

NTIA Grant Program Merit Reviewers Frequently Asked Questions July 1, 2021

The below FAQs are for informational purposes only and are intended solely to assist potential merit reviewers in better understanding the NTIA Broadband Infrastructure Program, Connecting Minority Communities Pilot Program, and Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program, and the requirements set forth in the program rules and/or Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) for each program. The FAQs do not and are not intended to supersede, modify, or otherwise alter applicable statutory or regulatory requirements, or the specific application requirements set forth in each program's NOFO. In all cases, statutory and regulatory mandates, and the requirements set forth in each program's NOFO, shall prevail over any inconsistencies contained in the below FAQs.

Merit Review Program

Why does NTIA need merit reviewers?

It is the policy of the Department of Commerce (DOC) to seek full and open competition for award of discretionary funds. DOC operating units must conduct application reviews in accordance with the requirements stipulated in 2 CFR Part 200 and in Chapter 8 of the *Department of Commerce Grants and Cooperative Agreements Manual (20 April 2021)* (accessible at: <https://www.commerce.gov/sites/default/files/2021-04/Department%20of%20Commerce%20Grants%20%20Cooperative%20Agreements%20Manual%20%202021%20April%202021%29.pdf>). Moreover, DOC financial assistance must be awarded through a merit-based review and selection process whenever possible. As such, NTIA will conduct a merit review of qualifying applications submitted for the Broadband Infrastructure Program, Connecting Minority Communities Pilot Program, and Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program. The merit review will involve teams of subject-matter and technical experts that evaluate applications against established review criteria specific to each program, detailed in each program's Notices of Funding Opportunity (NOFO).

How will being a merit reviewer benefit my organization or me?

NTIA requires a critical number of voluntary reviewers to meet its requirements to facilitate full and open competition and adhere to federal and DOC requirements for awarding grant funds. As such, participation as a merit reviewer will help maintain integrity and transparency in selecting applications for award and in contributing to successful and impactful NTIA grant programs. In addition, you will gain exposure to new and innovative ideas and initiatives relative to broadband deployment and adoption projects. Importantly, please note that each Non-Federal merit reviewer must complete the Reviewer Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Certification for Peer Reviewers, in which they agree not to discuss the contents of the applications reviewed outside of DOC during or after the review process.

What role does the Merit Review play in the overall grant programs and award selection?

The Merit Review is an integral part of the overall grant review and award process. Generally, the NTIA grant review process is divided into three stages: (1) Initial Administrative and Eligibility Review of complete application packets; (2) Merit Review; and (3) Programmatic Review. The specific process and details for each program are described in that program's NOFO. Not all applications will necessarily

proceed through all three review stages, depending on the results of the review process. Applications satisfying the Initial Administrative and Eligibility Review will enter Merit Review and be evaluated by at least two objective reviewers who have demonstrated expertise in the programmatic aspects of the grant program. They may be Federal employees or non-Federal persons. During the merit review process, the reviewers may discuss the applications with each other, but scores will be determined on an individual basis. Based on an average of the reviewers' scores, applications will be assigned adjectival ratings for each priority group in accordance with the following scale: Qualified for Funding – (70-100 points) or Unqualified for Funding – (0-69 points). Those applications that are deemed qualified for funding will go through the Programmatic Review, which is conducted by NTIA Program Staff. At the conclusion of the Programmatic Review using a series of program selection factors that include merit review scores, the Associate Administrator for the Office of Telecommunications and Information Applications (OTIA Associate Administrator) will prepare a rank order of applications within the specific grant program and present a package or packages of recommended grant awards to the Selecting Official (the Assistant Secretary) for review and approval.

Merit Reviewer Eligibility

What kind of experience is needed to be a merit reviewer?

NTIA is interested in volunteers with experience in broadband infrastructure and broadband use and digital inclusion. Example experience areas include:

- Infrastructure:
 - Broadband networks, using appropriate terrestrial or wireless technologies, and network sustainability
 - Broadband network planning and design
 - Broadband network construction and deployment costs and construction timeframes
 - Broadband network workforce development
- Broadband Use and Digital Inclusion:
 - Telehealth, distance learning, broadband adoption, and digital inclusion programs including equipment, networks, training and outreach
 - Telework, workforce development, and online entrepreneurship programs
 - Low-income discount and subsidized broadband programs
 - Planning, program design, and evaluation for telehealth, distance education, workforce development and digital inclusion programs
 - Programs and activities noted above that are conducted by Minority Serving Institutions

What is a conflict of interest and how can I avoid one as a merit reviewer?

It is the policy of DOC to maintain high standards of conduct to prevent real or apparent conflicts of interest in connection with the review of applications and the issuance of financial assistance awards. In this connection, reviewers must comply with DOC requirements for the avoidance of conflicts of interest, including the appearance of a conflict of interest, impropriety, or the appearance of impairment of objectivity with respect to any application that a merit reviewer is asked to review or comment on. The DOC requirements for the avoidance of conflicts of interest are located in Chapter 15.C of the *Department of Commerce Grants and Cooperative Agreements Manual (20 April 2021)* (accessible at: <https://www.commerce.gov/sites/default/files/2021-04/Department%20of%20Commerce%20Grants%20%20Cooperative%20Agreements%20Manual%20%2820%20April%202021%29.pdf>).

A conflict of interest exists when a person participates in a matter which is likely to have a direct and predictable effect on his or her personal or financial interests. A conflict also exists where there is an appearance that a person's objectivity in performing his or her responsibilities is impaired. An appearance of impairment of objectivity could result from an organizational conflict where, because of other activities or relationships with other persons or entities, a person is unable or potentially unable to render impartial assistance or advice to the Government. A conflict of interest could also result from non-financial gain to the individual, such as benefit to reputation or prestige in a professional field.

For this purpose, a financial interest may include employment, stock ownership, a creditor or debtor relationship, or prospective employment with an applicant. An appearance of impairment of objectivity could result from, an organizational conflict where, because of other activities relationships with other persons or entities, a person is unable or potentially unable to render impartial assistance or advice to the Government. It could also result from non-financial gain to the individual, such as benefit to reputation or prestige in a professional field. A reviewer will be considered to have a financial or other interest, and therefore a conflict of interest, if any of the following have a financial have a financial or other interest in an application that the reviewer is asked to review or comment on: (i) a profit or non-profit organization in which the reviewer serves as an officer, director, trustee, general partner, or employee; or (ii) any person or organization with which the reviewers is negotiating or has an arrangement concerning employment, including consultantship or a past employer (within the last year).

Conflicts may inadvertently occur, but if they are discovered, the applicant or reviewer must immediately inform NTIA and refrain from further review of the application(s) until authorized to continue by NTIA.

Do I need to tell NTIA when I apply to be a merit reviewer that I am also a stockholder, officer, director, trustee, general partner, employee, or a debtor/creditor of an applicant or project partner for one of NTIA's grant programs?

Yes, if you know that an organization that you are a stockholder, officer, director, trustee, general partner, employee, or a debtor/creditor is applying for, or is a partner (*e.g.*, subrecipient or vendor) of, an applicant for one of the NTIA grant programs, you must inform NTIA so that NTIA can take the appropriate steps to avoid real or apparent conflicts of interest in selecting and assigning merit reviewers. In this connection, merit reviewers will be required to sign a Reviewer Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Certification for Peer Reviewers, which will require reviewers to certify in writing that, to the best of their knowledge, they do not have a conflict of interest and that their particular circumstances are not likely to raise the appearance of a conflict of interest, impropriety, or the appearance of impairment of objectivity with respect to any application they are asked to review or comment on. If, at any time during the merit review, you discover that you might have, present, or appear to have a conflict of interest with regard to any specific application, you must immediately inform NTIA and stop review of the subject application(s) until authorized by NTIA to resume review.

If I am applying for one of NTIA's grant programs, can I also be a merit reviewer for one of the other NTIA grant programs?

Yes, subject to the conflict of interest and confidentiality conditions discussed above.

Can merit reviewers review applications in the same grant program they are an applicant or proposed project partner?

No. As noted above, it is the policy of DOC to seek full and open competition for award of discretionary funds and to maintain high standards of conduct to prevent real or apparent conflicts of interest in connection with the review of applications and the issuance of financial assistance awards. In this respect, the subject NTIA grant programs are competitive programs with limited amounts of available federal funding and, as such, NTIA will not generally assign merit reviewers to review applications for the same grant program in which they are a stockholder, officer, director, trustee, employee, or a debtor/creditor of an applicant organization or project partner. In very limited circumstances, NTIA may issue a conditional waiver of the conflicts of interest requirements in order to allow a merit reviewer to review an application within the same grant program where there is a real or apparent financial or other conflict of interest.

How will I know I am selected to be a merit reviewer?

NTIA will notify you no later than 30 days before support is required, including information on upcoming merit reviewer training that NTIA will conduct prior to starting your review of applications.

Are merit reviewers compensated for their time?

No, this is a voluntary opportunity to help advance broadband infrastructure, use, and adoption across the U.S. and NTIA will not be compensating voluntary reviewers for their time. It is important to note that merit reviewers will be performing duties on a remote basis and travel will not be required.

[Merit Review Process](#)

Where can I find more information about NTIA's grant programs, including information on the program funding objectives, priorities, and evaluation criteria for the merit review?

Each grant program's NOFO is posted on NTIA's BroadbandUSA website as it is released. As of June 2021, NTIA has released the [Broadband Infrastructure Program NOFO](#) and [Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program NOFO](#). NTIA has also released the [Connecting Minority Communities \(CMC\) Pilot Program Final Rule](#). NTIA will post the CMC Pilot Program NOFO to BroadbandUSA upon its release.

What kind of support or training will NTIA be providing merit reviewers in their review of applications?

NTIA will hold grant-program-specific training webinars (which will also be recorded for later viewing). NTIA will also provide a comprehensive Merit Reviewer Guidance document, tailored to each grant program, to help educate the merit reviewer on the grant program funding priorities, evaluation criteria, how to access applications, complete and submit reviewer scoresheet and related documentation, etc. These trainings will be conducted virtually and travel will not be required.

What is the estimated time it will take a reviewer to review one application?

For broadband-infrastructure-related applications (e.g., Broadband Infrastructure Program, Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program), we estimate 3 hours of review and related documentation time per application. For broadband use and adoption applications (e.g., Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program and CMC Pilot Program), we estimate 2 hours of review and related documentation time per application. NTIA understands that individual reviewers may require more or less time than the estimate provided, depending on the related experience of the reviewer and the actual application.

How many applications will be assigned?

The number of applications assigned will depend on the number of applications received; however, NTIA estimates that each reviewer will be assigned between 10-15 applications if reviewing broadband

infrastructure applications (Broadband Infrastructure Program and Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program) and no more than 20 applications if reviewing broadband use and adoption applications (Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program and Connecting Minority Communities Pilot Program). We anticipate providing reviewers two weeks to complete these reviews.

What is the timeframe for Merit Reviewers to review applications assigned to them?

Given the staggered release of grant program NOFOs, NTIA *preliminarily* estimates the following timeframes in which NTIA will engage reviewers for each grant program, subject to change:

- Broadband Infrastructure Program: September and October 2021
- Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program: September and October 2021
- Connecting Minority Communities Pilot Program: To be determined based on release of NOFO, but reviewers will not be assigned applications earlier than November 2021

Can prospective merit reviewers dictate to NTIA how many applications they will review?

No, however NTIA will work with merit reviewers to re-assign applications if the merit reviewer cannot review the number of applications assigned in the designated timeframe.

What will NTIA be doing to help control for conflict of interest in assigning merit reviewers?

NTIA will establish and implement conflict of interest mitigation measures in the assignment of merit reviewers to grant applications. As discussed above, each non-Federal merit reviewer will complete the Reviewer Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Certification for Peer Reviewers, and may have to share certain information with NTIA to avoid conflicts of interest or the appearance of a conflict of interest. NTIA will also assign applications based on geography, project type, and other factors that will mitigate any potential conflict of interest and avoid the appearance of a conflict of interest.

If my availability as a merit reviewer changes, how do I communicate this change to NTIA?

Please email NTIA at grantreviewer@ntia.gov as soon as possible if your availability to participate as a merit reviewer, or ability to complete the review of the applications assigned, has changed.