kind of walk the community, and you don't have to do it the way they do it. You can do it the way you do it in your community to identify what your narrative is, and we want your input. We're going to make our own assessment, but we very much are looking for your feedback about what is available in your community because you're making your case for where there is broadband and where there isn't broadband and why you think investment is needed, and we do value your input.

Laura Spining:

51:48

Thanks, Karen. Also, quite a few different kinds of questions that I would group into and how, you addressed that a little bit earlier, but exactly how are we interacting with the other Federal programs? And I would just come back to, you know, reiterating that we are, through our inter-agency work, continuing to engage with other agencies.

52:19

And understand where either they have made awards, loans, or different funding sources, as well as where states have made those awards. But also understanding that there may be some limitations there.

52:42

So, to Karen's point, right, what's happening locally is a key component of understanding, and we just can't know everything that's happening nationally, and so we really encourage you to share specific local information that we may not have access to.

53:06

Karen, what else are you seeing in the chat box in terms of themes that we should address?

53:10

Understanding, our limitation on being able to address all of them?

Karen Perry:

There is a question about whether or not RDOF and 903 auction areas are excluded. And I don't know the answer to that question.

Laura Spining:

53:29

So, the way that it's addressed in the statute, I'll try to read my notes here because I did try to address that, is in how unserved is defined. Which is, Part B of that states that no broadband provider has been selected to receive or is otherwise receiving Federal or State funding, subject to enforceable buildout commitments to deploy qualifying broadband service in the specific area where a household is located.

54:16

And I will just use it as a time to point out that one thing that's different about the language that's in this statute is, is not the 25/3 definition but the additional language about latency to support real-time, interactive applications.

54:39

And that an eligible service area, and this is just looking at my notes in section (a)(7) of Section 905, is a census block in which broadband service is not available to one or more households.

54:57

Karen Perry:

Whereas in other programs, it's been a much higher percentage had to demonstrate that it's not available. So, it flips that thinking that we've seen in the past a little bit. It looks at it from the glass half full, I guess, instead of a half empty perspective.

I think there's a related question here, will the installation of new fiber optic in a small town, that's growing, be an allowable request?

55:31

And, I think sort of related to that, sort of the entry criteria to get considered is that you have to be looking at greatest need. At a census block where there are census blocks where there is no service at 25/3.

55:54

Not the whole block, but at least one unit has no service at 25/3.

55:59

Beyond that, we are looking, we know we would prefer to have applications that have greater bandwidth, not necessarily fiber, where it's a technology neutral implementation, but we're looking for more than 25/3 in the implementation.

56:31

Laura Spining:

So, I'm again, just trying to be sure that we capture most of the concepts, even if we can't answer them.

56:39

Karen, you captured that question about RDOF and the 903 auctions.

56:48

In terms of the average award size that I expect will be in the NOFO and not something that we're ready to share today. And frankly could change.

57:07

Let's see. There is another question about the broadband grant program, the Tribal Connectivity Program Webinar from last week and that recording, which I did state, would be available as of yesterday, and I'm aware that it's not up, and it's actually not an issue with the recording. It's an issue with our website, and I apologize. We are working to address that issue and we will get it up as soon as possible.

57:41

Karen Perry:

I think we've gone through and answered most of the questions that we're able to.

57:48

Laura Spining:

I'm seeing a couple of others. One is, can a non-profit economic agency apply?

58:04

I'm hesitant to jump to say no, but my gut says no. That a non-profit economic development agency isn't a political subdivision, although, I'm not confident that I know that's the case. So, that might be something that the specific situation might be worth looking at more specifically once the NOFO comes out. Are matching funds required, Karen?

58:35

Karen Perry:

I don't believe we can say that yet.

Laura Spining:

58:39

Well, what I'll say is that will be an issue that's addressed in the NOFO from my recollection.

58:49

And if I have my notes correctly here, that the statute is silent on that issue.

58:58

OK. And I think that we did address the question about, can multiple political subdivisions, and in this case, the question is about, counties come together with a service provider to submit an application?

59:15

And the answer is, yes, that would meet the definition of a covered partnership.

Karen Perry:

59:26

One other thing to point out, though, is that it is very challenging for Laura and I to not be able to answer your questions. It doesn't mean we don't appreciate every single one of them.

59:44

The reason that, and we really do look forward to answering every single question, both through the NOFO and through FAQs, which we will be publishing on our website. It will be extremely fun to do this webinar when the NOFO is published, and, when we can answer every single one of these questions in detail.

1:00:09

We are happy that you've asked the questions and that we can record every single one of them, and that we can make sure that we put them into our FAQs. And that we can get the questions answered as we develop the FAQs that will go with this grant program.

1:00:31

And so, like I said, it is awkward for us to not be able to give you the best answers that we want to have. But, at next month's webinar, we hope to be able to share the NOFO, to share detailed answers and to over time put those detailed answers into FAQs. And so, we are happy to have the questions, and we will put the answers together as quick as we can, and we will share them with you.

1:01:04

And we do appreciate you asking. And we promise to them to get the best answers we can for you. We'd rather give you good answers when we can, than not.

1:01:20

Laura, do you want to go to the wrap up slides?

1:01:25

Laura Spining:

Sure. Give me one second to move this out of the way. All right. Very good. All right, so, as Karen mentioned, I think we've mentioned a number of times. We are extremely optimistic, but still a little bit cautious about committing that we will have the NOFO out by next month's webinar, which will be May 12 and 13.

1:01:56

But I'm extremely optimistic, but just a little bit of caution. And just on the slide, which will be available soon, the list of the series for each of the programs. So, we are doing quite a bit of these and hope that you'll join for as many as are relevant to your ongoing efforts locally to improve broadband availability and the kinds of applications that are so important to everyone's lives.

1:02:27

We'll start every one of them at 2:30 Eastern Time. And you do need to register. We haven't had an issue with the registration limit of a thousand, but that is one of the reasons that we do like the GoToWebinar platform is, it does have scale. And so again, we apologize for the phone audio difficulties, which we're working through the pluses and minuses of the different platforms that we can use.

1:03:03

Oh, we have one more slide right there. Just to say thank you and as Karen said, we'd love to hear from you.

1:03:13

We are putting in place a process to regularly, across the team, address questions that are difficult or that we don't immediately have an answer to, so we can provide consistent guidance on how to appropriately submit your application and ensure that it's consistent with the statute and get you the guidance that you need.

1:03:38

So, you can find past webinar recordings on our website, that is broadbandusa.ntia.doc.gov/events/past-events

1:03:47

And please do e-mail us at broadbandusa@ntia.doc.gov. We'd love to hear from you and help you have a wonderful afternoon and I hope you'll join us here next month. Thanks so much.

END TRANSCRIPT.