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State of Illinois Announces Illinois Connected Communities Grants to Assist Communities with Expanding Broadband access and use

Grants Will Help Communities Build Capacity for Remote Learning, Work from Home and Other Essential Elements of Digital Access During the COVID-19 Pandemic

SPRINGFIELD – The Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) Office of Broadband today announced the new *Illinois Connected Communities* grant program designed to assist local governments, schools, and community organizations with building broadband capacity. The $150,000 grant opportunity will help communities close existing gaps and lay the groundwork for improved broadband access, adoption, and utilization.

The latest grant program by DCEO builds on Governor JB Pritzker's capital commitment, *Connect Illinois*, aimed at improving access to broadband for the entire state.

"Without a question, there's never been a more important time to improve digital access in our state," said Erin Guthrie, Director of DCEO. "The *Illinois Connected Communities* grants will help more communities and community members have a seat at the table in making plans that will not only improve the way our residents live, go to school, conduct business, and so much more—but play a major role in jumpstarting our economy."

A product of partnership between the Illinois Office of Broadband and the Evanston-based Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, the *Illinois Connected Communities* program is designed to engage a first-year cohort of communities through best practice curriculum, expert consultation, and up to $15,000 for initial community planning and capacity building. By collaborating with the Benton Institute and area philanthropy, the State of Illinois will leverage additional funds of at least an equal amount to provide expert consultations and best practices curriculum available to the grantees.

"The Benton Institute is honored to be a strategic partner of the Illinois Office of Broadband," said Adrianne Benton Furniss, Executive Director, Bent nities are stronger communities, especially if broa grated into larger community goals."

Grantees will participate in a combinatic , cohor ide,

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and regional activities throughout a period up to 12-months in duration. These activities will involve a representative community broadband Steering Committee and build toward creation of a community-driven Broadband Strategic Plan. At any point during the program communities may invest their grant funding toward one or more of the following:

- Connected Community staff time or overhead
- Study, planning, or preparation for broadband access, adoption, or utilization
- Additional broadband-related support, technical assistance, or consultative services

Communities seeking more information on the grants program are encouraged to tune in to the *Developing Broadband Leadership* webinar series, a collaborative effort among the Illinois Office of Broadband, the Benton Institute, and University of Illinois Extension. Live webinars invite national experts, community leaders, and broadband providers from across Illinois to connect at 11:30 am on Wednesdays through June 3. The series kicked off last week, with Governor Pritzker providing opening remarks and encouraging communities to take advantage of the state's broadband grant programs, as well as other Office of Broadband resources.

The Office of Broadband also recently teamed up with the Benton Institute to launch the *Illinois Broadband Connections* newsletter, offering regular news and updates on available resources, shared priorities, and marked progress toward improved broadband access, adoption, and utilization throughout Illinois.

Improving access to broadband is critical for the economic growth of Illinois communities, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has changed daily life for residents and business across the state. The *Illinois Connected Communities* grant opportunity expands on Governor Pritzker's *Connect Illinois* program, which includes a $400 million capital investment to expand critical broadband access across the state. The first $50 million of this investment is expected to be awarded in the coming weeks.

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