

VPS Memo

USDA Officially Releases Details on the Community Connect Grant Program

APPLICATION WINDOW OPENED MARCH 20, 2023

Summary

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has released the highly anticipated details for the Community Connect Grant Program. The Community Connect Program will provide up to \$79M in grant funding to construct broadband networks that provide service on a community-oriented connectivity basis in rural areas.

This program was initially established back in 2018 when Congress passed the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2018. Included in the 2023 Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA) are funding limits, application deadline, defined area eligibility, and the basis of awarding projects.

Program Details

Funding Priorities and Deadline

The Community Connect Grant Program (Community Connect) encourages applicants to consider projects that will advance the following key priorities:

- Assisting rural communities to recover economically through more and better market opportunities and through improved infrastructure.
- Ensuring all rural residents have equitable access to RD programs and benefit from RD funded projects.
- Reducing climate pollution and increasing resilience to the impact of climate change through economic support to rural communities.

Area Eligibility

For an area to be considered eligible, applicants must demonstrate the area is lacking broadband services by a terrestrial technology at the minimum data rate of 25 Mbps / 3 Mbps for fixed service. **Satellite and mobile services are NOT considered broadband service.** Any proposed service area that is currently served with broadband service is ineligible to receive funding.

The Community Connect Grant Program is designed to provide financial assistance to provide service at the Broadband Grant Speed (100 Mbps/20 Mbps) in rural, economically challenged communities where broadband service does not currently exist. Applicants will be required to define the proposed funded service area (PFSA) as a contiguous area.

Grant funds may be used to:

- Deploy service at speeds of at least 100 Mbps/20 Mbps to ALL essential community facilities, rural residents, and rural businesses within the PFSA.
- Construct, acquire, or expand a community center.
- Equip a community center that provides free access to service at speeds of at least 100 Mbps/20 Mbps to community residents for at least two years (7 CFR 3570.53).

Grants will be awarded on a competitive basis for entities to serve all premises in rural areas to ensure rural consumers enjoy the same quality and range of broadband services that are available in urban and suburban communities.

Applicants must complete and submit their application electronically by **11:59 am EST on June 20, 2023**, in the RUS online system available on the [Community Connect website](#).

Competitive Scoring

Applicants applying for Community Connect will be subject to a scoring process based on 6 separate evaluation criteria with a total of 100 points possible.

The six evaluation criteria, with maximum points available for each, are as follows:

Criteria	Scoring
Economic Characteristics	15 points
Educational Challenges	15 points
Health Care Needs	10 points
Public Safety Issues	10 points
Stakeholder Involvement	40 points
Management Experience	10 points

Key Information

- Minimum Grant Request: \$100,000
- Maximum Grant Request: \$5,000,000
- Matching Fund Contribution: 15% of the requested grant amount - must be cash.
- Anticipated Award Date: September 2023
- Performance Period: 3 Years
- Applications: 1 grant application per applicant

Additional Information

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