

Interview Guide—Meetings with Internet Service Providers

Coordination with various groups, such as Internet Service Providers (ISPs), is necessary to meet the requirements outlined in the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Five-Year Action Plan and the planning documentation required by the State Digital Equity Planning Grant program.

This interview guide is a tool to assist State/Territory (S/T) Broadband Offices in preparing for and engaging with interested parties to further an understanding of high-speed internet availability in their respective areas. It provides direction for initial discussions and is not comprehensive of all topics that an S/T may need to discuss.

The guide will 1) frame why meeting with ISPs is important, 2) help prepare a meeting agenda and targeted outcomes, as well as 3) provide best practices for preparing for and conducting meetings with ISPs.

Why Engagement Matters

Successful S/T Broadband Office engagement with ISPs relies on open and transparent communication aimed at gaining an understanding of ISP interests and involvement. An extra focus on the positive impacts of digital equity and how ISP efforts will underscore the importance of digital inclusion should also be considered in engagement. Engaging with ISPs is important because it:

- Opens dialogue to better identify and understand priorities and needs
- Develops early buy-in for implementation approaches and high-speed Internet plans
- Includes diverse expertise and experiences
- Encourages transparency, which builds trust by demonstrating responsible stewardship of state and local resources and
- Expands awareness of BEAD and the Digital Equity Act programs, mobilizing others to act collectively.

Understanding ISPs

Collaboration with ISPs and telecommunication organizations – and trade associations that represent these entities - is highly important for the success of the BEAD and Digital Equity programs, as many will be subgrantees, cost-sharing partners, or project vendors. Some ISPs will be eager to participate in achieving BEAD and Digital Equity goals, while others may have conflicting interests or hesitation.

ISPs may also be participants in the Enabling Middle Mile Broadband Grant Program, therefore getting background details on their larger broadband engagement across the region and neighboring S/Ts is important. S/T Broadband Offices will also want to consider the level of competition for service across the area to better understand ISP involvement.

Industry Segment Types

Retail internet providers:

- Traditional private telephone companies and cooperatives
- Cable companies
- Municipal Providers
- Electric cooperatives
- Wireless Internet Service Providers (WISPs)

Ancillary industry groups:

- Internet Backbone Providers & Local Construction Companies
- Internet Equipment Providers
- Server and Data Center Operators

High-Level Meeting Agenda and Targeted Outcomes

Pre-Meeting Preparation

Basic logistics should be considered and discussed prior to meeting. **Figure Figure 1** captures key elements to consider when conducting an in-person, virtual, or hybrid meeting.

IN-PERSON		VIRTUAL		HYBRID
LOCATION <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider location access details (ADA accessibility, parking, ability to physically distance) Provide directions for finding the meeting room once on site Include enough seating for all participants Communicate current health protocol guidance (masking, testing) Set up closed captions or make other considerations for multiple languages 	EQUIPMENT <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluate what AV needs the meeting has (projector, screen, conference speakers) Determine if participants can access location Wi-Fi and prepare guidance for how to access it 	SOFTWARE & LOGISTICS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand web applications participants are familiar with using (Zoom, WebEx, Teams, etc.) Note if any constraints exist for using the selected application (free versions available, time limits on use) Offer to start the meeting earlier for those wishing to check their connection 	EQUIPMENT <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Share information on what video/camera technology, software, or connectivity is needed (or preferred) for participation Plan for an alternate method to participate if technology or access issues arise (call-in number or different video application) Set up the virtual meeting to include a transcript that is made available to all participants after the meeting 	<i>Combine in-person and virtual elements to meet physical and technological constraints of attendees</i>

Figure 1 - Meeting Formats and Considerations

Note: Meeting planning should not be one-sided. While the S/T Broadband Office might suggest one venue or software for the meeting, remaining open to alternatives proposed by the ISP may assist scheduling.

Evaluate Meeting Logistics

Once the S/T Broadband Office has established whether the meeting is in-person, virtual, or hybrid of the two, evaluate the meeting logistics.

- Number of Voices:** Meetings with an individual participant group are preferable as the focused format invites more open, detailed, and transparent dialogue. If a meeting has numerous groups participating, consider the potential impact on the level of details gathered for the selected topics.
- Availability:** Consider using a polling application (i.e., Doodle, Calendly) to determine attendee availability. If the meeting topic allows, consider offering multiple sessions or formats for attendees to participate.
- Meeting Size:** Plan for meeting space in accordance with the size of the planned engagement. Understand who the ISP's want to bring into the meeting and the size of the group.
- Duration:** Assess questions in the Discussion Guide from the context of the meeting timeframe, realizing that one question posed to several groups may take as long as several questions posed to a smaller group.

Agenda Topic	High-level Objective
Welcome & Introductions	➤ <i>Review meeting purpose, set expectations/desired outcomes and facilitate participant introductions, to include position and role in planning and implementation processes.</i>
Review Meeting Goals	➤ <i>Set expectations / desired outcomes as it relates to the meeting purpose and agenda</i>
BEAD & Digital Equity Overview	➤ <i>Brief overview of the S/Ts planning and implementation phases, to include a high-level review of program timelines.</i>
Understanding Industry Perspective	➤ <i>Understand the attendees' experience in broadband infrastructure planning through the lens of selected topics and seek to understand priority concerns.</i>
Feedback & Next Steps	➤ <i>Provide a feedback mechanism to capture additional input following the meeting and establish future engagement.</i>

Prepare Agenda in Advance

Developing and sharing an agenda in advance of meetings will help inform attendee perspective, set expectations about discussion areas, and bring the right participants to the table. Below is a sample agenda S/Ts can use to shape ISP discussions. *Note:* S/Ts can modify the agenda as needed.

Establish Targeted Outcomes

ISP engagement should seek to advance one or several of the following objectives:

- Establish relationship and rapport between the ISP and the S/T Broadband Office
- Provide a uniform, base understanding of the BEAD and Digital Equity programs
- Share the S/T's planning and implementation timelines and ongoing engagement plans
- Gain high-level understanding of the ISP's interest and participation in deployment, priority concerns, and potential participation in other programs, such as the Enabling Middle Mile Broadband Program
- Establish feedback mechanisms to capture additional input

Discussion Guide

Below are sample questions to help guide conversations based on the sample agenda above. Questions aim to elicit understanding of the ISP perspective and may be tailored, as needed.

Welcome and Introductions	
Guidance:	Discussion Questions:
<i>Discuss the meeting's purpose and ask all attendees to provide a personal introduction.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>With participant introductions, also inquire as to the ISP's footprint and range within the S/T and how they are organized (ex: co-op, commercial company, etc.).</i>
Review Meeting Goals	
Guidance:	Discussion Questions:
<i>Set meeting expectations and desired outcomes as it relates to the meeting purpose and agenda.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Gather from the participants their expectations going into this meeting.</i> • <i>Address their expectations head on and lead with the S/T's own purpose and desired outcome for the meeting, being specific and transparent.</i>

BEAD & Digital Equity Overview	
Guidance:	Discussion Questions:
<i>Provide overview of the S/T's planning and implementation phases for each program, to include a high-level review of program timelines. Can discuss Broadband Maps and the challenge process at a high-level.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the broader industry perspective of the current state of the network across the S/T? What is the ISP's perspective on the current broadband environment? • How aware is the ISP of BEAD and Digital Equity objectives and timelines? <p>Information: BEAD Program, Digital Equity Program, Digital Inclusion Startup Guide, FCC Broadband Data Maps</p>
Understanding ISP Perspective on...	NOTE: Questions may be tailored and meeting timeframe should be taken into account when choosing number of topics to cover and volume of questions to ask.
Guidance:	Discussion Questions:
<u>S/T Collaboration with ISPs</u>	
<i>Gather information on what engagement is taking place, or planned to take place, with ISPs. Document relevant points of contact mentioned.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the current state of the ISP relationship with the S/T? What concerns or issues are paramount? • Is there any known legislation complicating broadband implementation efforts across the S/T? If so, what impact is the ISP concerned about? • Is the ISP working on any legislation for upcoming sessions? If so, how does the ISP plan to address? • What other types of restrictions would impede the ISP from engaging in BEAD or Digital Equity? Are there other pressing concerns not yet discussed?
<u>ISP Collaboration with Local Government Entities (LGEs)</u>	
<i>Inquire if attendees have developed plans to engage with Local Government Entities (LGEs)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has the ISP worked with LGEs in the past on prior grants or partnerships? • Does the current regulatory environment constrain potential BEAD and Digital Equity Act program participants from engaging with LGEs? • Does the organization participate on any S/T advisory councils or similar groups?
<u>Workforce</u>	
<i>Encourage conversations regarding workforce issues (e.g., Community Anchor Institutions and Industry).</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What opportunities does the industry organization see for the S/T, BEAD and Digital Equity to support advancing workforce initiatives? • What workforce planning initiatives are currently taking place across the industry organization? How mature are they and how are they funded? • What is the ISP's plan to hire a skilled and diverse workforce?
<u>Digital Equity</u>	
<i>Inquire if attendees have developed plans for the provision of equitable broadband services to middle and low-income communities.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What unique challenges has the organization faced in working with unserved and underserved areas? • Does the organization have an outreach plan for digital inclusion efforts? • Does the ISP plan to participate in the Affordability Connectivity Program (ACP)? If not, how would the ISP offer a low-cost service plan? Does the ISP have any other plans on addressing affordability issues?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How is the ISP currently marketing ACP or other low-cost plans to customers?</i> • <i>What are the corporate and social responsibility programs as it relates to digital equity?</i> • <i>What are the current or potential collaborations with local communities (e.g., CBOs, CAIs, faith-based institutions, health organizations, etc.)</i> • <i>What are the current or potential efforts to expand access in areas that have been excluded from investment?</i>
Feedback & Next Steps	
<p><i>Capture TA assistance concerns, ask for feedback, and plan next meeting</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What resources or guidance is needed for the future?</i> • <i>What kind of technical assistance is needed for the future?</i> • <i>What kind of outreach activities or events are needed for the future?</i>

Best Practices for Successful Engagement

<div style="background-color: #002060; color: white; text-align: center; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 10px;">PREPARING FOR ENGAGEMENT</div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review the State Broadband Leaders Network (SBLN) and Digital Equity Leaders Network (DELN) materials and research the history of the ISP broadband involvement. • Review available BEAD/Digital Equity Act Technical Assistance materials prior to engaging with the ISPs. • Research S/T government and political structure, and understand the role of local politics across S/T landscape • Compile and tailor questions to broaden understanding of the ISPs current circumstance and address specific needs. • Finalize and distribute agenda to participants with meeting invitation. 	<div style="background-color: #002060; color: white; text-align: center; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 10px;">MEETING AND FOLLOW-UP</div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice active listening during each meeting, accurately record the discussion and information that is being provided. • Ensure fairness and equal time for discussions and information distribution during the meeting. Consider the size of group meetings when scheduling topics to discuss. • Remain conscious of time spent on each topic, allow for a question-and-answer period toward the end of each meeting. • Conclude the meeting by summarizing key take-aways and potential action items discussed. • Share meeting minutes to all attendees outlining all action items and their respective due dates as well as a feedback mechanism for additional input
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