

Capital Projects Fund: Community Wi-Fi Program Narrative Digital Connectivity Technology – Mississippi BEAM Fund

Program Description

A portion of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA) Capital Projects Fund (CPF) allocated to Mississippi has been designated to fund a Community Wi-Fi Grant Program. This program will provide 3 million dollars for technology projects installed as part of public Wi-Fi infrastructure (e.g., access points, repeaters, routers). A match of 33% of total project costs is required, and any additional matching funds will have a positive impact on application scoring. The program addresses a critical need exacerbated by the COVID-19 public health emergency in the communities where the investments will be made.

Applicants must demonstrate affordability as a barrier to local broadband adoption and use. Funding shall not be used for costs that are reimbursable by other state or federal funding streams but may be used for complementary funding. Compliance with all state and federal laws, rules, regulations, and guidance is required.

Identifying Critical Need

BEAM conducted or attended approximately 100 meetings (a mix of local planning meetings, community engagement meetings, as well as civic club meetings) with stakeholders across various regions of Mississippi and met with numerous large and small groups of state, county, or municipal officials and stakeholders. Public Wi-Fi was identified during these meetings as a method to address accessibility and affordability, particularly in smaller towns and communities. Mississippi has 423 cities and towns with only 20 having a population of over 25,000. Many of these small communities are also in areas of persistent poverty and identified on the State's broadband map as having a low percentage of internet access. The BEAM public Wi-Fi program will prioritize communities that do not have access to affordable, reliable broadband and guide funding priorities to areas with less access that were more severely impacted during the pandemic.

Program Design

Entities eligible to apply for a grant under the BEAM Fund CPF Grant Program are as follows: a company, firm, corporation, limited liability company, partnership, or association authorized to do business in Mississippi that (i) has been providing broadband service to at least one hundred (100) residences and businesses in Mississippi for at least three (3) consecutive years, (ii) is an electric power association's broadband affiliate operating pursuant to Miss. Code Ann. § 77-17-1 et seq., or (iii) has demonstrated financial, technical, and operational capability in building and operating a broadband network. Each applicant will be required to demonstrate that it has the technical, financial, and managerial resources and experience to provide broadband services in Mississippi to retail end users. See Miss. Code Ann. § 77-19-3(a), (e).

The State anticipates receiving varied plans for the provision of public Wi-Fi. Any facility designated as a location for public Wi-Fi must provide information as to the hours, location, staffing, accessibility, and public safety precautions for the facility. BEAM will require that any

location requesting funding is accessible to all members of the community. The types of buildings where the State anticipates the funded projects to take place are as follows: libraries, government buildings, community centers, fire stations, and potentially other commercial buildings. The locations listed would provide storage/security for the equipment for the public Wi-Fi.

The specific materials and equipment subrecipients can apply for are as follows: Wi-Fi Access Points, Backhaul Radios (if needed), External Antennas (if needed), Mounting Hardware, Ethernet Cabling, COAX Cabling (if needed), Cable Management, Power over Ethernet (PoE) Equipment, Network Switch, Power Supply and Backup, Weatherproof Enclosures (if applicable), Surge Protectors, Network Security Hardware, and other related equipment determined by BEAM to be necessary for the project. Any technology should meet federal standards but also be readily available and widely used in the marketplace. If a product is widely used, it is easier to deploy, maintain, and access at a cost-effective rate.

The State projects there will be a total of 25 projects funded at \$120,000 per project. While community participation will vary, the State anticipates 50-100,000 users yearly. There will be no device and/or equipment loan programs. It is anticipated that the people who will use the public Wi-Fi service will utilize already existing devices (i.e., school-provided tablets or laptops) to connect to the internet. Because of this, the subrecipients will need to demonstrate an understanding of what devices their end users will be using for access.

The State will create reporting requirements including the number of times the internet has been accessed, download and upload amounts of data, number of registered users, sites visited, etc. Device Type data (i.e., Samsung, Apple, HP, etc.) will also be collected as the program is being administered to ensure that subrecipients are providing effective service to end users.

Selection Criteria

The final rubric and scoring will be published on the BEAM website at www.beam.ms.gov/cpf at least 10 business days prior to the opening of the application window. The rubric provides points based on whether the available public Wi-Fi project provides free, free with paid options, and paid services. Points increase for those offering free or free with paid options. The rubric also takes into consideration whether the location is an economically distressed area. A free version of the public Wi-Fi network is required to be offered at every approved project location and must be provided for a minimum of five years. Fee-based access may be available for streaming certain videos, audio, and social media.

All categories will be evaluated as required by the Mississippi laws, rules, regulations and guidance which bases awards on (a) applicant experience and financial capacity, (b) readiness to build and operate the project, (c) those that reach the most unserved or underserved, (d) scalability to increased speeds, (e) whether the area would be served absent governmental funding, (f) demonstrated community support and needs, (g) areas with no fixed terrestrial internet, (h) no discrimination on type of technology that meets grant standards, (i) size and

scope of area, and (j) service thresholds proposed and scalability. Miss. Code §77-19-11 All projects will be competitively scored using a rubric to include these statutory requirements and compliance with any additional federal laws, rules, regulations, and guidance.

Application Process

Grant applications will be submitted through BEAM's On-line Grant Application Portal. Applicants will be required to provide the technology to be used, a proposed budget, sources of funding, the proposed project plan and timeline, and relevant applicant financial information as may be required.

Applicants will be required to include a marketing plan that will inform the communities of the available service. Each awarded applicant will be required to provide a quarterly marketing report that indicates the actions taken to promote awareness of the infrastructure as well as the engagement with such infrastructure within the community. Additionally, awarded applicants will be required to run a weekly speed test available at (<https://www.broadbandms.com/>) that will be captured in the Mississippi Broadband Map and ensure the network is functioning properly. Awarded applicants will also be required to advertise the test as a component of their marketing plan so end-user experience may be assessed.

Contact Us

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Capital Projects Fund: Community Wi-Fi Program Timeline for Applicants

- Week of July 15th - Registration Open
- Week of July 22nd - Application Open
- Week of August 26th - Application Close
- Week of September 23rd - Comment and Objection Period Open
- Week of October 21st - Comment and Objection Period Close
- Week of November 11th - Final Determinations